

Chinese Religiosity in an Evolving China

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By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vi
Chapter 1	1
Introduction: New Spring on the Mainland	
Chapter 2	10
The Secular and Sacred Contestation: A Critical Assessment of Modern China's Pragmatic Re-appropriation of Traditional Chinese Resources	
Chapter 3	33
Conservatives, Liberals, and China's Dream of a Harmonious World	
Chapter 4	65
An Imminent Threat: A Withering Ecology	
Chapter 5	89
Biomedical Exigencies: China and the Euthanasia Debate	
Chapter 6	110
Beyond Liberal Democracy: China, America, and a New World Order	

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: NEW SPRING ON THE MAINLAND

Four decades into the opening up and reform era, the complexion of the Chinese milieu is undergoing radical transformation. Full scale modernization, breakneck industrialization, and induction of free market economy has let loose social and cultural forces that have fundamentally reconfigured the character of contemporary China. What transpired in the PRC has repercussions beyond the mainland. As an emerging superpower, the ‘China factor’ is playing an increasingly pivotal role in global affairs, becoming catalysts for paradigmatic realignments in international trade alliances and geopolitical strategies. And this permutation is continuing unabatedly as Beijing accelerates the middle kingdom advancement into the ranks of the first world. Indeed, the PRC has locked itself into a high-speed transition that is reinventing the Chinese civilization.

Now one crucial variable in this unfolding story is the rebirth of Chinese religiosity. Once consigned to the peripheries, ancient China's philosophical and religious traditions are making a gradual but steady return to the main arena. And this reawakening of the sacred heritages has the potential to significantly impact the ongoing remodification of secular China and one may add, the world-at-large.

A Reawakening in the Making

The 1960s cultural revolution witnessed the Chinese world spiraling into an iconoclastic frenzy; among others, religious institutions and places of worship were shut down or converted into schools, museums, and even public toilets. China has since recovered from that short lived yet destructive outburst of anti-traditionalism hysteria. And Chinese religiosity itself appears to have survived that sacrilegious mayhem. Indeed, as the warm of spring sweeps across the once barren wintry land, roots of the sacred past are sprouting back to life. Chinese are returning to the fold

seeking traditional spiritual anchors even as the PRC continues to languish in an ideological flux.

Of the lot, 'popular' religion such as Daoism and Buddhism specifically is experiencing the strongest resurgence. As is reported, across the country, abandoned shrines and monasteries are being restored, new cloisters and sanctuaries build to recapture the vivacity and splendor of old. Though driven in part by commercialism, the Shaolin Temple phenomenon is one apt sample of the dynamism permeating the Buddhist renaissance.¹

'Western' religions like Christianity have similarly recorded burgeoning membership in both the state controlled Three Self Patriotic movements and 'underground' churches. According to some studies, conversion to Christianity represents one of the fastest growth segments as the Chinese en masses search for higher transcendental self-fulfillment. And that these new Christians, due to their sizable urban professional representation, will in future assert considerable impression upon the Chinese society-at-large.²

In the more immediate term, it is the reconstitution of the Confucian tradition that may have the most in-depth and far-reaching imprint on China today. As is the case, study of the Analects is now reinstated into the school curriculum, and courses on Confucianism offered in Chinese universities. And in public education to inculcate civic mindedness, the state has variously exhort the Confucian virtue of disciplined self-cultivation. And the world-wide establishment of the Confucius Institute is another indicator of Beijing's courting of the Confucian 'brand'.³

These developments underscore the major metamorphoses in modern China's perception of its premodern cultural heritages. As was the case, at the onset of the 20th century, a tumultuous China, entranced by the euphoria of Western enlightenment, chose to abnegate its sacred past as

¹ Fisher, Gareth (2012) Buddhism in Chin and Taiwan, in David L. McMahan (ed). *Buddhism in the Modern World*, New York, NY. Routledge., pp. 69-88.

² Fenggang Yang, (2005), Lost in the Market, Saved at McDonald's: Conversion to Christianity in Urban China. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Vol. 44, No 4., pp 423-441. Uhalley, Jr Stephen and We, Xiaoxin (eds) (2001). *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future*. London, England. M.E. Sharpe.

³ Bell, Daniel (2010) *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). Sun, Anna, (2013) *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

relics of dark ages that the light of reason will banish to the annals of human history. A century later, premonition is sinking in, in China as well as in the West, that the 'God is dead' prophecy may be misguided or at best premature. The power of scientific reasoning has yet to liberate humankind from the clutches of our primitive impulses to dabble with the paranormal. Indoctrination and even coercive persecution, as was the case in communist China, did not extinguish the human obsession with the mystical. Modernity is conceding to a 'new normal' of co-existence with these idiosyncratic, and seemingly innate, human behavioral proclivities. In terms of governmental policy, the PRC has constitutionally guaranteed the freedom of religious belief, within the constraints of a secular regime.⁴

In recent decades, a further shift in mindset has occurred with rulers of modern China. Religion is no longer an endemic quirk to be acquiesced as a matter of tolerance. Embedded in these antiquated conventions are valuable cultural assets that can be mustered to advance the common good. Local temple associations and faith organizations, for example, are being drafted into state run campaigns to strengthen communal bond and instill moral rectitude. And as mentioned, Confucian concepts such as the ideal of harmonious co-existence, has become part of Beijing's lexicon for nation building as well as to harness international relations, assuring the world of China's expectant peaceful rise.⁵

Freedom and Growth Within Limits

Notwithstanding these turnarounds the PRC is not yet a land of the free. The US State Department's Annual Report on Human Rights, for instance, continues to cite China for violation of fundamental rights pertaining to religious freedom, among others.⁶ The Falun Gong debacle is one obvious reason for these censures. Beijing's hardline responses to perceive threat from Tibetan Buddhism and militant Islam have also raised international concerns. In fairness, some of the Chinese government tough stances are

⁴ Vincent Goossaert, David A. Palmer. (2011). *The Religious Question in Modern China*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Fenggang Yang, (2012) *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*. Oxford University Press.

