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Chinese Civilisation: Resilience and Challenges*

Tan Chung

Civilisation is usually not allotted the front seat in social science discourses except for being treated as a whipping boy. This is precisely what the 'Clash-of-Civilisations' school has done. Nevertheless, we should thank Professor Samuel Huntington of Harvard University for bringing 'civilisation' into sharp focus. Huntington and others have initiated a civilisational discourse in the world forum on international political affairs, inviting much echo and more critique on their Great Divide between 'us' (the Western Judaic-Christian liberal-capitalist mainstream) and 'them' (all non-Western, non-Christian, particularly the Islamic and 'Confucian-Chinese' traditions) in the comity of nations and peoples. In anthropology, the 'culturalists' have been challenging the sociologists for many decades. I worked exactly throughout this challenging period as a culturalist or civilisationalist in a small circle of Chinese studies in Delhi from the mid-sixties up to 1999. My most enthusiastic sympathiser and supporter is the very person whom we are remembering today. How I wish Giri Deshingkar were standing here in my place, instead of dedicating this talk to his memory!

Taking advantage of the scarcity in the Anglo-American literature on 'deliberative civilisation', I am emboldened to advocate the retrieval of Chinese civilisation from the bin of irrelevancy and recast its importance in a new light in this post–post-modernist era. I am sure, with the support of like-minded friends, we shall be able to offer a better moral taxonomy of the Chinese civilisation.

In this talk, I wish to ask three questions as the basis for discussion. How is Chinese civilisation unique in the world? How does one assess and explain the sustainability of Chinese civilisation? What is the future of Chinese civilisation?

My choice of the word 'unique' is deliberate but not exclusive (certainly not suggesting other civilisations are otherwise), because I think I know Chinese civilisation like a son knows his mother. I also view it from a Sino-Indic perspective as I style

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myself a *Cheeni-Hindustani*. Today, even the realist strategists recognise competitive paradigms in the geopolitical-economic strategic ground reality, but the academic ivory tower is still the domain of unilateralist Western paradigms, be they of the orthodox, liberal or the heterodox neo-Marxian hue—both equally assertive, aggressive and attacking. I anticipate learned opinions from Western literature being cited to question my conclusions, even my methodology. I would then, fall into pitiable defencelessness like country bumpkin Ah-Q in front of the foreign-retained *jiyangguizi* (the pseudo-foreign-devil).¹ While welcoming all this I would like to engage my critics in a level playing field. Since we are on the subject of Chinese civilisation, I am automatically on the turf of Chinese and Sino-Indic perspectives to greet my detractors. I know Western paradigms are immensely fashionable and glamorous for non-Western scholarship but they may not be very helpful for Chinese and Indians to delve into our own cultural heritage. I would humbly wish the rich tools of Western scholarship be utilised for deepening our understanding of non-Western civilisations instead of using Western paradigms as deterrence to developing heterodox non-Western thinking and wisdom.

A UNIQUE CIVILISATION

How is Chinese civilisation unique from the world perspective? Around four thousand years ago, there was the Xia Dynasty founded by the great Yu, son of an irrigation engineer who had failed in his job and been executed. We are now certain that Yu was born in Sichuan Province in the upper stream of the Yangtse, and ethnically a Qiang/Tibetan descendant outside the Han genealogy.² Look, the founding ruler of a kingdom located in the lower-middle stream of the Yellow River was born in the upper stream of the Yangtse. And the one who started the first ancient dynasty of China belonged to the Qiang/Tibetan race. How surprising! The theory of multiple sources of Chinese civilisation is confirmed by this and many other evidences.

Late Harvard China-expert, Professor John King Fairbank, illustrated during the 1980s that a billion people lived in fifty states all over the European and American continents, but the same number of people were under only one single political roof in China (Twitchett and Fairbank 1987: 14, vol. 14). The spatiality of China is even more unique considering her monopoly among the ten greatest rivers on earth. All of them are international waters except the third largest river Yangtse and the sixth largest river Huanghe (the Yellow River), which are exclusive Chinese territories. In times of territorial disputes, China's claim of both the Yellow River and Yangtse as the cradles of her civilisation has been unchallenged.

¹ In his world-famous fiction *A-Q zhengzhuan* (The true story of Ah-Q), Lu Xun depicts the foreign-retained Chinese intellectual *jiyangguizi* (Pseudo-foreign-devil) who every now and then raises his *wenming gun* (civilisation stick) to deter the country bumpkin Ah-Q from airing his opinion.

² This is the authoritative opinion of a life-long expert on national minorities, Prof. Zhou Xiyin. (See Zhou Xiyin and Liu Zhirong 1993.)

Equally impressive as China's spatial coverage is her temporal sustainability, which only India can peer with. Powerful civilisations and civilisational clashes first emerged in the Western Hemisphere. Alexander the Great of Macedon (356–323 BC) was the first great world conqueror, bringing a large part of Eurasia under his direct rule during the third century BC. Rome initiated the 'Struggle of Orders' (509–287 BC), and its world-famous legion carried out armed conquest in the European continent for more than half a millennium. In the Eastern Hemisphere, King Ashoka rose to build a fairly large empire in the Indian peninsula. Ashoka's Chinese contemporary, Emperor Qin Shihuangdi, united China into a unitary empire in 221 BC. While Macedon/Greece and Rome never regained their ancient glory and magnitude, India and China have emerged more powerful than what they were two thousand years ago. Today, in almost all branches of modern scholarship, mainstream academic discourses hardly recognise the input of Chinese and Indians in world civilisation during historical, let alone modern times. We need to correct this Western bias and re-establish self-confidence in our own Eastern civilisations. At the risk of being exaggerative, I would say that in the global marathon race, civilisations of European, African and American continents (in fact all those of the Western Hemisphere) have been left far behind by their counterparts of China and India of the Eastern Hemisphere. Indian and Chinese civilisations are clearly the unchallengeable winners of the marathon.

