

# Synthesizing Chinese and Western Values

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# Introduction

This is an important contribution to the discussion about China's place in the world in the 21st century. If talk of an 'Asian Century' is exaggerated, nevertheless China is bound to play a much bigger global role in the more plural world order that is clearly emerging. As a result of its phenomenal rate of economic growth it is already the world's second largest economy; it is home to a quarter of the world's population; it is extending its investment reach into Africa and Latin America; and is becoming politically more self-confident and self-assertive. At the same time it has yet to resolve serious domestic problems, to do with the balance of both its economic and political system.

So some shift in power from West to East is inevitable. The question is whether it will be peaceful or violent. There are a number of potential political flash points (like Taiwan) and large unresolved questions about trade and monetary policy. Resolution of the problem of current account imbalances requires a grand bargain between China and the United States. Respective spheres of influence need to be worked out. On other issues, like carbon emissions, Chinese cooperation will be essential if an effective global response is to be achieved.

Historically, large transfers of international power have rarely been peaceful. In the last century, Germany fought two hugely destructive wars in a losing attempt to overthrow the (perceived) hegemony of Great Britain. However, Britain peacefully yielded its pre-eminence to the United States. There is no doubt that a peaceful rearrangement of power is greatly facilitated by the existence of shared values. Democracies are less likely to go to war with each other than are democracies and dictatorships. Moreover, democratic institutions make it easier for countries to resolve their domestic problems, and less likely to look to external aggression as an outlet from domestic tensions.

So from the West's point of view the question of the relationship between Chinese values and Western values is enormously important. If there is sufficient similarity and

overlap, China will succeed in navigating from dictatorship to liberal democracy (and the West can learn something from China too). If the differences are too great, China will be – or at least perceived to be - a threat to the West.

As Hairong Lai tells it, Chinese values are rooted in three traditions: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism is about how an individual should behave in order to lead a life worthy of respect. It is a philosophy of activism – it is about how humans should act in different social relationships in order to make a good society. Taoism is about the unpredictability of social and natural forces. It shares with Confucianism the goal of living a life worthy of respect, but differs about the means to achieve it. Its tenet is state non-action. Through the non-action of the state people can do what they want, allowing the multitude of talents to achieve great things; whereas the active intervention of the emperor limits the intelligence and activities of others to his own narrow intelligence. This has parallels with the Western economic concept of ‘laissez-faire’ and, more generally with liberalism. Buddhism maintains that everything we see (power, money, desires) is an illusion. People are obsessed by these illusions. They can find tranquillity only when they realize that they are illusions.

At first sight, there are three major differences between Chinese and Western values.

The first lies in their understanding of human nature. Liberal democracy’s starting point is that human beings are imperfect; hence the need for institutions to limit and control power. But Confucianism’s fundamental assumption is that by nature humans are good. However, if you take a closer look, Confucian practice was to set up institutions in order to check the power of the emperor and his officials. This balance may not have worked as well as in the West: there was no ‘bottom up’ check from the people because of the Chinese belief in the ‘mandate from heaven’. On the other hand, Lao Zi, the founder of Taoism, says that ‘the holy person is not benevolent; he treats people like straw dogs’, illustrating how power may corrupt.

A second difference is paternalism. Confucianism ranks

ordinary people lower than the rulers, which is anathema to liberal democracy.

A third key difference is the lack of a belief in the sanctity of life. Very little is said in Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism about the special value of human life. Buddhism believes that there is no difference between humans and plants and animals. This undermines people's sense of justice – they tend to forgive the ruler responsible for disasters, and forget that such events happened. This sense of forgiveness protects the reputation of Mao Zedong from the need for posthumous accountability.

However, it is not the case that traditional Chinese culture is wholly incompatible with liberal democracy. Even now a synthesis is developing.