⁵ Chau, Adam Yuet (edited). (2011). *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation*. New York, NY: Routledge. Lai, Honggyi Larry. (2003) *The Religious Revival in China*. *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, 18, pp. 40-64.

⁶ US Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014; www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper.

not without justification. That said, other restrictions such as those imposed on the Chinese Catholic church are less admissible.

These contentions underline a basic challenge of governance, namely, the delicate task of reconciling the tension between freedom and order. Regulations are necessary but where is the line that demarcate judicious oversight and infringements of rights? Conversely, autonomy ought to be protected but how to prevent liberty from slipping into anarchy? While most governments have their share of miscalculations, China, in the assessment of some, has tend to err excessively on the side of order to the detriment of freedom.

More generally, the arduous circumstance of Chinese religiosity is compounded by the prevailing spirit of disenchantment. By most account, Marxism as a political ideology is a spent force in China. That said, the CCP-PRC is still officially an atheistic party-state, and as is the case, Beijing continues to avow its commitment to pursue a socialist utopia. In actuality, the ongoing regenerations notwithstanding, skepticism towards the traditional Chinese beliefs system, especially among the ruling elite, persists. As such, to the extent the efficacy of the sacred resources are acknowledged and utilized, Beijing employs them chiefly as handmaiden of the state, to achieve secularists determined ends. And when religious communities are allowed to reconstitute, they do so under the aegis of their secular masters. In short, China remains a disenchanted country, and the fate of Chinese religiosity stays in the hands of modern China's secular rulers.

Unlocking Religion's Transformative Power

This book is an analysis of the resurgence of Chinese religiosity and its probable impact on the PRC and the world-at-large. It explores how the legacies of ancient China can be reappropriated as remedial recourses to deal with the exigencies afflicting modern China. Specifically, this philosophical and religious studies-based research will make the case that Chinese religiosity has the potential to play a greater transformative role in the moral restoration and ideological reconstruction of a post-Marxist China. This prospect is however contingent on contemporary China undertaking a more complete rehabilitation of the sacred Chinese traditions.

To that end, this treatise is a critique of the current state of affairs. At the outset the obvious challenge is for Beijing to exhibit greater fineness in

managing the order and freedom tension. The broader task is to deal with the secular and sacred dialectic, namely, the need for the CCP-PRC party-state to overcome the residual prejudices against its premodern customs and norms. More pointedly, this book will argue that in order to resolve the social-moral crisis at hand, contemporary China may have to undertake structural readjustments in presuppositions and perspectives, i.e., to reembrace the ancient holistic in lieu of the prevailing modernity's dualistic worldview.

As the case may be, in dualistic conception of the world, reality is bisected into two antithetical spheres, rational vis-a-vis non-rational, physical vis-a-vis spiritual, temporal vis-a-vis eternal. In secularism this diametric binary is collapsed in favor of the former, where reason reigns over sense, and the this-worldly takes precedence over the other-worldly. The CCP-PRC's idealization of a socialist utopia is founded upon such a dichotomized weltanschauung. It launches modern China on the quest, marching to the drumbeat of scientific rationality, to consummate a paradise on earth, free of heavenly inferences.

Through the lenses of the quintessentially Chinese theorem of yin-yang, ancient China also perceives the world as bifurcated (dark and light, body and mind, natural and supernatural). But the ancient Chinese set these contrasting polarities in synthesis rather than antithesis, each dependent on the other for its existence. This consanguinity is in turn encapsulated within a wider Chinese cosmology that regards all things as ultimately one, emanating from and converging back to a singular source of energy, *chi*. It is this organic worldview that underpins the primordial Chinese vision of a flourishing civilization. Appealing to both rational and emotional intelligence, it sets ancient China up to actualize a holistic way of life, one that accords equal import to the physical and metaphysical, with judicious reverence for the terrestrial authorities as well as the celestial forces.⁷

Herein lies the central thesis of this book: the predicaments afflicting China today, in large measure, are symptomatic of secular modernity's lopsided notion of progress founded upon a dualistic worldview. Therefore, in order to stem the crisis at its source, China needs to recapture the ancient vision of oneness, to hold the polarities in creative tension rather than collapsing one over the other. It is by regaining this sense of equilibrium that the transformative power of the Chinese sacred heritages

⁷ Chan, Wing-Tsit. (1963) *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

can be unleashed to redirect modern China towards a more holistic model of growth and development.

Aside from impediments from secularism, another set of complications inhibiting Chinese religiosity is the internal discords within the traditionalists' rank. In general, the fissure runs along the conservative liberal divide, the former advocating a conforming orthodoxy while the latter a reformist heterodoxic rendition of the ancient traditions. This book will argue that the Sinic civilization was founded upon the Confucian ideals of pluralism and universalism. And it is by reaffirming these progressive principles that post Marxist China can be transformed into an inclusive nation state and in turn sustain a harmonious postmodern world.

This philosophical treatise is also an ethical study, with detailed ethical investigation, involving both theoretical as well as practical exegesis, of the moral-social-political conundrums besetting China. In fact, this is a multidisciplinary project, covering a wide spectrum of issues, from contentions over political reform to exigencies pertaining to a fraying communal fabric, and a looming ecological catastrophe to the nascent bioethical dilemma of euthanasia.

Beyond domestic concerns, we will also examine China's global footprints and status as an emerging world power, addressing specifically the tenacious Sino-US relationship. And where appropriate, we will employ a comparative religion and philosophical analysis, contrasting Confucianism with Christianity, as a way to bring to forth the commonalities underpinning Confucian East and Christian West as well as to accentuate the distinct features of the Chinese tradition and experiences.