Modern Chinese scholars have summed up Confucianism in four syllables: *neisheng waiwang*, meaning, 'a saint internally and a moral-leader externally'. The relevance of this definition has been debated for half a century among Chinese philosophers.³ I am adopting this theory to highlight the Chinese moral values on international behaviour. There was the Chinese obsession with *sheng* (sainthood) and *wang* (moral leaders) that brooked no compromise. The combination of the two created *wangdao* in opposition to its antithesis, *badao*. This *wangdao* was the international approach that gave full expression to the spirit of sainthood and moral leadership. And its antithesis, *badao*, means 'hegemony' precisely. Mencius (372–289 BC) succinctly outlined the difference between these two approaches by saying: 'From ancient times the good rulers have pursued good deeds and are unmindful of power' (Mengzi: chap. 13; also see Li Shen 2002). According to this definition, *wangdao* means 'to pursue good deeds', and *badao* means 'mindful of power'. I may give an analogy of modern times. In American foreign policy, President Bill Clinton was tilting towards *wangdao* while President George W. Bush was tilting towards *badao*.

Today, when we see the museum exhibits of ancient Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and Persians, we are shocked and in awe of their creative power and tragic destruction. The quest for absolute power by these civilisations was the very cause of their undoing. Even today, people are living under the shadow of past hostilities in the Western Hemisphere. A powerful Islamic lamentation of 'historical and modern humiliation at the hands of Christianity' is generating restiveness, hatred and *jihad* (holy war) in both the Arab Streets and Eurabia (communities of Arab immigrants in

³ This discourse was initiated by famous Peking University professor of philosophy, Feng Youlan (Fung Yulan), during the 1940s. (See Zheng Jiadong et al. 2001.)

European countries) (Burke 2004). All this is the mischief of hegemony and clash of civilisations. Conversely, India and China, the two great ancient civilisations in the Eastern Hemisphere never pursued hegemony and never wanted to destroy each other. That is why they could survive for five thousand years.

China was meant to be a mega-agricultural commonwealth after the Great Yu had successfully harnessed river channels in her heartland, offering a great opportunity to develop irrigation farming over her vast plains. Professor Karl August Wittfogel saw China's 'big patterns of societal structure and change' arising from her 'hydraulic agriculture' (different from the 'hydroagriculture', that is, small-scale irrigation farming) (Wittfogel 1981: iii, 23). This analysis helps us identify Chinese civilisation with her unique agricultural culture. 'Agricultural culture', what a tongue-twister! I prefer to simplify it by a new term 'agroculture'.

As early as three thousand years ago, there was census in China (ibid.: 51) paving way for total governance. The Zhou Dynasty that maintained the world's earliest census records also sent 'poem officers' (*shiguan*) to the registered households to collect folk songs. The collection yielded an anthology for the education of the ruling elites. Confucius (551–479 BC) edited this collection of songs later to create the classic, *Shijing* (Book of Odes). This, along with another classic, *Shujing* (Book of History), also compiled by Confucius, became the most fundamental education for academics and politicians of China from the second century BC up to the beginning of the twentieth century.

How the *Book of Odes* and *Book of History* gained immense importance in Chinese civilisation is illustrated by a true story. The founding emperor of Han Dynasty, Emperor Gaozu (reigning from 202 to 195 BC), was initially antipathetic towards Confucian teachings. He was annoyed by his scholar adviser, Lu Jia's (240–170 BC) insistence on the importance of these two classics. He shouted at Lu Jia that as he had 'obtained the kingdom on horseback, how would *Shijing* and *Shujing* matter to me?' Lu Jia replied: 'Though Your Majesty has obtained the kingdom on horseback, can you rule it on horseback?' The Emperor was convinced by him, and the moral authority of *Shijing* and *Shujing* was firmly established.⁴




There is another Confucian classic, *Yijing* (Book of Change), which says: 'The greatest virtue of the universe is *sheng*' (*tiandizhi dade yue sheng*).⁵ To Chinese agroculture, nothing is more important than the concept of *sheng*. I shall even say that *sheng* is the soul of Chinese agroculture. The evolution of the visual symbol of *sheng* is seen in the evolution of graphics (showing plants sprouting from earth) that look like the earliest embryonic research in human history.

From this research, a host of ideas have emerged. These are: birth, growth, life, creation, production, freshness, vigour, exuberance and humans (all these are the connotations of *sheng*). Chinese civilisation is essentially a pro-life, pro-creation and pro-production culture that had featured the world's largest economy from the third century BC

⁴ *Shiji* (Records by a historian), compiled by 'China's Herodotus', Sima Qian (145–86 BC), fascicle 97; *Hanshu* (Annals of Han Dynasty), fascicle 43.

⁵ *Zhouyi* (Book of Change, Zhou Dynasty), ch.1.

Figure 1

- ①  Oracle Script (*Jiaguwen*)—3,500 years ago
- ②  Tripod Script (*Dingwen*)—3,000 years ago
- ③  Small Seal Script (*Xiaozhuan*)—2,200 years ago

through the 1870s (Maddison 1998). Various foreigners who invaded China and, then settled down to live as the Chinese, did so mainly to construct this agroculture and partake in its prosperity. It was this on-going multi-ethnic endeavour in building up a prosperous agroculture that had not only created such wonder goods like silk, tea, porcelain, etc. but also attracted large numbers of foreign traders to China in many millennia. Both these factors (Chinese wonder goods and foreign traders in China) helped create its many admirers all over the world. Recently, I visited Dresden in eastern Germany and was told that the Augustus ruling family of the Saxony Empire during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had admired the Chinese porcelain so much that they thought of China as a 'dreamland', and even intended to invite a Chinese missionary to Germany to help improve European society.