First, Buddhism was imported into China from India (whereas Confucianism and Taoism originate in China) and was accepted, and internalized by Chinese after hundreds of years of interpretation and debate (including periods of persecution). This parallels China's engagement with the West. China completely rejected Western culture at first, but began a gradual conversion to liberal democracy after 1898, the year when Guang Xu, the young emperor, announced a reform which would produce a constitutional monarchy, after a humiliating defeat by Japan.

Second, there was the 'new culture movement' of the 1910s, which was a reaction against traditional Chinese culture. This movement advocated the introduction of equality (opposed to paternalism), popular sovereignty (opposed to the divine right of the emperor) and the separation of powers.

Since then imperial power has had to be justified, not as part of the ineluctable order of things, but by limited short term material aims. Mao Zedong's rule was justified by the need to continue the revolution of communism and protect China from western colonialism. Support for Mao's absolute rule only lasted as long as the threat of colonialism. Paradoxically, China's one-child policy resulted in families valuing life itself more highly, contributing to the adoption of protections for human rights into China's constitution in 2004. Also, there are

surveys that show that the growth of forward-looking values is only a generation behind the growth in South Korea, Japan and Taiwan.

East Asian countries have Chinese culture, too. The Chinese-liberal democracy synthesis has proved successful in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan and South Korea. Although there are differences among the particular forms of liberal democracy in these cases, the values that emerge in China will be basically identical to those in the East Asian Tigers.

This, in brief, is Hairong Lai's argument. It is attractively and persuasively presented. It is particularly important as coming from the pen of a prominent younger thinker in the Communist Party, until recently editor of its theoretical journal, and currently executive director of the China Centre for Overseas Social and Philosophical Theory. His age group of 40 year olds will be China's leaders before long. So it is worthwhile to know how they are thinking about the future.

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# Synthesizing Chinese and Western Values

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## Why is synthesis an important issue?

With the rapid and continuous growth of the Chinese economy during the past three decades, China's presence has increasingly been felt on the global stage. The future of China, and in particular its political future, will have a great influence throughout the world. If China maintains its "authoritarian" regime while continuing to develop its economic might, it will menace the world of liberal democracy. This is the source of speculation about "the Chinese threat". But if China succeeds in navigating from "authoritarianism" to liberal democracy, China will do much to further liberty and democracy.

Liberal democracy, both as a value and an institution, is new to the entire world, not only to China. It emerged first in Western Europe less than 400 years ago (if we regard the 1640 revolution in England as the starting point for the emergence of modern liberal democracy), and then gradually spread to other parts of the world. The history of the past 400 years of the

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I am grateful to Lord Robert Skidelsky for raising this synthesis issue and urging me to think and write about it at our meeting at the international conference on "Law, Politics, Economy, and Media" that was organized by the Moscow School of Political Studies, July 18-24, 2010, Golitsyno, Moscow Region, Russian Federation.

global spread of liberal democracy shows that the success or failure of internalizing imported values and institutions of liberal democracy largely depends on whether or not liberal democracy is compatible with local traditional values.

There have been many discussions both inside and outside China about the uniqueness of traditional Chinese culture. Many people believe that traditional Chinese culture and liberal democracy are like oil and water that cannot be synthesized.

Is this really true? What evidence is this claim based on? In this article, we will try to examine the issue of synthesis along two dimensions: values (or culture), and institutions, with a focus primarily on the former.

### **What are the basic traditional Chinese values?**

Confucianism is considered traditional Chinese culture (or values). By my understanding, this is completely misconceived. Chinese culture is composed of three significantly different schools of thought: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism is only one part of Chinese culture. It is important to note that Taoism and Buddhism guide the lives of Chinese people just as much as does Confucianism. Taoism and Buddhism provide different opportunities for synthesis with liberal democracy.