In summing up, this manuscript is an advocacy think piece, arguing the case for a greater role for Chinese religiosity, in conjunction with a particular liberal reinterpretation of the sacred traditions. The hope is that through the normative arguments presented, we will gain a clearer descriptive picture and understanding, albeit from the prism of the ancient Chinese philosophy and religion, of the extraordinary transfiguration taking place in China today, and by extension, the wider world.

Outline of Chapters

This book begins with a critical assessment of modern China secular ruler's ad hoc readaptation of premodern Chinese sacred resources (Chapter 2). The chapter argues that Beijing's pragmatic use of religion to

deal with a multifaceted crisis afflicting the mainland is at best ineffective, at worst counterproductive. It first addresses the current Xi-Li administration's sweeping offensive against a corrupt officialdom, contending that for the sake of restoring moral rectitude China needs to transcend the prevailing coercive secular temperament and reabsorb the ancient benevolent sacred ethos anchored on *Tien*. The next set of criticism is directed at Beijing's stoking of ethnic and cultural pride to coalesce a fragmented country. If committed to a harmonious world it will be argued that a unified China ought to be founded on Confucian universalism in lieu of the prevalent parochial nationalism. The chapter ends with assertions that in order to deal with the root causes of a looming ecological disaster, it is imperative that the Chinese milieu undertakes a fundamental realignment in worldview, from the present dualistic anthropocentric to the ancient holistic anthropo-cosmic view of the world.

Chapter (3) turns our attention to the conservative-liberal tension within the contemporary Confucian movement, with members advancing competing and conflicting visions of a post Marxist China. Specifically, this analysis will critique three aspects of the conservative re-sacralization project deemed incongruent with China's dream of a harmonious world. The first pertains to the prevailing Han-centric rendition of the Confucian tradition. Rebuttals are made in support of an emerging multicultural 'Global Confucianism', an international movement that would further the Chinese quest for a universal ethical order. Following this is a critique of the conservative proposed Confucian church and installation of Confucianism as China's state religion. In response, counterarguments are advanced for the re-institution of 'Civil Confucianism'. It is the scholar-officials vis-a-vis the clerics who can restore a more holistic, pluralistic re-enchanted China. The final contention addresses the conservative melancholic Hobbesian worldview. The Confucian vision, I explain, is essentially sanguine and the clash of civilizations not inevitable. Additionally, China and America do share core values for both to jointly sustain a harmonious world.

The next two chapters are examinations of two sets of crises besieging China. Chapter (4) addresses the worsening degradation of nature. As is the case, confronted with an imminent ecological calamity, calls are intensifying for modern China to rekindle its ancient naturalistic worldview. This chapter explores the practical implications of these exhortations, namely, the requisite actions to transform contemporary Chinese into citizenry committed to sustainable living. Two trademarks of the traditional Chinese moral enterprise will be elaborated. The first is the

doctrine of concentric circle. I will explain that the Confucian strategy to fulfill humankind universal obligation is to begin with rectifying the self, the local community and extending incrementally towards the embrace of all things. The process to heal nature's wounds henceforth must similarly commence with discipline self-cultivation anchored on the nucleus family. The second is ancestral worship, which I plan to elaborate has efficacy in strengthening people's resolve to subsist sacrificially for the sake of their descendants. As a platform to venerate the dead, this ritual also serves as conduit to a spiritual realm that awakens the living and reinforces our bond to the future generation.

Soaring medical costs, coupled with an aging population is straining China's public-health system. It is against this dire backdrop that euthanasia is being debated. Chapter (5) looks at this impending bioethical dilemma and evaluates the Chinese moral traditions response to this controversial medical option. It begins by examining a related phenomenon, the Chinese relatively liberal stance on suicide. The chapter then addresses the "self-regarding" euthanasia cases where death is advanced as measures to relieve personal affliction. This is followed by explications on the "other-regarding" category, where euthanasia is invoked as an altruistic act to benefit the collective. This exposition will argue that the hastening of death may be morally permissible in certain exceptional circumstances. Even so, the legalization of euthanasia is dissuaded because these exigencies arose from Beijing's dereliction in administering equitable care. The stronger ethical resolution is to reform China's beleaguered healthcare system with enhanced and fairer allocation of resources.

This research project ends with a look at China's global footprints, focusing on the Sino-US relationship (Chapter 6). As representative of proud civilizations, the Chinese and American encounter is inevitably vexed with rivalry. Nevertheless, this chapter will show that the philosophical-religious foundations of these two worlds, specifically, Confucianism and Jeffersonian Deism possess overlapping values and ideals (universalism, pluralism, moderation). Thus, disputes over liberal democracy notwithstanding, it will be argued that Confucian China and Jeffersonian America share common core values that posit the prospect of a peaceable coexistence and joint maintenance of a new world order.

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CHAPTER 2

THE SECULAR AND SACRED CONTESTATION: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF MODERN CHINA'S PRAGMATIC RE-APPROPRIATION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE RESOURCES

Once maligned, traditional mores are being reappropriated to deal with the multifaceted malaises vexing the PRC's decades-long 'economic miracle'. Beijing's rehabilitation of the past is nevertheless driven by pragmatism, with the sacred subsumed under the predominant secular ethos. To begin with this constricts the efficacy of the Chinese philosophical and religious traditions. More critically, as we shall see, the modern exigencies are the consequences of the radical secularization of 20th century China. Given this prognosis, the aim of this chapter is to make the prescriptive call for a fundamental realignment in *Weltanschauung*. In order to resolve today's crisis at its source, secular China needs to reembrace its ancient sacred worldview and become re-enchanted with its sublime past. This extensive thesis will be developed by examining three specific sets of conundrums affecting the PRC.

