

# Who Should Fear China?

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My lifelong experience in India tells me that in the third world, most of the information and insight into Chinese affairs does not originate from China, but is supplied by the Western press and literature, particularly by the USA and Britain. Though there is no dearth of excellent British and American scholars and reporters on the China topic, understanding China — a country of the "Far East" — via the media of the Western Hemisphere is like scratching itching toes with boots on.

China is a "sustainable", ancient civilization that has thrived for five millennia, which is comparable with India, while the rest of the world is either *newly civilized*, comparatively speaking, or separated from their ancient civilizational glories by millennia of "dark ages". Thus to understand China we must engage in a "civilizational discourse", wading through knee-deep civilizational sedimentation to get to the bottom of truth.

Geographically, China is in an enviable position, spatiality monopolizing two of the ten greatest rivers on earth, while the other eight are international rivers. The Chinese have always claimed the world's 6<sup>th</sup> greatest river, the Yellow River and 3<sup>rd</sup> greatest Yangtze River, to be the cradles of the Chinese civilization without any controversy — a rare phenomenon in troubled, polemic world politics. The Late Harvard China-expert, Prof. John King Fairbank, illustrated during the 1980s that the same number of over a billion people lived in 50 states all over the European and American continents, but under one political umbrella in China. Europe — the motherland of "divide and rule" and cesspool of two world wars — is today emulating China's historical example of homogenizing and harmonizing the socio-political and socio-economic existence of an entire continent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Since Emperor Qin Shihuangdi unified China in 221 BC, a unique process of "bounded globalization", from the lower and middle streams of the Yellow River, extending to the present boundaries of China has started. It is "globalization" because a universe originally dotted with tribes as numerous and diverse in ethnicity, language and culture as Africa has been transformed into an integrated commonwealth of "super-state-hood" — differentiating from "nation-state-hood". It is "bounded" because the transforming dynamism respects China's boundaries, avoiding *outsourcing* her power and energy beyond. Of course, it's also true that these boundaries were pushed further and further in historical times, constituting a territorial expansion of sorts. But, this expansion was more due to the aggressiveness of China's neighbours than that of China herself.

Though the so-called "Han race" is a misnomer according to classical anthropological definitions (because "Han" is an artificial political identity, not a primordial geographical or ethnical consensus), we conventionally use the term to designate the locals living in the heartland of China. In two thousand years, there have been constant external invasions into the Han heartland, coupled with the continuous

acculturation of the non-Han invaders by the Han locals. Moreover, most of the major territorial expansions of China were carried out by China's non-Han rulers – like the Mongols and Manchus.

The non-alphabetic Han script proves to be the most effective unifying force in a "continent" of great diversity that is China. Another cementing force of sustainability within Chinese civilization is the paramountcy of "*guo*", which is the "state" in a glorified status. Chinese civilization glorifies the state institution like other civilizations glorify religion. This is underlined by the fact that while temples were generally named after gods in India, most of the India-imported Buddhist temples in China have had the name to bless the *guo*/state institution, and more often than not christened by the imperial Chinese government. Today, this paramountcy of *guo*/state persists not as a sign of Chinese antipathy against democracy, but because of the centripetal DNA of Chinese civilization. It is this centripetal DNA that has made China the concentration of 1/5, or more, of humanity through two thousand years of history. It is also this centripetal DNA that has quickly transformed China from the status of "the sick man of East Asia" into a near superpower of sports — as shown by the Summer 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. In the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China may further consolidate her parity with USA and Russia, or even eclipse both these sports superpowers.

All this is because Chinese civilization has placed its emphasis on "human harmony" ("*renhe*" in Chinese terminology), vis-à-vis the other two essential elements of human life, i.e. "celestial/seasonal environment" ("*tianshi*") and "terrestrial/natural resources" ("*dili*"). While ancient Egyptians busied themselves in building imposing pyramids and ancient Greeks in carving out gigantic stone statues, in their quest for material power, Chinese were excavating the spiritual strength that smoothed human relationships. Modern scholars have correctly pointed out that ancient Chinese wisdom was no profound philosophical epistemology, but down-to-earth common sense ethics. We might term it "harmony ethic". Later, Indian pilgrims and their Chinese colleagues jointly created a kind of Buddhist culture named "Chan/Zen" that further strengthened the native "harmony ethic". Furthermore, the Indian concept of "equality" ("*samata*" in Sanskrit) stimulated Chinese peasants to rise in arms, not to create chaos, but to overthrow corrupt and insensitive regimes and rebuild the governmentality *de novo*. I call this Buddhism-inspired Chinese culture "struggle ethic". It was the dialectic interaction and vibration between the "harmony ethic" and "struggle ethic" that made Chinese civilization last. The new China today is like a phoenix rising from the ashes of revolutionary war — a phenomenon exemplifying such dialectics.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scores of former colonies gained independence through various means. China set a unique example of gaining her independence by first, overthrowing her own *ancien regime* that had grown like cancer within her socio-political system, and then gaining respect from her former foreign tormentors. Western imperialism played the role as both the conscious oppressor of old China and the unwitting incubator of new China. As Mao Zedong said, though the West was a bully, China treated it as guru and learned how to stand on her own feet in the comity of nations in the Brave New World. Today, it is the people of the West who see China as a spectre without sound basis. Alastair Johnston, in his *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (1995, Princeton University Press) made a typical observation:

"It seems fairly evident that the operative Chinese strategic culture does not differ radically from key elements in the Western realpolitik tradition. Indeed, the Chinese case might be classified as a hard realpolitik sharing many of the tenets about the nature of enemy and the efficacy of violence as advocates of nuclear war-fighting on both sides in the cold war, or late nineteenth century social Darwinist nationalism."