The dynamic force of *Sheng* is accommodated by Chinese agroculture in a cosmic infrastructure of 'Heaven and Earth' (*tiandi*). Great poet, Li Bai (AD 701–62), described Heaven-and-Earth as a guesthouse, and Time as the permanent guest who stayed in it.⁶ This permanent cosmic infrastructure has produced a holistic Chinese way of life called *tian ren heyi* (meaning 'Heaven and humans are one'). According to Professor Ji Xianlin, doyen of Indian studies in China, *tian ren heyi* is the Chinese equivalent of the Indian concept of *Brahmatmaikyam* (unity between *Brahma* and *atma*) (Tan Chung and Geng Yinzeng 2004: viii). In my opinion, this *tian ren heyi* is the shorter form of *tian di ren heyi* (meaning 'Heaven, Earth and humans are one'). The syllable *di* was dropped to make it a quadrisyllabic phrase—a peculiar Chinese literary predilection. Thus, *tian ren heyi* actually means the synergic dynamics between Heaven, Earth and humans. These three elements are called *sangang* (three key-links), viz. *tianshi* (celestial/seasonal environment), 'dili' (terrestrial/natural resources), and *renhe* (human harmony). Mencius reiterated that 'human harmony' was superior to the other two.⁷

⁶ Li Bai's words are: *Tiandizhe wanwuzhi nili ye, guangyinzhe baidaizhi guoke ye* (Heaven and Earth are the guesthouse for everything, while Time is the guest who comes and goes for hundreds of generations), in his preface to poem *Chunye yan congdi taohuayuan* (Feasting my cousin in the peach garden on a Spring night).

⁷ Mencius said, *Tianshi buru dili, dili buru renhe* (Terrestrial resources are superior to celestial facilities, while human harmony is superior to terrestrial resources), in *Mengzi*, ch. 4; Li Shen, p.1063.

Chinese literature is replete with discourses on harmony. Confucius made a very sophisticated observation: *Junzi he er butong, xiaoren tong er buhe*, meaning, 'The sagacious people stay together in harmony while keeping their differences. The mean people stay together without differences and harmony' (Lunyu [analects] chap. 12; Li Shen 2002: 921). This quotation comes handy today when Chinese leaders argue with the Bush administration that the best means in maintaining Sino-US harmony is to accommodate each other's opinions—in a way persuading Washington to behave like the 'sagacious people' (*junzi*) in a Confucian spirit.

The Chinese ethic of harmony can further be characterised by four Chinese syllables: *tuiji ji ren*, meaning 'putting yourself in other's situations'. This is expanded into two Confucian quotes: *Ji yu li er li ren, ji yu da er da ren* (When you establish yourself, you also establish others; when you make yourself thrive, you also make others thriving) (Lunyu, chap. 6; Li Shen 2002: 826); and *Ji suo buyu wu shiyu ren* (Don't do to others what you don't want others to do to you) (Lunyu, chap. 8; Li Shen 2002: 956). Confucianism is meant to inject a tonic of harmony and an antidote to individualism in human relationship. The Confucian moral influence was conducive to agreeable individual behaviour, just social order, collective spirit, and obedient conduct. Chinese agroculture contrasts with Western culture in propagating not only rights but also duties, not only the individual but also the collective, not only freedom but also discipline, not only impulse but also restraint. The absence of individual freedom, human rights and privacy in Chinese agroculture is compensated by the avoidance of human conflict, prevalence of social stability and universal public good. It was this paradigm that had constrained hegemony on the part of Chinese rulers during historical times.

Chinese agroculture permeates eugenics and cross-fertilisation through its own development, and has absorbed innumerable foreign elements into its fold. It has never bred Darwinism or natural selection. Mencius said: 'Everyone can become a sage-ruler' (*Ren jie keyi wei Yao Shun*) (Li Shen 2002: 1192). Chan Buddhists responded to it centuries later by believing in *Fo zai wo xinzhong*, meaning 'Buddha lives in my heart'. All this contrasts with the Western value system built around the concept of egoistic individuality. With the input of Confucianism and Buddhism, Chinese agroculture has not only been a material pursuit of cultivation, but also a spiritual acculturation, bringing about character-transformation through persuasion and education. Mencius said: 'Using the people without giving them education is to victimize them' (ibid.: 1200).

Thus, Chinese civilisation is a permanent melting pot that would never fall in disuse. Changing times have only changed the contents inside the pot, not the pot itself. Both India and China are unity in diversity. Tribalism, which is a primitive tradition of the fishing-and-hunting economy, loses its force in agroculture. Millions of communities in the valleys of Indus, Ganga, Yellow and Yangtse have been united by the flow of goods, information and culture, along with the waters of the rivers. The Indian saying, *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the world is one family), speaks out the Chinese inner voice of *tianxia yijia* (one family under Heaven). Globalisation in the spirit of mutual dependence has existed in the Eastern Hemisphere for many millennia. Today, the European Community seems to emulate this example after suffering the pains of two world wars.

RESILIENCE THROUGH VICISSITUDES

How does one assess the sustainability of Chinese civilisation? We have to revisit the glorious odyssey that the Chinese civilisation has travelled for five thousand years, particularly in the last twenty-three centuries.