The first looks at Xi Jinping's drive to reinvigorate a corrupt officialdom and instill rectitude to a listless milieu. At the outset, to enhance the anti-graft campaign, the CCP-PRC party-state needs comprehensive political and legal reform. That said, equally important is the necessity to reconstitute a conducive cultural habitat that inculcates conscientious citizenry and exemplary moral leadership. The Chinese society today, as will be explained, is effuse with a coercive secularized temperament inimical to the Confucian moral enterprise. Therefore, in furtherance of an ethics-centered social environment, modern China may have to reaffirm its ancient benevolent ethos anchored on the sacred reverence of *Tien*.

Faced with a fraying social fabric the Communist Party is likewise turning to antiquity for motifs to galvanize the country. In a number of respects,

Beijing's attempts to rally the masses are not without efficacy but this is achieved chiefly through the hyping up of chauvinistic civilizational pride. If committed to advancing harmony at home and abroad, Chinese leaders should repudiate the pragmatic exploit of ethnocentric nationalism with a principled reaffirmation of the Confucian universal ideals.

This chapter ends with an analysis of the imminent threats facing the mainland's withering ecology. The crisis afflicting China, I explain, is symptomatic of a broader vexation, namely, secularism lopsided anthropocentric, materialistic notion of progress. To bring about a comprehensive resolution the Chinese milieu has to undergo a paradigmatic shift in worldviews, to recapture their forebear's organic cosmology, and to strive for a holistic existence that reconciles the competing interests of humankind and the wider ecosphere.

A) Heaven and Ethical Governance

The early sages' invocation of the Mandate of Heaven serves to forewarn erstwhile Chinese Emperors that failure to rule virtuously would provoke mass uprisings, toppling dynasties like waves upending a rudderless ship. Rulers of modern China are no less cognizant of the potency of a disgruntled populace. Among others, Beijing is acutely mindful that a corrupt officialdom and a broader milieu ensnared by moral decay are admixtures that could potentially erupt and subvert the CCP-PRC party state. To that end, the Xi-Li administration is resolute in their determination to clean up the party ranks and to reinvigorate a demoralized citizenry.

A1) Institutional Reform

Thus far, and by many accounts, President Xi's unrelenting drive to wipe out corruption roots and branches, sparing no fleas nor tigers, have met with remarkable early successes. Critiques nevertheless are cautioning that for lack of transparency, Beijing's all-out battle against graft runs the risk of political factional infighting. A concern stems chiefly from the existing one party-state system with weak institutional oversight.¹

¹ Delisle Jacques, (2015) "The Rule of Law with Xi-Era Characteristics: Law for Economic Reform, Anticorruption, and Illiberal Politics. *Asia Policy*, No 20, Jul 2015, pp. 23-29.

The Communist Party is not indifferent to the need for political reform. In the past decade of so measures such as the setting of term limits, buffing up of the judiciary, to mentioned a few, have been put in place to enhance good governance. These are significant steps but the CCP continues to resist one vital reform, namely, the installation of a multiparty system that would allow for the existence of viable oppositions.

Herein lies the crux of the problem: absence of external overseers with matching power severely weakens institutional accountability. In fact, it also gives the lie to Beijing's claim to the rule of law. Without credible oppositions and legal avenues to challenge its supremacy, the CCP, as the sole dominant authority, critics charge, is able to rewrite the law of the land at will. For this reason, qualms abound whether the Communist Party can be truly be disinterested in enforcing the law, and for that matter, effectively police its rank and file, and the country.²

It is worth noting that the Chinese rejection of a multiparty system and Western style government in general is not without justification. To start with is the genuine trepidation that a rush toward liberalization could unleash forces that beget more harm than good. The other reason is simply because Beijing does not think liberal democracy is the panacea to China's ills. Concededly, electoral democracy is not without flaws, the constricted capacity for long range planning is one clear example. Complex checks and balances with protracted due processes can further subvert effective governance. Additionally, the universal suffrage system is vulnerable to undue sway of special interest groups, pointing to liberal democracy's own susceptibility to corruption.

Given these counter points, it is apt to place the intractable liberal democracy debate within the broader perspective of primordial Chinese transcendental worldview. Like most theistic traditions the ancient Chinese regards the mundane realm as ephemeral and human enterprise inevitably fallible. The Chinese monarchs, as the Sons of Heaven, are transitory potentate. Even the much-touted imperial bureaucracy is not immune from routinization. Thus, from the vantage point of *Tien*, it is presumptuous to declare human progress has arrived at the 'end of history'. The best that we can strive for is a tentative, approximate working model. After all, the Way, as the *Daodejing* laments, is ultimately elusive.

² Fewsmith, Joseph. (2013). *The Logic and Limits of Political Reform in China*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.)

The want of a perfect system however does not absolve China from the necessity for political reform. Liberal democracy may be imperfect but the CCP-PRC one party state is as amiss, if not more. For one, to sustain the current governing system would render the modern Chinese republic no different from its imperialistic predecessors on one crucial feature, namely, the change of rulership can only be exacted through violent revolts. Since no human person and for that matter human institutions (dynastic family or political party) can attain immortality and the transfer of power inevitable, prudence would counsel the installation of some form of peaceful mechanisms to facilitate such eventuality.

Pertaining to the issue at hand, as said, lack of robust external oversight is positing inherent risks to the Communist Party ongoing crackdown on corruption. It is henceforth critical that some variations of a multiparty system whether in the shades of liberal democracy or alternatives with 'Chinese characteristics' be put in place so as to enhance transparency, accountability, and good governance.³ In this way the PRC will become more in alignment with the modern era expectation of non-violent contestation and peaceful transition of governmental power.

A2) Charismatic Leaders

Now, despite the fact that the Way is ultimately impassable, the ancient Chinese believes that harmony under the Heaven, albeit fleetingly, had and may yet be realized. And this is contingent upon the advent of an extraordinary figure, namely, a sage king. As is the case, historically, the golden age of the Sinic civilization transpired during the auspicious reigns of noble sovereigns.