There are hundreds of schools and interpretations of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. One of the best ways to learn about them is to read *Lun Yu* (or *The Analects of Confucius*) and *Meng Zi* (or *Mencius*), *Dao De Jing* (or *Tao Te Ching*) and *Zhuang Zi* (or *Chuang Tzu*), and *Heart Sutra* (or *Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra*), *Diamond Sutra* (or *Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra*), and the *Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra* (referred to as the *Platform Sutra* in later texts). Among these, *The Analects of Confucius* and *Mencius* are Confucian classics; *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuang Zi* are Taoist classics; and *Heart Sutra*, *Diamond Sutra*, and *Platform Sutra* are Chinese Buddhist classics. These seven texts were widely read by

Chinese for thousands of years, with the only exception being during the short period from 1949 to 1978. In China today, after thirty years of coming under attack, these classics of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are again the major sources for the general public (if not the specialist) to understand traditional Chinese culture.

Confucianism and Taoism came into being from 500 B.C. to 1000 B.C (the exact dates are still being researched by archeologists, but are beyond the scope of this paper). Buddhism was first imported into China from India during the Han dynasty. After hundreds of years of interpretations and debates (including periods of persecution), Buddhism was finally and formally internalized by Chinese during the Sui-Tang dynasty (between the 5th and 8th centuries). The *Platform Sutra* was written by the Chinese monk Hui Neng in the late 7th and early 8th century (the text is said to have been compiled by his followers in later years). The fact that the author is Chinese is indicative of a milestone in the development of Buddhism in China, revealing Buddhism's complete internalization in China by that time.

There have been various waves of convergence between Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism during the long historical development of Chinese culture. Zen (禪宗) was created by Buddhists by absorbing elements of Confucianism and Taoism. Neo-Confucianism was developed during the Song dynasty by taking elements from Taoism and Buddhism. This triad, and the attempts to merge it, defined traditional Chinese culture.

What is the meaning of Confucianism? It is about how an individual should behave in order to lead an active life worthy of respect. For Confucians, such a life is both necessary and possible. But to achieve it, one must actively seek it. There is no discussion in Confucianism about the environment in which humans live. The tenets of Confucianism are all about technical issues within human relationships. Morality, hierarchy, obedience, and contributions are essential for order in society and for an individual to lead a life worthy of respect.

What is the meaning of Taoism? Taoism focuses on the humility of the individual in the face of the unpredictability of

the mighty social and natural forces. Taoism shares with Confucianism the goal of living a life worthy of respect, but it has strong reservations about the Confucian path towards this aim. According to Taoism, the strategy of actively moving ahead is often counter-productive.

What is the meaning of Buddhism? Buddhism maintains that everything we see and feel is an illusion. Respect and/or insults are illusions. Power, fame, money, and desires are illusions. People are overly anxious because they are obsessed by these illusions. One can only find peace when one realizes that these are illusions and can thus be relieved of such obsessions.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that most of the imperial laws governing officials and subjects and the rules that mediated people's daily relationships were based on Confucianism. But Taoism and Buddhism are now playing a deeper and more important role in guiding Chinese spiritual life. If one understand Taoism and Buddhism, one can easily find them everywhere in Chinese literature, poetry, paintings, calligraphy, music, opera, and so forth. Most of these arts, if not all, express the wish and need to withdraw from the excitement and frustrations of daily life and to be relieved of obsessive desires. This paper will be too lengthy if we examine each type of art form, but below I present several examples from poetry.

Yuanming Tao in the Jin dynasty, Bai Li in the Tang dynasty, and Shi Su in the Song dynasty are among the three most respected poets in China (for a time Tao and Li served as middle-ranking officials in their respective dynasties. For almost his entire life Su served the dynasty, rising and falling within the ranks. Su was also one of China's most respected calligraphers). Most of Yuanming Tao's poems draw on Taoism and Buddhism (although he was neither a Taoist nor a Buddhist in a religious sense). For example, in one of his poems, he wrote, "after hundreds of years, who knows your glory and insult?" (千秋万岁后，谁知荣与辱). This echoes the Buddhist teachings.

<sup>1</sup> As this is my personal reconstruction, I am open to any criticism about this brief introduction to Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.