Where there had been thousands of autonomous *guo* (states) during the time of the Great Yu within China, there were only seven fighting each other during the 'Warring States' period (403–221 BC). The idealism of a peaceful agro-cultural commonwealth that China was trying to develop was finally destroyed by Emperor Qin Shihuangdi (reigning from 221 to 210 BC). He made China a solitary empire, and burnt the Confucian classics including *Shijing* and *Shujing*, in 213 BC.⁸ The descendants of Confucius in Shandong had to hide the books in between the walls to preserve them.

On one hand, the spirit of *wangdao* vanished from the polity of China for fifteen years throughout the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC). On the other, China expanded her spatiality and strengthened her unification. The Qin Emperor introduced irrigation projects all over, and built highways across the country. The Qin tradition of non-slaughter of animals was universalised, which greatly enhanced stockbreeding in China—creating one of Chinese agro-culture's plus points. Increased agricultural production, and improved communication and transportation coupled with rapid development of commerce, mining, metallurgy, and salt industry, created a prosperous country. The Qin government strengthened market regulations and controlled minting of copper coins. Rich merchants emerged. The greatest contribution of the Qin Emperor was his creation of a unified script, which he imposed on the entire country. A uniform mass media of information and education came into existence, which generated enormous centripetal force and sentimental unification, and played an important role in efficient governance. The Chinese agro-culture had a facelift although the commonwealth was transformed into an empire.

The succeeding Han Dynasty (202 BC–AD 220) that replaced Qin was enormously important to China's development. It continued with empire-building initiated by the Qin Dynasty, and enhanced the prosperity of Chinese agro-culture. It also restored the dominance of *Shijing* and *Shujing*, as I have illustrated earlier. Confucian intellectuals regained their leading role in the socio-politico-cultural hierarchy, and all important policy decisions of the country could be taken only after a serious debate in the imperial court by scholar-courtiers. This convention, which lasted for more than two thousand years, has earned for China the reputation of 'enlightened despotism'. Han Emperor Wen (reigning from 180 to 157 BC) propounded physiocracy that continued to guide Chinese economic development for two millennia, and was later exported to France in the eighteenth century. The emperor repeatedly vetoed scholars' suggestions to ban private minting of copper coins. This created a very prosperous rich stratum, and made Chinese economy fairly balanced and exceedingly vibrant. During the 1960s and 1970s, China scholars, led by Professor Mary C.

⁸ *Shiji*, fascicle 6.

Wright of Yale University, floated a powerful theory that the Confucian tradition was *Zhongnong yishang* (patronising agriculture while suppressing commerce), even blaming it for China's non-development of capitalism. Today, this has been proven wrong by both historians and philosophers.

Though 'enlightened', Chinese despotism remained vulnerable, particularly having no safety valve against power struggle and palace usurpation. The greatest usurper, Wang Mang (45 BC–AD 23), and his establishment of a rebel dynasty of Xin (AD 8–23) inflicted heavy damage to the Han imperial structure, which became much weakened in the second-half of Han Dynasty known as the 'Eastern Han/Latter Han' (AD 22–220). In its last phase, China was split into 'Three Kingdoms' (AD 209–63) followed by four centuries of disintegration.

Significantly, it was after the collapse of the Han Dynasty that 'Han' became the ethnic identity for the Chinese. This was consequential to the new emergent identity of 'Hu' (foreigners), a rather stigmatised term for those who intruded into north China as conquerors and rulers. In fact, these foreign rulers resented such a distinction and the use of 'Hu' was prohibited by severe punishment. Since spiritually every Hu in China was already a Han, all foreign races had lost their non-Han traces during China's reunification under the Sui Dynasty (AD 581–618). In south China (that is, south of the Yangtse) the picture was identical in a different way. The exodus of Han ruling elites to the south expanded Han political sovereignty and cultural influence to new areas. Hundreds of non-Han ethnic communities were converted. Thus the reunification period of Sui and Tang (AD 618–906) dynasties saw a much expanded new Chinese family under the umbrella of 'Han'. This expansion took place during the reigns of twenty-five emperors (two of Sui and rest of Tang), all of whom were zealous patrons of Buddhism except one. Sino-Indian civilisational dialogue was a positive gain for China.

The Sui Dynasty, though short, created a facelift on Chinese soil by carving out the Grand Canal between the two parallel rivers—Yellow River and Yangtse. If we are on a spaceship flying over China, the two great rivers and the connecting Grand Canal come to our view like an H. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2

H → north

The left vertical of this H represents the Yangtse, its right vertical represents Yellow River, and the central horizontal represents the Canal. This river transportation network greatly enhanced the political unity and economic prosperity of China.

The Tang Dynasty was a doubly transformed society by Buddhism, spiritually and materially. Spiritually, people sought the blessings of the Buddha by building and visiting temples. Buddhist temples entertained extravagant higher-ups with a newly invented elegant beverage—tea—in lieu of alcoholic drinks. The new elegant drink had to be presented in elegant containers, which in turn, stimulated the porcelain industry. Thus, Buddhism was instrumental in creating two new industries—tea and porcelain, both to gain international fame as wonder goods. The prosperous Tang

economy was facilitated by an emergent banking system keeping a circulation of 'flying money' (*feiqian*) that is, paper cheques bearing large sums of money for travel and remittance. This mode of transaction and remittance preceded modern banking institutions by more than a thousand years—signifying an early development of mercantilism. China enjoyed unprecedented prosperity during the Sui-Tang period through trade and commerce, which was also the main thrust of Buddhism. Orthodox scholars have lamented that there were six centuries of 'dark age' viz. the decline of Confucianism in the second-half of the first millennium; but others feel this was the golden period of China, economically and culturally, largely due to the popularity of Buddhism.