This leads us to Max Weber's analysis of charisma, of outstanding personages endowed with exceptional virtuous qualities that inspire loyalty and obedience from followers. According to the Weberian thesis, if

³ From within China are ongoing efforts to steer political reform towards a 'post liberal democracy' trajectory, imbued with unique 'Chinese characteristics'. In Jiang Qing's wide-ranging proposal for example is the setting up of a tricameral parliament that consists of the House of Exemplary Persons, the People's House, and the House of Cultural Continuity. See Jiang Qing, *Political Confucianism: The Transformation, Special Characteristics, and Development of Contemporary Confucianism*. Daniel A. Bell & Ruiping Fan edited "A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Political Future" (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

utopia is to be actualized, it is most likely to materialize via the passionate force of personal leadership than the impassionate efficacy of institutionalized bureaucracy.⁴ The implication of this thesis for good governance is clear. It accentuates the import of ethical personnel. Codes of conducts are legislated, governing bodies established to enforce these decrees but it is through the persuasive power of exemplary individuals that the spirit of these laws become alive and sublime governments become concrete. As Mencius asserts: "When the ruler is benevolent, all are benevolent. When the ruler is righteous, all are righteous. Once the ruler attains rectitude, the state is well governed".⁵

Given the ancient idolization of the sage king, let us turn to President Xi, widely regarded as China's most powerful helmsman since Deng Xiaoping. Xi has thus far proven to be hugely popular, in large measure for his audacious crackdown on delinquent cadres. But strongman leadership, with power concentrated narrowly, raises the specter of personality cult and tyrannical despot, a peril all too familiar in Imperial as well as post Imperial China.

Two critical points to draw from the above analysis. Plainly, to deal with the corruption malaise, beyond institutional reform, China needs virtuous personnel to administer the bureaucracy and to preside over the country. The challenge however is to ensure exemplary personalities assume these positions of authority and power. Which leads us to the broader task at hand, namely, how to sustain a cultural habitat that would generate such conscientious individuals? In premodern China, this undertaking was spearheaded by the Confucians, whose moral enterprise is anchored on a theistic worldview, with features distinct to the Chinese.

A3) The Confucian Moral Enterprise

As one of the Axial Age civilizations, ancient China also espouses the vision of a common humanity. What sets the Sinic civilization apart is the Confucian idealistic approach towards actualizing this universal aspiration.

Confucianism, of the Mencius school in particular, upholds a sanguine theory of human nature: every person is endowed with innate capacity to

⁴ Gerth H. H and C. Wright Mills. (2009). From Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*. New York, NY. Routledge.

⁵ Mencius, trans. D. C. Lau (1970) (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

do good. And through diligent nurturing the germ implanted in us can mature into virtuous self. This optimism shapes the basic ethos of the Confucian polity. In terms of statecraft, the Confucians are convinced that through the humane rule of a sagely king, all of humankind has the potential to co-exist harmoniously under the Heaven.

Such idealism is not universally affirmed, not even among the ancient Chinese. Xunzi for one takes the contrarian view of human nature as essentially flawed thus austere methods are needed to mold the human character. In the case of Han Fei Tze, the legalists consider human society as governable only through the enforcement of harsh penal laws.

Added to this list of realists' schools of thought are the Mohists, who argued that in pursuing the good, we can at best strive for the compromised goal of the greatest good or lesser evil. Mo Tzi's utilitarianism is in fact a form of consequentialist ethics whereupon the ends justify the means. That is to say, if the consequences are desirable then the methods deployed, even immoral ones, may be justifiable.

Confucianism rejects Mo Tzi's utilitarianism and consequentialism because in Mencius idealism, the integrity of the attained 'good' would have been corrupted by the unscrupulous means used to achieve those goals. In the Confucian deontological ethics, the ends do not justify the means. For the Confucians, what is morally right is at times base on an action itself rather than the effects of those actions. That is to say it is impermissible to act unethically even if the after-effects are 'good'. This axiom in turn underscores another key Confucian conviction, namely, the existence of moral absolutes. Indeed, the Confucians believe that Tien has prescribe sets of Heavenly Principles that we cannot violate on earth, even when pursuing 'good' ends.

This theistic belief system forms the philosophical foundation of Imperial China. At the outset, it underpins the Chinese doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven, forewarning the emperor to reign in deference to and under the constraints of Heaven. Then, and more broadly, through a rigorous self-cultivation program the Confucians work to instill these deontic values into the Chinese collective consciousness. By nurturing individual hearts and minds, these philosophers strive to transform the Chinese body politic into a virtuous citizenry imbued with integrity, fortitude, and humanness. It is the result of such a discipline inculcation, set within an ethic-centered cultural habitat that the history of Imperial China is invigorated by the coming to scene of the noble scholar-officials and the rarefied wise rulers,

to enliven the Sinic civilization with their much-touted benevolent kingship.

A4) The Theistic Conundrum

At this juncture, it is apt to address a tangential yet important conundrum associated with theistic traditions. As is the case, religious adherents do not always manifest ethical restraints, and militant Islam is an apt contemporary illustration. Like the Confucians, the Islamists revere a transcendent authority. But unlike the former, the latter had, in the name of God, condone immoral acts. Now such deviant justification stem from a specific kind of religiosity, namely, dualistic theism.

In traditions such as the Abrahamic religions, reality is demarcated into distinct, asymmetrical spheres: material and spiritual, earthly and heavenly, temporal and eternal. In this bifurcated worldview, the infinite creator is deemed as fundamentally different and superior from the finite creation. As such the eternal transcendent is not restricted by the temporal mundane. Divine miracles, for example, could contravene the law of nature. Edicts from above too may overrule ethical norms below. A case in point is the episode concerning Abraham who was challenged to sacrifice Isaac, his infant son, as a sign of loyalty to Yahweh.