Johnston's analysis is both right and wrong. He is wrong by sizing up China through the prism of Western historiography, ignoring China's unique development as a "sustainable civilization" and "bounded globalization" through millennia as I have discussed above. He is right by seeing the possibility of China being led astray by the "Western realpolitik" and "social Darwinism" in her nascent quest for modernization in the new era of "unbounded globalization" (not respecting national boundaries).

In order to survive in the modern world where "might is right" still permeates in international affairs, China has learnt to "rise" as a big power, and play big power politics which is by no means assailable. For instance, China decided to develop nuclear weapons in June 1958, at a meeting of the Military Commission. Everyone agreed with Chairman Mao that "if without it [the atom bomb] you are not respected by others [foreign countries]". Mao put it lightly in a do-or-die situation, in the wake of repeated US threats of throwing the atom bomb on Chinese soil. And the Chinese nicknamed the nuclear project as "*zhengqi*", meaning "to gain self respect". But, soon after China succeeded in exploding a nuclear device and retrieved her international dignity and status, she declared the non-first use of the Bomb. Interestingly, when India exploded her nuclear devices in 1998, she was almost driven by similar motivation, i.e. without nuclear weapons, India would be permanently treated as second class power in world affairs.

In order to placate the fear of "the China threat", especially among China's neighbours, the Chinese government has come out with a new slogan of "a peaceful rise". I am not happy about this slogan for it amounts to China tacitly regarding herself as a *rising giant*. Such a frame of mind runs counter to traditional Confucian modesty, and it betrays the lingering existence of this "great power dream" among Chinese ruling elite. Of course, we should understand that this "great power dream" was a Chinese rebound to the erstwhile Western prohibition of "Chinese and dogs" from entering into the public park of Shanghai that was on Chinese soil (though in the so-called "foreign settlement" being impinged on Chinese sovereignty by the imperialist "gunboat diplomacy") and other likely humiliations. However, in the wake of those bygone, China is today virtually a "great power"; hence, the dream has already been realized and is redundant. If China wants to avoid others having any inferiority complex or fear, she should settle down in the comity of nations as one in the crowd of the ordinary and weak, not in the company of the "*more-equal-than-others*" great powers.

In the 1960s, China exhibited bravado in standing up and challenging the two superpowers – the Soviet Union and USA. Mao Zedong, who was a past master of traditional Chinese strategy, ultimately realized the folly of such quixotic vanity, and made up with USA, responding to the unprecedented overture of President Nixon. His successor, Deng Xiaoping, went a step further to refrain from high-profile diplomatic gesture, making China the darling of the developed world. This yielded positive results such as the change of hearts on the part of USSR's sunset leaders – leading to an enduring equitable fraternal Sino-Russian equation during the last quarter of a century that China had never enjoyed even during the Stalin days. Meanwhile, the USA warmed to China both politically and economically, for three and a half decades, despite intensive China-baiting from both conservative and liberal lobbies in Washington and other American centres. While all this may have been to the advantage of China, she has also faded in her image as a trusted ally of the oppressed and developing world.

Even more worrisome is China's eyeing of an illusory goal for great power that is divorced from reality. As a mini-globe, large parts of China are facing serious problems from poverty and backwardness to environmental deterioration. Disparity of income and living standards is skyrocketing, creating an unenviable situation of affluent oases being intruded by hundreds of millions of migrated labourers from

the countryside. In the Maoist era China had virtually eliminated theft and crime. Today, Chinese cities are fast becoming a reminder of London, New York, Chicago etc. During the period of the "primitive accumulation" of capitalist development – hardly any compliment for China's experiment of "socialism along the Chinese road". Meanwhile, China's "great power" image now is hardly supported by real strength. It would take China half a century to reach the *critical mass* of a great power. China is now facing a serious challenge in her onward march with diverse incentives distracting her concentration.

It is vitally important that China desist from unbecoming attractions and provide good living conditions, social security, happiness, and upscaling opportunities for one fifth of humanity. It is gratifying that the Chinese authorities have, two years ago, prescribed this as their goal of governance. This is phrased in Chinese as "*quanmian jianshe xiaokang shehui*", meaning "to construct a well-to-do society universally" for everyone and every family within China. If China can materialize such a goal, not only a part of the earth is well off, but the mainstream world might depart from its habitual predatory mood of globalization.