The Tang ethos became noble and dynamic as reflected by people's words and deeds. In words, we see great Tang poets voicing enlightened, righteous and pious sentiments. In deeds, we see bright young scholars joining the ranks of dedicated Buddhist evangelists and pious pilgrims, exemplified by Xuanzang (AD 602–64) and Yijing (AD 635–713), whose historic journeys to India are immortalised by the two pagodas—Dayanta (the great swan pagoda) for Xuanzang and Xiaoyanta (the little swan pagoda) for Yijing—in Xi'an. The social standing and reputation of these two great Buddhists eclipsed all great Confucian scholars of their times. The Tang Dynasty was also a unique period that attracted Japanese and Korean scholars to China, who returned to expand the Chinese Renaissance to the entire East Asia.

The most significant but unrecognised beneficial result of India-China civilisational dialogue mediated by the development of Buddhism, was the emergence of Huineng (AD 638–713), an illiterate woodcutter who eventually assumed a more saintly and sagacious image than even Confucius among the Chan/Zen followers of China (and other East Asian countries). His *Liuzu tanjing* (Canon of the altar by the Sixth Patriarch) has passed down as the Bible of popular Buddhism, and is more frequently recited by the populace of China than all the Confucian classics put together. Rev. Huineng also accomplished a theoretical revolution of Buddhism. Whereas originally Indian Buddhists renounced the world in the hope of being ferried to the 'yonder shore' of Heaven, Huineng and his disciples made China the paradise of Buddha. Whereas the Indian Buddhists originally cherished *bodhi* or enlightenment as a distant goal of life (and of the next life), Huineng and his disciples propounded the theory of 'all living beings are Buddhas' (*zhongsheng shi Fo*). The significance of such a revolution deserves scholarly attention with a new paradigm of historical discourses.

During the second millennium, the Song Dynasty (AD 960–1276) was an extension of the Tang Dynasty in many ways. The explosion of ideas and information, technological innovation, enhanced productivity, commerce and foreign trade reached an unprecedented height. All the three great inventions, movable-type-printing, gunpowder, and the mariner's compass belonged to Song China. The Song ruling elites conducted a comprehensive assessment of past experiences and achievements of Chinese civilisation, and yielded a rich literature in all branches of scholarship. The most favourite book of Chairman Mao Zedong was not the writing of Marx or Lenin, but *Zizhi tongjian* (General Mirror of Governance) compiled by the Song scholar and Prime Minister, Sima Guang (AD 1019–86). It was said that Mao had read it

from cover to cover scores of times in search of the best governance of the People's Republic of China. The Song publication industry ensured that all information and knowledge gathered would forever pass down to posterity. Thus, China became a gigantic library-cum-museum-cum-cultural bazaar. Today, Chinese scholarship is heavily armed by a millennium-odd years' accumulation of publications of information, knowledge, culture and history. Chinese civilisation is culturally extra heavy-weight because of such a development.

By the way, we see what appears to be the 'Sinification' of Buddhism during Song and Ming dynasties with the new movement of 'Neo-Confucianism' and the powerful impact of *bodhicitta* on Chinese thinking. I have described elsewhere that the two schools of Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, *Lixue* and *Xinxue*, are actually the 'yukti school' and 'bodhicitta school' in name and spirit. In fact, both the schools had inherited the Tang thinking on the importance of *zhixin*, which may be understood as 'the management of one's inner self'. The word *xin* (obviously the translation of *citta*) was regarded by the proponents of both the schools (like Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan of Song Dynasty, and Wang Yangming of Ming Dynasty) as the foundation of moral values. The importance of *xin/citta* reached the supreme height in the writing of Wei Yuan (the precursor of modern reform in nineteenth century China), who observed that '*xin/citta* is the ruler of Heaven' (*xin wei tianjun*) (Yu Longyu et al. 2004: 158). Judging from the international situation today, this Sino-Indic cultivation of *xin/citta* is of great relevance in winning hearts and minds amidst cultural and civilisational tension.

Meanwhile, maintaining the stability of the colossus of Chinese political edifice through historical vicissitudes amidst umpteen challenges was never easy, hence we see dynasties falling as quickly as they rose. The Sui-Tang transformation of the Han superstructure had enhanced social mobility and expanded the social base of the ruling elite largely through the Imperial Examinations system. Yet, the concentration of power of such a gigantic country within a very small circle was the cesspool of evil. The traditional *wangdao* in opposition to *badao* was, by and large, adhered to in China's foreign policy, but the Chinese political hierarchy became a pyramid dominated by hegemonies at various levels.

The second phase of Tang Dynasty saw a structure of weak monarchs losing influence to powerful generals. To correct this tendency, the Song rulers adopted a policy of *xing wenjiao, yi wushi* (promoting education and suppressing military affairs) (Yang Weisheng et al. 1998: 5). This made China a soft, intellectual, non-militant society. 'Good men would not go to the army just like good pieces of iron would not be turned into nails' (*haotie bu dading, haonan bu dangbing*), says the Chinese proverb. Consequently, China could not repulse continuous invasions from three powerful northern tribes. The Khitans started the move by forming the Liao Dynasty (AD 916–1125) on Chinese soil. Then came the Jurchens, whose Jin Dynasty (AD 1115–1234) expelled the Song administration from the north of Yangtse. Finally, the Mongol invasion completely overran Chinese territory and established the Yuan Dynasty (AD 1206–1368). Later, Zhu Yuanzhang (AD 1328–98) of the Han race, who rose from a beggar boy to be a Buddhist monk, and led a peasant rebellion, overthrew the Mongol

rule and established the Ming Dynasty (AD 1368–1636). Less than three centuries later, China was once again under the last Mohegan of foreign government, the Manchu/Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

We see Han China completely outwitted by these waves of foreign invasions. The ultimate saving grace was her foreign conquerors' acculturation and absorption into the fold of Chinese civilisation on their own volition. Except the Mongols, the descendants of China's Khitan, Jurchen, and Manchu rulers no longer retain their ethnic identities. The common heritage of the Han race is thus reduced to one element—the use of Han script. It is this script that has united people of various ethnicities, cultures, languages and other anthropological idiosyncrasies into one homogeneous civilisation.

