**Clubbable China**

*The Chinese have either looked down on foreigners as brutes or up to them as saints, but have never actually been able to call them friends or speak of them as equals*

Lu Xun

The early nineteenth century brought not a clash of civilizations but a rupture in China’s settled way of life, sense of supremacy and imperial security. The Western impact was a rude awakening to the power of logic to form pathways to modernity. The West’s advantage over China stemmed from the Industrial Revolution, hastening the migration of people off the land into cities and providing the panacea of social democracy. The Chinese have no Greek roots, of course, no Aristotle, Socrates or Plato, neither Magna Carta nor rule of law, but they do have a civilization based on moral codes: Confucian obligations rather than statutory rights. What are the odds of balancing the European Convention on Human Rights with a Human Obligations Code?

Faced with having to deal with each other for the first time, the Chinese and Westerners viewed one another with shock and disgust. Each must have struck the other as absurd. To the Chinese, Westerners were simply rude and hairy interlopers who had strayed in from the nether regions of the earth with nasty habits – an impression quickly reinforced by the odious opium trade. The Chinese called them ‘raw’, while those who had bothered to immerse themselves in a little local custom were called ‘cooked’. The West found China caught in a curious kind of time warp, apparently hidebound by ritual, elaborate attire and highly affected manners and forms of address.

The wellspring of the Chinese spirit is the written word. It is the touchstone of their memory, imagination and inspiration. Momentous events and instants in human experience are captured in single characters of calligraphy which have today the force and power of scripture. They remain abiding reminders of both identity and purpose, lighting the Chinese mind in triumph and adversity. Only two civilizations on earth have enjoyed unbroken continuity. While those of Egypt, the Middle East, Persia (Iran) and India are no less ancient, it is the culture and traditions of the Jews and the Chinese alone which have survived intact as spiritual phenomena throughout recorded history. The writings of the Jews have passed down in an almost unbroken line through the Torah and the Talmud. Those of the Chinese originate in forms of script which have undergone remarkably little transformation – only deviation with the Mongol (*Yuan*) and Manchu (*Qing*) dynasties – over several millennia.

The written language is also the root of the Chinese spirit in that the script is treated as an art form. Chinese calligraphy is endlessly expressive and instructive of both their literacy and philosophy, as is their brush painting of traditional subjects like plum blossom, lotus flowers and small figures in a landscape at one with nature. The written word in its finest calligraphic form is the one great constant thread which links the present with the remote and ancient past of prehistory. In the millennia BC, it was the crude, runic inscriptions on the flat shoulder-bones of cattle carcasses and the shells of tortoises which first served to record the mind and magical invocations of the earliest Chinese (on their so-called ‘Oracle Bones’). From this developed a form of script which is, with Arabic, one of the highest of the human arts in the beauty of its precision and execution. The cultivation of this art demands an intensely rigorous discipline in self-control and mental equilibrium. It is as if, with every brush-stroke, an attempt must be made to live up to the spirit of the original word-character.

Much of the civilizational clash has arisen from the teachings of Confucius in the form of a set of moral or ethical obligations applied to hierarchical members of a state, to patriarchal members of a family, and across networks through trustworthy friends. Confucius, like Christ, worked to lower the prevalence of enmity and strife, help stabilise society and bring peace. China’s stabilisation, resulting in a more structured state, also brought an increase in penal law and acknowledgement of the Emperor’s ‘Mandate of Heaven’. The mandate was, in effect, a right to rule with the rights liable to forfeit. The people would accept the Emperor’s mandate from on high provided he was just and fair. Acts of injustice would be countered with opposition to that mandate through riot and rebellion. Repression often followed with coercion its natural successor. It is this tradition of ‘Legalism’ – of punitive controls and sanctions against all forms of protest and dissidence as opposed to the benevolence of Confucian rule – that has produced the currently unstable equilibrium in China, where ‘stability’, ‘harmony’ and ‘security’ can only be maintained by force.

The West’s insistence that only ‘Enlightenment’ values of the rule of law, democracy and human rights will solve China’s problems of governance and stability is a misreading of its historical evolution as a society and civilisation. Who is to say that China did not evolve, through Confucius’ teachings and their adoption, a set of rational and enlightened moral principles to live by in a man-centred world? In their world, there is no higher authority than that of their temporal rulers, no acceptance or acknowledgement of any higher power. Thus, the notion of transcendence that forms the central tenet of religious faith is fundamentally inconceivable to them and Christianity, in particular, is regarded by an overwhelming majority of Chinese as simply another ‘ideology’, notwithstanding the current surge in its popularity. The major obstacle that China faces is in overcoming its difficulties in reconciling its values with those of the West – while its priorities remain the collective over the individual, the relational over the contractual and duties, obligations and responsibilities over rights.

The twin pillars of wisdom in the West have been law and religion (with a stout buttress of philosophy). The absence of both such pillars in China appears to have caused Western concern and some dismay. Western legal process enables governing controls over society – as does religion with its commandments and strictures. China also has controls, substituting a confrontational, dichotomous, legal process with an opaque bargaining system based on arbitration and reciprocity, two constructs not unusual in Western legal systems. The opacity is created by bargaining (which can be corrupt and manipulative) within closed networked connections (*guanxi*) to ensure ‘a very present help in trouble’.