Herein lies the paradox of dualistic theism: the omnipotent deity, in its radicalness, could impute such wrath as to confound human justice. To be sure, these are extremely rare events, occasioned by extraordinary circumstances. But the prospect exists whereupon the divine could intervene in a manner that violate the mundane order. And here is where the inherent risk with dualistic theism resides. Even if anomalous, this radical view does provide theological justification for the suspension of ethical norms on account of a supreme authority who presides over and above natural law.

It is this dualistic belief system that underpins the Islamists extreme behavior today. Simply put, in the militant Islamists assessment, the holy order is now so besieged by vile that a fervid counter-response is warranted. The righteous is compelled to wage a ferocious jihad, in an epic battle of good and evil, in order to save the earthly realm from perdition.⁶

⁶ Feldman, Yael S. (2010). *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative*. Stanford, California. Stanford University Press.

When captive to such an apocalyptic vision, dualistic theists become hostage to a deviant form of eschatological morality. The quest for the heavenly can be so all-consuming that it justifies the deployment of any earthly means, including the most abhorrent one. For all intents and purposes, in such a scenario, it is might, albeit a purportedly divine one, that makes right, unencumbered by ethical restraints.⁷

Confucians repudiate this variant of theism because of the Chinese imminent-transcendence theological worldview. To be sure, through the yin-yang lenses, premodern China similarly perceived the world dualistically. But the Chinese polarity is embedded within a broader organismic cosmology where all things are seen as emanating from and ultimately converging back into one source: the fountain head of *chi* energy. In such a cosmogenesis, there is no radical dichotomy separating the celestial and terrestrial, divinity and humanity. Indeed, some Confucianists depict humankind as co-terminus with the transcendent and as co-creator of the cosmic order.⁸

Of course, as noted, the Way is in the end elusive, confounding human comprehension. But unlike dualistic theism, in Chinese holism, the transcendent is never so inscrutable as to contravene the mundane order, and heaven would at no time issue decrees that violate earthly norms. Framed in ethical terms, for the Confucians, there is an all-encompassing convention that regulates the universe, the natural and supernatural, the this-worldly and other-worldly. This continuance is captured by the philosopher's counsel against excessive preoccupations with the afterlife that would undercut obligations in the present life. Herein lies the unique feature of the ancient Chinese theism, embedded within an organic cosmology, it sees humanity and divinity, the temporal and the eternal, as bound by a common law. Put colloquially, for the Confucian, no one is above the law, not even God. (It is in this sense, for its lack of a radical transcendent, that Confucianism has been ascribed by some as a humanistic albeit sacred tradition).⁹

⁷ Juergensmeyer, Mark. (2003) *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley, CA. University of California Press.

⁸ Tu, Weiming. (1985). *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*. Albany: SUNY Press.

⁹ Tu Weiming. (2001). "The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism: Implications for China and the World" in *Daedalus* 130 (4): 243-264.

A5) Modern China in Crisis

As was the case, the dawn of the 20th century witnessed a tumultuous China abnegating its sacred past in favor of secularism. To be sure, the modern Chinese are no less ambitious in espousing a universal aspiration of a socialistic utopia. While not without misadventures, the CCP regime did manage to sustain some semblance of a disciplined order, extolling and or cajoling the masses into self-sacrificing communal existence.

With the onset of the 21st century, Beijing continues to affirm its allegiance to a 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. This pledge however is being undermined by the concurrent inception of capitalism, inducing disjuncture across economical as well as social planes. At the outset, critiques point to a mismatch in official moral codes, as post-Mao China no longer sustain the praxis to cultivate the avowed communistic values.¹⁰ Instead we have a new socio-economic reality where individuals pursue, and are egged on to pursue, their own interests in competition with others in an increasingly capitalistic economic order.¹¹

By most measures, the PRC has moved past Marxism in all but rhetoric. The problem is that China has yet to reconstitute an ascetic discipline (like the Protestant ethics) to restrain the free market economy. Herein lies a cultural fault-line in contemporary China, namely, no replacement has emerged to fill the gap left by the demise of the old moral order. And in this transitional flux, critics identified the engendering of a new Chinese person: a communist turned nihilist, a nihilist turn hedonist, who responds to the new opportunities presented by the market as if directly to a set of stimuli, with little mediation either of a moral code or a conception of self.¹²

Collapse of the socialist order has in reality precipitated a broader moral caving in of the Chinese world. In the absence of a new constellation of values and everyday self-forming practices, post Marxist China has descended into an ever more individualistic, materialistic, and immoderate

¹⁰ In Mao's time the moral injunction to "serve the people" used to go together with elaborate practices of self-improvement ranging from concrete displays of self-denial in matters of dress and diet to almost daily rituals of avowals of faith in communism embodied in devotion to collective work. See Wang, Xiaoying, (2002) "The Post-Communist Personality: The Spectre of China's Capitalist Market Reforms," *The China Journal*, No. 47 (Jan 2002), pp. 1-17.

¹¹ Ibid.,

¹² Ibid.,

way of life. Media today are rife with reports of everyday norms -- be they moral, legal or regulatory -- being breached on an alarming scale, involving every sector of society, and by so many in every walk of life.¹³

From the Confucian perspective, the source of today's moral crisis predates capitalism and even socialism. It stems from secularism and the radical disenchantment of the Chinese world. As alluded to, in refuting the premodern cosmology, modern China turned to science for an explanation of the universe. And among others, Darwin's evolutionary theory in particular exerted the deepest impression on how 20th century China conceive reality.