MODERN CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

What is the future of this Chinese agro-cultural civilisation? Can it survive and continue to develop from strength to strength in the much changed international context of post-industrial information era?

In historical perspective, Western colonialist and imperialist aggression on China during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a blessing in disguise. It has rescued Chinese civilisation from the vulnerable situation I have just now spoken of. China was finally awakened by two developments. First, the despicable international image of China shook the vainglorious Chinese self-esteem to the core. Mencius once said: 'How little are humans different from the brutes?' (Mengzi chap 8; Li Shen 2002: 1134) He was extremely provocative, thus meaning: 'Those who don't have moral values are like dogs'. Being called 'dogs' (or brutes) was the greatest insult to Chinese intellectuals. This was exactly what the Britons did in the thirties by erecting a big board: 'No entry for Chinese and dogs' at the entrance of the Park at the Bund (*Waitan*) in Shanghai. (They did the same in a park in Calcutta.) Patriotic intellectual, Chen Tianhua (1875–1905), committed suicide because of this humiliation. 'Chinese are even inferior to the brutes,' he lamented.⁹ This was just one of the sparks that started a prairie fire of revolution in China. Second, under British initiative, other European powers and Japan got busy in carving out foreign 'spheres of influence' (USA's efforts to stop it have been caricatured as 'me, too') in China at the end of the nineteenth century. This 'cutting the Chinese melon' set off a loud alarm for the Chinese intellectuals and masses. 'What a pain! Territory is being cut away and would not return for ten thousand years!' Once again, the lament of Chen Tianhua (*ibid.*). China had been herself for thousands of years and whosoever invaded it became the custodian of her safety and perpetuator of her sustainability. Now, Western imperialism

⁹ Chen Tianhua, *Meng Luitou* (Take the return journey immediately!), published in Shanghai in 1903. The essay was read by millions of Chinese intellectuals and evoked an intense response from them—leading many to the revolutionary road.

arrived to put this to an end. (This vicious agenda was taken over by Japanese militarism in 1930 under the tacit encouragement of Western powers until the bombardment of Pearl Harbour in 1941.) Chen Tianhua, Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), Mao Zedong (1893–1976), and many other patriots were simply alarmed into action by this crisis to save China from vanishing from the earth.

Three solutions to this civilisational crisis were attempted. The first was the reform movement (ideologically inspired by Buddhist and Western cultures), pushed by Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) with the backing of the lame duck Emperor Guangxu in 1898. This failed miserably after only one hundred days of experimentation. The second was the revolutionary movement led by Sun Yat-sen, and carried on by Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975). The revolution was aimed at reviving Confucianism by absorbing nutrients from the Western Christian culture. It also could not work. The third solution, under the leadership of Mao Zedong and his close comrades, was to invoke China's Struggle Ethic by mobilising the revolutionary spirit of the peasants, and employing Marxism as the needful inspiration. This worked, and China stood up again in the comity of nations with a bang.

Red China alone stands firmly today while almost all other major communist movements have now failed. China's version of the 'socialist revolution' is more a victory of Chinese agrocultural civilisation than Marxist internationalism. Tracing back to its genesis, there are two dynamic forces in Chinese civilisation: Harmony Ethic and Struggle Ethic. Harmony Ethic was the quintessence of Confucian culture, while Buddhism helped to reinforce it. Struggle Ethic was a corrective to the drawbacks of Confucian culture. Buddhism that advocated *samata* (equality) and penetrated into the hearts and minds of Chinese peasants generated a powerful force that inspired armed peasants to bring down unjust and corrupt governments. 'When the devil rises by a foot, *dharma* rises by ten' (*mo gao yichi, dao gao yizhang*), goes the Chinese saying. In this saying, the word for devil, *mo*, a shorter form of *moluo*, is the transliteration of Sanskrit *marā*, and *dao* is a translation of the Sanskrit *dharma*. This is clearly the adoption of the Indian ethos of 'good overcoming evil' (*maravijaya*). My theory that the Boxer rebellion, 1899–1900, was mainly inspired by Buddhism (Tan Chung 1985) is further vindicated by the objects of the Boxers, now preserved in an Indian army regiment headquarters. These objects were tablets for religious practice captured from a group of Boxers called *Chuanxiangjiao* (the sect that passes down the incense). Its patriarch was called *Danglai dongdu chuanxiang jiaozhu laoshizun* (the reverend guru of the sect passing down the incense who has come to the East from the sea)—a reference to the patriarch of Chinese Gungfu, Bodhidharma, the Indian monk who had lived in China from AD 520s to 520s/540s. The objects also show other deities of this sect, like *Bodhisattvas Guanyin* (Avalokitesvara), *Puxian* (Samantabhadra) and *Dizang* (Ksitigarbha), and also *Tuota Li tianwang*, the celestial king who has a pagoda in his hand—a sinified version of Vaisravana, one of the Indian Lokapalas.¹⁰ Here was, undoubtedly, a Sino-Indic moral force fighting the Western vanquishers of

¹⁰ I saw the photographs of these objects and was asked to identify them.

China. I feel this aspect of civilisational dialogue still deserves deeper understanding and further in-depth academic inquiries.