In general, Bai Li's poems are not explicitly Taoist and Buddhist. But he retains a strong sense of Taoism and Buddhism. In one of his most widely recited poems, he wrote, "the flowers and precious grass of the court of the Wu dynasty are now buried under the wild and dark road, the official clothes and hats of the Jin dynasty are now turned into aged hills" (吴宫花草埋幽径, 晋代衣冠成古丘). This resonates with Buddhist beliefs. Shi Su, however, more openly addresses Taoist themes. His famous "How I wish to take a small boat and vanish, so that I can lead my remaining life freely in the wide river and sea" (小舟从此逝, 江海寄余生) features obvious elements of Taoism.

These notions and values are quite abstract. They appear to be very far from the liberal democracy in which we are interested. But let us now turn to their relations with liberal democracy.

### **Among traditional Chinese values, what is compatible and what is incompatible with liberal democracy?**

It has been argued that the starting point for liberal democracy is the inevitable imperfections of man, and therefore the imperfections inherent in the exercise of power. From this insight into human nature follow institutions to limit and control power: the separation of powers, the rule of law, free and competitive elections to provide for a peaceful change of power, a free press, laws to protect human rights, and so on. These institutions and procedures aim to prevent dictatorship and tyranny. A typical Western intellectual construct is the "social contract." In Locke's formulation, members of society foreswear certain freedoms they enjoy in a state of nature for the sake of security. But they retain certain inalienable natural rights, which no ruler can violate. Any attempt to do so is regarded as a breach of the social contract and justifies resistance. But the fundamental assumption about human nature in traditional Chinese culture is that by nature humans are good (人之初、性本善), and in essence all individuals are

similar, despite different behaviors and habits (性相近、习相远).<sup>2</sup> Based on this assumption, there are no grounds for checks and balances or other associated values and institutions. Yet this is only partially true. According to Confucianism, human beings are fundamentally good. But Taoism maintains that this is not the case, in particular with respect to power-holders. Lao Zi says, “The holy person is not benevolent, he treats people like straw dogs” (圣人不仁，以百姓为刍狗). Another Taoist thinker, Zhuang Zi, is even more sober about human nature, especially about the nature of power-holders. When the king of Song sent two officials to ask Zhuang Zi to accept high office, Zhuang Zi answered that he would rather be a turtle dragging his tail in the mud than be an official who is destined to die from being in power.

Even Confucianism, which maintains that humans by nature are good, is actually far from optimistic about human nature. In other parts of his teachings, Confucius repeats the same prescription, “to try to be an official when politics is reasonable (or moral), to try to be a hermit when politics is unreasonable (or immoral)” (邦有道则仕，邦无道则隐). This shows that Confucius was fully aware of the negative side of human nature and the degeneration of politics.

Confucianism’s recognition of this side of human nature is not only displayed in his teachings. It is also embodied in Confucian practices. In each of the dynasties that were dominated by Confucian thought, a set of institutions sought to check the power of officials and even the power of the emperors. It was generally understood that the emperor was someone who could do whatever he wanted based on his will. But this was not always the case under Confucius. An emperor could often be very frustrated by his officials. An extreme example is the case of Emperor Wan Li (万历) of the Ming dynasty in the late 16th century and early 17th century. Because of opposition from

<sup>2</sup> These two sentences (人之初性本善，性相近习相远) are neither from the *Analects* of Confucius nor from the *Analects* of Mencius, but from the *Classic of Three Characters* (三字经) that was developed from the Confucian classics.

the officials he had appointed, he was unable to get the woman he loved to be the queen, nor was he able to make his beloved son his successor or implement his preferred policies. He was so frustrated that he refused to perform his duties as ruler for more than twenty years. For twenty-eight years he merely indulged his own personal pleasure.