Closer to Xunzi than Mengzi, Darwin's stance is a familiar one: homo sapiens, as with rest of the animal species, are essentially driven by the banal instinct to survive. And to the extent humankind do co-exist, this is sustained via the confluence of mutually self-preserving impulses, a *modus vivendi*. And in this Darwinian world, it is the law of natural selection that prevails, where the strong lords over the weak and might is the maker of right. And in this beastly dominion, survival is the ultimate endgame. Therefore, when existence descends into a dog eat dog, kill or be killed savagery, one is compelled to deploy all means necessary, immoral ones included, to avert extermination. Hence unlike the Confucian deontological morality, Darwin evolutionary ethics has no qualms employing unethical measures to achieve the desired ends.

Herein lies the root of the PRC's predicament, namely, secularism's unbridled realism. Modern China's submission to scientism has contorted the moral orientation of the Chinese world. The Confucian transcendentalism that once commanded the Sinic civilization has been superseded by the afore-discussed Darwinian naturalism. The age-old veneration for the sagely and virtuous, for instance, is eclipsed by the present generation's adulation of power and wealth. And the ancient conviction in the Heavenly Principles that restrained human conduct is usurped by a pervasive evolutionary based relativism where might is acquiesced as the subjective arbiter of right, and ends pursued uninhibited by constraints.¹⁴ Arguable, the endemic corruption afflicting the PRC is an outgrowth of a disenchanted

¹³ Ci Jiwei. (2009). "The Moral Crisis in Post-Mao China: Prolegomenon to a Philosophical Analysis" *Diogenes*, 221: 19-25.

¹⁴ He, Huaihong. (2015) *Social Ethics in a Changing China: Moral Decay or Ethical Awakening?* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press).

mainland bereft of its traditional ethical inhibition and moral compass.

Therefore, in summing up, in order to deal with the moral exigences at hand, beyond legal and political reform, the PRC needs a turnaround in worldview, to countermand the prevailing secular naturalistic ethos. It is critical that contemporary China reaffirms its ancient holistic theism and the Confucian conviction that human conducts are subject to constraints, even when pursuing the good. By so doing, a unique theistic and ethics centered Chinese polity can be reestablished to check the excesses of radical secularization, and as explained, the converse idiosyncrasies of extreme religiosity. And it is from within such a rejuvenated cultural habitat that virtuous individuals are more likely to emerge to provide the exemplary moral leadership Beijing needs to revive a corrupt officialdom and a listless milieu.

B) Confucian Idealism and a Harmonious World

Apart from moral cynicism, China's embrace of free-market capitalism has also unleashed economic forces that are fracturing the Chinese social landscape. The yawning gap between urban rich and rural poor is one such fissures. Similar to the endemic corruption, Beijing is acutely mindful these fragmentations are potential flash points with importunate political consequences. In response the Xi administration has concocted the 'China Dream' to galvanize the country around a central ideal, namely, common prosperity. And again, Beijing is turning to traditional heritages, like exalting the preeminence of the Sinic civilization as motif to rally an increasingly disparate society.

To some extent Beijing's effort to coalesce the republic is not without success. The 2008 Olympic is an apt illustration where the Chinese celebrated the middle kingdom's reemergence onto the international arena with an extravagant display of cultural and ethnic pride. In fact, notwithstanding domestic dissonances, there is no deficit in Chinese patriotic fervor, especially when affronting the outside world. But the disconcertment with this united front is its underlying vindictive ethnocentric impulses. In the testy Sino-Japan relationship, for example, the Chinese remonstrance against its presumably unrepentant neighbor bear a markedly xenophobic undertone. Critics noted that to the extent a discordant China does hold together, it is bound through a virulent form of

nationalism antithetical to the Confucian universal ideals.¹⁵

B1) Confucian Civic Nationalism

The Confucian retort against Han chauvinism is the aforementioned Mencius doctrine of one humanity. Humankind is by nature the same, each endowed with innate capacity to live in accord with the Heavenly Principle. This sanguine worldview underpins the Confucian universal vision, to establish a social order whereupon all people could co-exist peaceably. More importantly and pertinently, embedded within this aspiration is the Confucian rejection of any theory of a 'chosen race', who by nature stands above the rest. Hence to elevate one's ethnicity, Han or otherwise, as naturally superior contradicts the Confucian doctrine of common humanity.¹⁶

Now, even as all are born equal, Mencius proceeded to explain that humankind subsequently diverge, as peoples develop varied cultural norms to nurture their natural potential. This gives rise to a plurality of philosophical and religious traditions, in form as well as quality, some more and others less equal than the rest. It is at this stage of human development that qualitative distinctions appear. And it is here that the Confucians sets themselves apart as attaining a superior way of life that is in greater conformity with the Heavenly Principle. Indeed, as first among equals, Imperial Confucianism regards itself as an apex civilization, qualified to provide moral leadership, for all under the Heaven. Notwithstanding this sense of eminence, the Confucian order contains distinct inclusive features.

Let's first revisit the issue of race. When censuring a religious tradition, the Confucians draw a critical distinction between culture and race. The Confucian would for example adjudge Tibetan Buddhism as a fallacious tradition but would not deprecate the Tibetan people as naturally inferior. The reason for this qualification is because, as mentioned, according to the Confucian tenets, human nature is innately good. Human starts to err when we fail to nurture our natural potential. The implication is that human weakness is not intrinsic, but extrinsic. That is to say human by nature is not morally flawed. Putting this more broadly, no human person by nature

¹⁵ Gries, Peter Hays, (1999) A "China Threat"? Power and Passion in Chinese "Face Nationalism". *World Affairs*, vol. 162, no. 2, Fall: 63-76.

¹⁶ Bloom, Irene (1997) Human nature and biological nature in Mencius. *Philosophy East and West* 47 (1), pp. 21-32.

is banal, and by extension no human race by nature is inferior.

Indeed, for the Confucian, there are no naturally inferior race, just as there are no naturally superior race. Every human being, regardless of ethnic origin, are inherently good, and none is genetically impaired. On this account it is amiss to demonize any group of people as naturally subnormal. To do so contradicts Confucian sanguine doctrine that all people share the same capacity to attain a judicious existence. This analysis returns us to a hallmark of the Confucian enterprise, namely, its Axial Age vision of a universal edifice that embraces the whole of humanity regardless of race, as moral equals capable of harmonious co-existence under the Heaven.