The communist revolution of China signifies hundreds of millions of Chinese rising to rescue Chinese civilisation from being destroyed by modern Western aggression. There has never been any Chinese rebellion in the past or any communist revolutionary movement in the world so gigantic, so intense, and so total because of the powerful motivational forces generated by Chinese agroculture. It is the victory of the vibrancy and resilience of Chinese civilisation. This truth, unfortunately, has not been understood by many. Ironically, Mao Zedong was one of them. For, Mao's sense of triumphalism led him down the garden path of 'continuous revolution', of pursuing absolute power (to become the leader of world revolution), which was the antithesis of Chinese civilisation.

Mao's death and the exit of the 'Gang of Four' in 1976 saved China from embarking on the disastrous path of pursuing absolute power in a Quixotic bravado. Apparently, post-Mao China has returned to the historical period of Sui and Tang, enjoying the international position of a leading economic powerhouse and pursuing international trade with gusto. Here, we see the dynamism of Chinese agroculture at play. The post-Mao Chinese scenario is often compared with the Zhen'guan Era (AD 626–49) of Tang Emperor Taizong, with a powerful but less interfering central authority mediating societal smoothness and stimulating the *sheng* or 'pro-production' spirit of agroculture. How rapidly China has caught up with the modern standards of production and taken upon herself the role of the 'factory of the world' in just a quarter of a century, is an astonishing phenomenon—proving again the vibrancy of Chinese agroculture.

By consensus, modern Western scholars feel China is facing serious challenges of modernity, advancement, and human evolution. Can Chinese civilisation, with its five thousand years of sedimentation of tradition, adapt itself to the modern world? Is the cultural burden carried by China too heavy to enable her to move ahead? Is not China a huge boat that cannot turn swiftly to cope with the fast changing times? Again, as modern scholars point out, three things are vitally essential in order to function smoothly in the modern world: democracy, market economy, and individualism. Any deficiency in them would make China out of tune with modern global advancement and evolution.

This, however, is not the perspective through the prism of Chinese civilisation. It is incorrect to think that only one Western development model can survive in future. Professor Wang Gungwu of Singapore National University has noticed the 'paradigm shift' in civilisational discourses from a unilateralist Western projection towards a newly emergent Asian self-confidence.¹¹ The new phenomenon of 'Industrial East Asian Civilization' has provided an alternative development model. In this model, government maintains a powerful initiative to plan, guide and control the market force. In this model, relations of production and management-labour equations are relatively harmonious and homely, and private and public sectors learn how to adjust

¹¹ Wang Gungwu's keynote speech on 7 December 2004, in Taipei to the 18th International Conference of Asian Historians (IAHA).




with and complement each other. Such a model has exhibited its advantage in overcoming stormy attacks like the Asian financial crisis in the nineties. Japan, South Korea, Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore are the chief architects of this new model—all of them have been the cultural beneficiaries of Chinese agroculture.

Professor Tu Wei-ming of Harvard University said in an interview at Boston in 1995 that China's was 'a special development model' in which the market economy did not conflict with government macro-mediation, and 'democratic politics and Party leadership' would not 'necessarily clash'. He added: 'There is no outstanding individualism in East Asian societies' (Guo Qiyong and Zheng Wenlong 2001: 447, Vol. 5). Since Tu Wei-ming propounded the concept of 'cultural China' in 1990, this has now gained universal acceptance among China scholars. According to him, cultural China embraces three worlds. The first world is made up by the Chinese residing in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and Singapore. The second world consists of the Chinese diaspora all over the world. The third world belongs to those who have no blood relationship with Chinese ethnicity, but are culturally the 'in-group' inside the Chinese civilisation—scholars, business people, specialists and others who deal with China, the Chinese and Chinese culture, and who are conversant with Chinese ways of life (ibid. Vol. 5, pt. 4). Such an expansive phenomenon is a sure sign of the strength of Chinese civilisation and its adaptability to the rapid changing times.

There is clearly a process of adjustment and transformation which Chinese civilisation is good at. Of course, problems arising from democracy versus dictatorship, freedom versus control, and collectivism versus individualism are thorny, and have not been tackled satisfactorily. But possibilities are wide open. What is termed as the 'quizzical miracle' of China may gradually unravel its mystery through common-sense analyses.

For one thing, in Western political science the space between the individual and the state is a horizontal concept, in Chinese agroculture it is vertical. In Western political concept, there are only two main concerns of the state: peace and security. However, the Chinese *guo* (state) has been very differently conceived. We can see from its visual symbols at different times how this concept developed:

Figure 3

- ①  Oracle Script (*Jiaguwen*)—3,500 years ago
- ②  Bell Script (*Zhongwen*)—3,000 years ago
- ③  Small Seal Script (*Xiaozhuan*)—2,200 years ago

The earliest symbol is made of two graphics, a *ge* (weapon) and a *kou* (mouth), suggesting 'protection of livelihood'. In the second symbol there is an additional graphic of *tu* (earth), meaning territory. The third symbol has another addition of a boundary graphic. From this evolutionary process, we see the essential function of *guo* or state being defined as the protector of people's livelihood, with an added concept of guarding territory within national boundaries.

Here, I have inadvertently identified Chinese civilisation with something that is qualified by the Chinese boundary, apparently contradicting the truth that civilisation is universal and no national boundary can be drawn on it. But I cannot ignore the driving force of *guo* that has all along helped Chinese civilisation overcome fatal challenges in history. This dichotomous proposition is resultant from the multiple levels of civilisation. Now, I shall delve into the efficacy of Chinese civilisation at its low and functional level.