The rise of China will be unstoppable unless it fails to acknowledge the need for the restoration of a traditional mandate from the people. This mandate must permit participation by the people in the organisation of their affairs and the true representation of their legitimate interests in an increasingly plural society. Hong Kong is the current crucible of the struggle for liberty and representative government. Here wills and cultures collide in the wrangle over social and political freedoms. People there and in Mainland China want to be citizens, not servants of the state. Recent events in Hong Kong show that the local leadership is perceived to be toeing the Party line at the expense of any kind of public mandate in the election of its leaders. The ‘universal suffrage’ granted by central government under the ‘Basic Law’, which serves as Hong Kong’s constitution as a Special Administrative Region, has no meaning if there is no real choice to be made in the selection of candidates for office. Similarly, the ‘rule of law’ (whose Chinese translation, *fazhi*, is more commonly interpreted as ‘rule by law’) and the Chinese constitution are invoked to safeguard ‘human rights’ and to eradicate corruption. However, since the Party has absolute control over judicial decision making, it sits in absolute authority above the law and is not accountable to the people for anything other than year-on-year growth in GDP, where the law of diminishing returns has already set in.

The Party enjoyed an undoubted mandate after it prevailed against the Nationalists and the Japanese during World War II. It was akin to the Imperial ‘Mandate of Heaven’. But can that mandate be balanced, if it is not harmonious and if there is no process possible to assess accountability of the Party to the people for the mandate? That mandate can be measured against the achievement of key performance indicators outlined within objectives laid out in the ‘2030 Report’ compiled by the State Council and the World Bank. These focus very practically, as Deng Xiaoping would have it, on ‘seeking truth from facts’ in the evolution of a new society, on achieving structural reform (private sector development); championing innovation (and re-routing education); cleaning up the environment; creating opportunities for all (the people have entered society); strengthening the tax system (and the restitution of a quality civil service); and seeking ‘mutually beneficial relations’ with other countries (a deeper cultural understanding).

The *guanxi* system is unique to China. It is not based as networks of influence are in the West on clubs, schools, colleges and regiments and other institutions like the law and the church. Its function is not so much to secure advantage and privilege as to protect the secrecy and anonymity of networks established to ensure survival of core interests and to hold people safe from harm and arbitrary victimisation. Thus, *guanxi* are as vital to peasant farmers as they are to members of the Party, closed as they are in networks set against each other to enforce ‘harmony’ and ‘security’. In time, the Chinese will be able to divest themselves of these expensive insurance policies.

The initiatives set in train by the campaign of Chinese cultural dissemination overseas have aroused no little suspicion. Are the Confucius Institutes mere propagandistic stalking horses, established to present the smiling face of friendship and China’s peaceful ascendancy? The acid test, of course, and the proof of cultural and artistic integrity is the degree to which foreigners may find some intrinsic appeal and attraction in the cultural ‘products’ on offer. In this regard, the Chinese language is a barrier and bottleneck; the essence of its cultural strength may be lost in translation. The challenge for China in ‘going global’ is to project the integrity and authenticity of the finer elements of its culture as an instrument of soft power. As the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, remarked in his *Philosophical Investigations, “*To restore a broken culture is like trying to repair a torn spider’s web with our fingers.”

East and West are often literally poles apart in their representation of life in both literature and drama. Comedy and action-fantasy apart, the plot lines of Western and Chinese novels and dramas tend, respectively, towards the up-beat and down-beat. While the stories of Western books and films are generally optimistic or at least stoically realistic, those of the Chinese are often imbued with a certain tragic sense of life, as if it were driven by the cruelty of fate. Perhaps this is no wonder, given the misery and suffering that they have had to endure over the last century. It is almost as if the ‘bitterness’ which they have had to ‘eat’ has become bitter-sweet, part of a staple diet. Even if read only in translation, it is a country’s literature which speaks most clearly to foreigners in its disarming directness.

The Chinese take pride in their culture as it is exported, with 5.5 million Chinese now working overseas (up from 3.5 million in 2005). Sixty million Chinese travelled abroad for tourism in 2011. China’s role as a major player on the world stage is evidently widening: in 2003, it chaired the 6-party talks on North Korean nuclear disarmament; in 2009, it joined the anti-piracy force policing the shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden; in early 2012, Jinhai Lin was appointed Secretary of the IMF, making him a pivotal figure in easing co-ordination with China and liaising with member countries for Chinese assistance to the Euro-zone and other crisis-ridden areas of the world.

The world is slowly working towards a rules-based international order, ostensibly based on ‘universal values’, which are still anathema to the Chinese. The main stumbling-block to its achievement is the challenge of reconciling differing value systems, particularly in areas such as human rights, the rule of law and the Separation of Powers (with its independent judiciary). One major consequence of the financial crisis from 2008 is that China is becoming, almost by default, the world’s banker. With the creation of the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, it is establishing a parallel institution to the IMF/World Bank and may effectively wrest the reins of finance for the developing world away from Western institutions. The Bank with its initial capital of $50 bn. and contingency reserve fund of a further $100 bn. will be set to enable countries suffering heavy capital outflows to by-pass the IMF. In this way, China intends to supersede the international monetary order created at Bretton Woods in 1944 and dominated ever since by the US and Europe.

It is now all the more important for Western institutions to engage in urgent discussions with China to make common cause to find solutions to the most intractable problems besetting the world economy. This task is unavoidable for, as the historian Tony Judt argued, it is essential to rediscover ‘the politics of social cohesion based around collective purposes’. These collective purposes extend from clean energy, environmental protection, disease control, food security, a regulatory framework for banking, investment and trading, legal and dispute resolution, particularly in matters of IPR, technology and innovation, to population control and space exploration. In a word: collaboration.

China is understandable through our common humanity and is neither a threat nor an enemy: it must be a chosen companion. As with many companions, there is also a problematic side to the relationship. Just as one might try to neutralise an annoying idiosyncrasy with a joke or a diplomatic comment, so China must be humoured to minimise misunderstanding. We see no adaptation of the Western democratic model for China; yet its necessary political reform may only come through a proper people-to-Party mandate. For the present, the Party forges a critical stability following the extension of President Xi’s term of office beyond 2018 and an affirmation of the metaphysics of Marxism.