In other words, traditional Chinese culture is fully aware of the evil elements in human nature and supports the establishment of institutions to serve as a check on power. But the problem was that all the checks were within the faction-ridden court. There was no bottom-up check by the people, nor was there any separation of administrative, judicial, and legislative power. Part of the reason why there were no checks was because of the belief that dynastic legitimacy was granted by heaven (with the emperor as the son of the heaven, i.e., 天子观) (similar to the belief in the pre-modern West that the legitimacy of the monarch was granted by God). Thus it was unthinkable that there should be any bottom-up checks or division of power among different people or institutions. But once this notion of “the emperor as the son of the heaven” was no longer accepted by the people (i.e., after 1911), there was no reason why values and institutions for bottom-up checks, separation of power, and other associated institutions could not be incorporated into traditional Chinese culture.

Moreover, Taoism contains clearly liberal ideas. Taoism believes that rationality is limited. Either as different individuals or as a whole, we know much less than what we do not know. The world is unpredictable and life is imperfect. A central tenet of Taoism is non-action (or 无为). Taoism urges those in power not to be pro-active in imposing their programs. The best governance is governance that allows ordinary people to do what they want. No matter how intelligent a ruler is, his intelligence is still limited; by imposing his own program he is limiting the intelligence and activities of others to his own narrow intelligence, holding back their achievements. Only through non-action will the people be able to do whatever they want, allowing the multitude of intellects to produce great

achievements (无为无不为). In particular, Taoism opposes force or coercion. Coercion is never effective for long, as Taoism states “a sweeping shower will not last for one whole day, nor will a strong wind last for an entire day” (骤雨不终朝，飘风不终日). Thus the best way to behave is to do things “like water, which is beneficial to everything, but doesn’t compete” (上善若水，水利万物而不争). In other words, it is best for the ruler to enable others rather than coerce them to follow his will. These approaches are very close to the Western economic concept of “laissez-faire” and the notion of spontaneity that has been elaborated by Friedrich Hayek, one of the greatest philosophers on liberalism.

Non-action (无为) was as widely accepted as Confucian teachings by Chinese rulers. During the course of Chinese history, the following two characters were carved on the roof beams above the seat of numerous emperors: “Non-Action” (无为).

One of the main purposes of liberal democracy is to provide a check to those in power, to prevent them from oppressing the ordinary people in their insatiable lust for power and wealth. Buddhism regards power and wealth as an illusion. Nothing is more worthless than trying to possess power and wealth at the cost of morality, inner-peace, physical health, and so forth. Taoism also maintains that power and wealth are harmful to those who possess it. The *Dao De Jing* says, “The five colors blind our seeing, the five tones deafen our hearing, and the five spices dull our taste. Hustle and bustle, chasing and hunting let the human heart become too passionate. And goods hard to be obtained make man perturb his inner growth” (五色令人目盲，五音令人耳聋，五味令人口爽；驰骋田猎，令人心发狂；难得之，令人行妨). Such teachings calm the quest for power and wealth and are in line with the purpose of liberal democracy.

However, there are certainly some elements in traditional Chinese culture that are anathema to liberal democracy. The most prominent is paternalism. Confucianism places ordinary people at a lower grade than the rulers. The ruler is the shepherd and the people are the sheep. In the Han dynasty, the

provincial governor was called the shepherd (州牧). According to Confucianism, ordinary people are unable to take care of themselves. They need to be taken care of by the rulers, who are naturally superior. Mencius (the greatest Confucian writer after Confucius) stated: "Those working with their brains dominate others; while those working with their muscles are dominated by others" (劳心者治人，劳力者治于人). This is not merely an empirical observation but a norm. The rulers should take care of the ruled, as parents take care of their children. This mentality is deeply embedded in the minds of both the governing and the governed. This mindset is incompatible with the spirit of liberal democracy.

The absence of individualism in traditional Chinese culture also poses a problem for a synthesis with liberal democracy. Traditionally, a person is a part of a larger entity (the family, community, ethnic group, and in modern times the nation). A telling example is that Chinese people do not ask a stranger his name when they meet him. They ask: "what is your esteemed family name?" There was only egoism but not individualism in Chinese culture.