The Chinese sentiments of *baoguo* (paying back one's gratitude for the state), *xuguo* (redemption of one's obligation to the state) and *youguo* (anguish for the pains of the state) are hardly comprehensible in modern Western societies. The great Tang poet, Du Fu's (AD 712–70) famous line *guo po shanhe zai*, which literally means, 'the state is broken, but the mountains and rivers are intact', projects a spiritual *guo* as a separate political existence from the geo-economic reality. Such a separation further develops the unique Chinese concept of *wangguo* (the state is dead) and *wangguohen* (lamentation for the death of the state). Only the Indian sentiment of *Bharat-mata* (India, my mother) can echo such a Chinese citizen-state symbiosis.

It is this symbiosis that has quickly transformed China from the status of 'sick man of East Asia' (*Dong-Ya bingfu*) into a near super power of sports—as shown by the results of 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens. China's unprecedented second place with thirty-two gold medals (only three less than USA, but five more than Russia) was directly proportional to the combination of gigantic input of the state (including individual donations), and the athletes' high spirit of 'winning glory for the state' (*wei guo zengguang*). While this 2004 Olympic success has greatly enhanced China's unity, vibrancy and vitality, the next four years will be an even more vigorous period in pursuing this Olympic politics culminating in the expectant glorious and victorious 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

During this Olympic fever all other things can wait. Democracy, which is the pseudonym of direct elections, is not a big deal for China. The election-politics of USA that failed to overthrow a 'failed' war-mongering regime in 2004 does not impress Chinese intellectuals and masses. Nor is the Indian multiplicity of minority government a model for China. Theoretically, Democracy of all existing models is only of, by and for the elites, not the majority of the ordinary and poor. So long as the Chinese common people can enjoy a relatively stable and well-to-do livelihood, there will be no strong demand for election-politics in China in the near future.

Attention should be paid to the Communist Party of China (CPC), which is a colossus of seventy million membership. This, in addition to the human strength of its junior partner, the Communist Youth League (with sixty million members), makes up one-tenth of Chinese population. The health, vigour, vibrancy and power of this

political colossus will determine China's destiny one way or the other. This CPC phenomenon is a Chinese variation of 'functional pluralism', and differs only in degree with the 'two-party monopoly' of American politics. Throughout Chinese history, there has been the intellectual ruling elite that supports the government and mobilises mass allegiance for the government. In times of rebellion, the intellectual elite turns its face the other way, and the government is overthrown. Today the intellectual ruling elite is almost entirely subsumed by the CPC colossus. Unless the CPC collapses or disintegrates, the government of China will remain stable.

It is puzzling how Chinese agroculture is so efficient in adapting to the globalisation mediated by democracy and market economy, and yet retains its 'Chinese characteristics'. Economists sometimes wonder how less experienced, and more haphazard, non-English speaking Chinese corporations can become more attractive in drawing investment from the English-speaking world than their more experienced, better organised, and English-speaking Indian counterparts, who function much better according to the economic rules. Some even wonder whether the mystic Chinese *guanxi* (public relations) is a secret weapon. Maybe there is an extraordinary force of 'human harmony' at play, which is a subject deserving further investigation.

Finally, there is likelihood that China is abandoning the traditional *wangdao* by pursuing absolute power and becoming a future hegemon. Of course, China's 'great power dream' (*qiangguo meng*) as a rebound to the 'Chinese and dogs' humiliation is no mischief of Chinese nationalism. In order to survive in a modern world where might-is-right, China's continuation of its rising lest she is marginalised by big power politics is also unassailable. However, those humiliating days are gone, and China is today virtually a great power. As such, the lingering great power dream has no justification. Today, no country is threatening China if China does not pose a 'threat' to others. It is her great power dream that rings the alarm bell elsewhere.

Indeed, China is more challenged by her own great power ambition than other things, as the historical tragedy of great powers has not dampened her enthusiasm. Being a mini-globe, large parts of China are facing a range of serious problems from poverty, backwardness, to environmental deterioration. Disparity of income and living standards is skyrocketing, and creating affluent urban oases that are besieged by the desert of less affluent countryside. Beijing, which used to project a very peaceful and secure agrocultural living environment, is now a reminder of London, New York, Chicago, etc. during the period of 'primitive accumulation' of capitalist development.¹² Against this background, China's quest for great power status would be counter-

¹² Friends informed me that the increasing disparity of income and living standard between the urban rich and rural poor has created an increasingly restive societal situation. The residents of Beijing are affected by the exodus of peasants from the countryside far and near. Some of them nursed a deep hatred against the affluent lifestyle of the Beijing locals. Some resorted to robbing and stealing after their initial failure in gaining some benefits through normal avenues. Beijing streets have become unsafe after dusk. Murderous attacks on local residents are on the increase when the new year festival draws near. One of the motivations of criminality is the peasants' unwillingness to return to their respective villages empty-handed—as their relatives are eagerly waiting for them to bring something home from the affluent capital.

productive. On one hand, it would take China half a century to possess the critical mass of a great power. On the other, there would be a great price for Chinese people to pay for getting there.

The strength of Chinese agroculture lies in its aim of providing one-fifth of humanity with 'safe livelihood and happy work' (*anju ley*). If China can provide this to all of 1.4 billion Chinese in the near future, she would be the greatest civilisation on earth. If China cannot ensure such an outcome, she runs the risk of being *expelled* from the globe. It is gratifying that the Chinese authorities have, two years ago, raised the slogan of *quanmian jianshe xiaokang shehui*, meaning, 'to construct a well-to-do society for everyone within China'. While this is easily said than done, as long as such a goal persists there is a bright future for China to survive and prosper in the twenty-first century. All other people on earth would wish her and support her to realise this *xiaokang* dream.

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