Now, while all races are born equal, not all cultures are made equal. The Chinese philosophers do discriminate against lesser traditions. Even so, there are distinctive traits in the Confucian dominance. And the essence of this uniqueness is foremost captured in the Chinese practice of multiple religiosities. It is not uncommon for a Chinese to plea allegiance to Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, all at the same time. This phenomenon underscores in general the Chinese and in particular the Confucian acceptance of interreligious collaboration. To be sure in this ecumenical alliance, the Confucians do assert their supremacy as first among equals. Yet unlike the other Axial Age religions such as Christianity, the Confucians do not claim a monopoly of virtue in so far as they acknowledge the moral efficacy of others.¹⁷

In fact, the Confucians reject any pretense to an exclusive right to moral leadership. The Sinic civilization has no equivalent doctrine of a 'manifest destiny' whereupon the Chinese are deemed as divinely elected to govern. For the Confucian, the privilege to rule is based on meritocracy, it must be earned. Failure to perform forfeits one's prerogative to hold the reins. The history of modern China may be seen as one such period when the once venerated Confucian tradition, devoured by prolonged internal decay, was ceremoniously banished from the mainland. Like no 'chosen race', the Confucians dismiss the presumption of any 'chosen tradition', predestined to be first among equals. Herein lies another liberal trademark of the Confucian superiority, it is not exclusionary, but open to collaboration with any who prove worthy of leadership.

¹⁷ Ching, Julia. (1993). *Chinese Religions*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

These inclusive attributes draw attention to the multiracialism and multiculturalism underpinnings of the Sinic civilization. The classical Chinese thinkers' vision was to bring into existence a unifying kingdom, embodying a multitude of peoples and diversity of belief systems. In modern terminology, Confucian China would advocate a form of civic nationalism, anchored on the liberal principles of freedom, tolerance and equality, and whose core identity transcends ethnicity and creed. A civic nationalist state that champions an overarching international order where all people and various civilizations could co-exist harmoniously.¹⁸

B2) Ethnocentrism, Universalism, and Opportunistic Pragmatism

Concededly, the Chinese world has not always lived up to the Confucian inspired vision of one humanity. As Dikotter's works indicate, the history of Imperial China is tarnished with ethnocentrism, in practice as well as conviction. Indeed, embedded in Chinese intellectual and popular thought are crude mythologies and Han racist theories. And these racialistic tendencies continue to afflict modern China.¹⁹

Be that as it may, to depict Beijing as operating wholly on an ethnocentric and nationalistic platform is not an accurate account of the current state of affairs. For a start, the PRC is not without universal aspirations, the communists do advocate a socialist utopia that embraces all humanity. And in the present opening up era, we have seen Beijing turning to classical motifs, rehashing concept such as harmony, to reassure the global community of the PRC's peaceful rise and benevolent intent to sustain an inclusive, pluralistic new world order. Now, admittedly, these liberal endeavors are also accompanied by the aforementioned periodic outbursts of ethnocentric nationalism, raising skepticism over China's commitment to the Confucian ideals.

In any case, in what seems to be Beijing's contradictory oscillations between universalism and parochialism, there is in fact a constancy at play, namely, Chinese pragmatism. As is the conventional perception, rulers of China are pragmatist rather than ideologue, their behavior

¹⁸ Bell, Daniel A. (2015) Reconciling Confucianism and Nationalism in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 42:1-2., pp 33-54.

¹⁹ Dikotter, Frank (1992) *The Discourse of race in Modern China*. (Hong Kong: Hurst & Co).

dictated by opportunistic utilitarianism rather than dogmatic convictions.²⁰ A case in point is the CCP's harping of the 'peaceful rise' mantra during the early 2000s, which detractors see as calculated moves to placate the world-at-large in the run up to the PRC's induction into the WTO. Other instances of pragmatic calculus at work include amplification of external threats to divert attention from pressing internal crisis, and stoking up of ethnocentric sentiments to reinvigorate a dispirited constituent, jettisoning Confucian universalism.²¹

Herein lies a central critique of Beijing's current effort to restore social cohesion. To be sure, pragmatic compromises are at times needed to untangle ideological gridlocks. But as elucidated above, for the Confucians, there are limits to the pursuit of practical ends. The deployment of unethical means, even if the immediate yields are 'good', will ultimately undermine the integrity of the whole. On the subject at hand, feeding racial passion may have a unifying effect upon the Chinese polity. But in the long run, this ad interim gain base on Han-centrism will erode China's multiethnic social cohesion as well as subvert Beijing's broader aspiration for a harmonious world.

Thus, if committed to mending a fraying social fabric, China should, at the outset, anchor this endeavor upon civic rather than ethnocentric nationalism. To reaffirm the Confucian Axial Age vision of universalism, and to strive for the actualization of a multiracial, multicultural social order that embraces a diversity of peoples as well as religiosities. To that end, it is equally important that Beijing curbs the urges for pragmatic fixes that pander to chauvinistic sentiments. It is by reasserting a principled commitment of the Confucian ideals that the PRC can begin the process towards achieving a more substantive and enduring harmony at home and abroad.

C) Organic Cosmology and a Sustainable Ecology

As with counterparts in the US, the Chinese are yearning for an existence beyond subsistence. But by its sheer size, the prospect of China emulating the American Dream is raising environmental alarms. The burgeoning Chinese middle class growing penchant for luxury comfort is exacting untold woes upon the mainland ecology. Akin to the endemic corruption

²⁰ Zhao, Suisheng. Ed. (2004). *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior*. Armonk, NY and London: M Sharpe.

²¹ Ibid.,