The lack of a sense of the value of life is another element in traditional Chinese culture that works against liberal democracy. Very little is said, either in Confucianism or in Taoism or Buddhism, about the special value of human life, not to mention the supremacy or holiness of human life. Confucianism teaches one how to behave in one's daily life. But there is no discussion about the value of human life. In Buddhism there is no difference between life and death. There is no more value to life than there is to death. Both life and death are illusions. And Taoism is very cold toward life. According to Zhuang Zi, human life is no different from the life of a plant or an animal. This attitude permeates Zhuang Zi's text, in particular the chapter "Theories on All Things Being Equal" (齐物论). This is not the notion that "all men are created equal," (although it does imply that the ruler and the ruled are equal) but that human life is equal to any other good. In the *Dao De Jing*, Lao Zi mourns for death. He says, "to win without

enjoying it: for enjoying victories would mean pleasure in killing people...If masses of people are killed, let us weep in grief and sorrow; let us celebrate victories like attending funerals” (胜而不美, 而美之者是乐杀人.....杀人之众, 以悲哀泣之, 战胜以丧礼处之). This does attribute value to human life. But it also reflects how frequently masses of people were killed during wars and conflicts in during his time. In sum, from reading either Buddhism or Taoism, one easily gets the impression that human life is nothing special. Why then should there be a reason to develop values and institutions to protect human rights? It is not accidental that capital punishment occurs most frequently in China today, even though as individuals and as a collective Chinese people seem humble and peaceful. This is not only because of the dominance of the idea of revenge rather than justice for criminals, but also because in traditional culture, humans have no special value.

The sense of justice among Chinese people is different from that among Westerners. Horrific events such as massive deaths have been recorded throughout Chinese history. But the individual tends to forgive the ruler responsible for such disasters and to forget such events. He tends not to seek justice as vigorously and rigorously as a Westerner. The reason for this may be the historical impossibility of seeking pure justice. This impossibility is partially reflected in the Taoist and Buddhist teachings. All Chinese know the following proverb: “There is no fish if the water is absolutely pure; one has no friends if one seeks absolute purity in one’s relationships with others” (水至清则无鱼, 人至察则无徒). Accordingly, purity (including pure justice) is not only impossible but also undesirable. This distinctive sense of justice has two contradictory effects on the acceptance of liberal democracy. On the one hand, it prevents people from being passionate about liberal democracy, in particular in seeking accountability through liberal democracy. On the other hand, once democratization unfolds, the risk of society being split by events in past history is smaller, since society tends not to seek accountability for past historical events. The general public tends to forgive and forget. It also

encourages the ruling elite, in cases when their predecessors engaged in evils acts, to make the necessary changes because of the people's tendency to forgive and forget.

Hierarchy<sup>3</sup> and obedience are elements in traditional Chinese culture that are incompatible with liberal democracy. In Confucianism, there is a basic norm whereby “the ruler guides the subject, the father guides the son, and the husband guides the wife” (君为臣纲、父为子纲、夫为妻纲). This norm requires full subordination and complete obedience by one group to another. However, this norm basically disappeared in the first half of the 20th century in China.

By saying this, I imply that Chinese culture has undergone some changes. In the following section, I will discuss these changes in more detail.

### **What is the state of the synthesis of traditional Chinese culture with liberal democracy?**

China had scattered communications with the other parts of the world before the 19th century. After the British violently opened China's door during the Opium War of 1840, China began to interact with the Western world on a massive scale. Synthesis between Chinese culture and Western culture (including but certainly not limited to liberal democracy) began to occur, both intentionally and unintentionally.

Briefly, there have been two stages of such a synthesis in modern Chinese history: complete rejection and confusion about Western norms and institutions during the first stage prior to 1898; and gradual conversion to liberal democracy during the second stage after 1898.

<sup>3</sup> Some might refer to the notion that “rulers are not born to be” (王侯将相，宁有种乎) as a sign of equality. But it actually means two things. First, it means that if a dynasty is rotten to the extent that it cannot deliver the mandate of heaven, it is legitimate to rebel and substitute a new dynasty. Second, it means that it is legitimate for a person from an ordinary family to rise to power through the meritocracy. This implies the high upward social mobility in China, but does not imply that there is equality between the ruler and the ruled.

During the first stage, Chinese were completely alienated from and frightened of Western norms and institutions, in particular those of liberal democracy. In the 19th century, no one would have believed that the ruler and the ruled were morally, intellectually, and politically equal. A world in which the ruler and the ruled are equal was incomprehensible and frightening. Institutions and values such as freedom of speech and freedom of association were unheard of. Space for speech and association was justified instrumentally, not by its intrinsic value. In other words, some space for speech and association was allowed because the ruler regarded it as positive. The space could be closed at the whim of the ruler, but often the ruler did allow it to exist.

Chinese people did not learn the merits of the institutions and values of liberal democracy even after being defeated by the Western powers in a succession of wars. In 1840-42 China was defeated by the United Kingdom; in 1856-60, China was defeated by the United Kingdom and France; in 1884 China was defeated by France. From these defeats, the Chinese learned that their weaponry was too backward. Thus, there were some efforts to learn about Western weaponry. But they still believed that politically and economically they were superior to the West. Only when China was humiliated by Japan, considered a junior partner prior to 1894, was there a realization that China had fundamental political and economic problems. Four years later, in 1898, the young emperor Guang Xu announced a reform toward a constitutional monarchy. Although this reform effort was soon suppressed by the empress dowager Ci Xi, it was a turning point in the synthesis of traditional Chinese culture and liberal democracy. Since then, China has been embarked on the uneven and long road of adopting liberal democracy, despite numerous setbacks and failed attempts to use a secular version of the “mandate from heaven” to justify the right to rule.

Between the end of the nineteenth century and the early 1910s, there were several attempts to build a democratic republic and restore absolute monarchism. Internalizing the institutions of liberal democracy was a difficult process.

Chinese people realized that the problems were rooted in the elements of traditional Chinese culture that are incompatible with the norms and institutions of liberal democracy. Efforts to criticize traditional Chinese culture developed into the New Culture Movement (新文化运动) in the mid- and late 1910s. At that time, Confucianism was under siege.

The New Culture Movement was another landmark development in the synthesis of Chinese culture and liberal democracy. The New Culture Movement altered many Chinese values,<sup>4</sup> paving the way to the introduction of equality (rejecting hierarchism and blind obedience), the introduction of people's sovereignty (abandoning the idea that the emperor was the son of the heaven, or 天子观), and the introduction of the separation of power (abolishing the old positions of unified power). These changes are relevant to the synthesis with liberal democracy. Since then, there have been several imperial-type power holders in China, but they hold power through fear rather than through voluntary acceptance by the ruled. It is also important to note that imperial power could no longer be justified by any long-term spiritual norms, and had to be justified by limited short-term material aims. For example, dictatorship by Chiang Kai-Shek and Chiang Ching-Kuo (between the late 1940s and 1988, initially on the mainland and later on Taiwan) was justified by the need to fight communism (embodied in the "Temporary Provisions Effective during the Period of Communist Rebellion" that were passed in 1948, several

<sup>4</sup> During and after the New Culture Movement, traditional Chinese culture was criticized and abandoned by many Chinese. Prominent scholars such as Xuantong Qian and Shuren Zhou urged the abandonment of Chinese characters and the adoption of an alphabet, similar to the program in modern Turkey that abandoned Arabic letters and adopted Latin letters. Two waves of simplification of Chinese characters in the 1950s and 1970s (the latter efforts survived only a few years) to a large extent represented a continuation of the mood of the New Culture Movement. The fierce attacks on traditional Chinese culture during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and the 1970s to some extent were also a continuation of the radicalism of the New Culture Movement, although the New Culture Movement was by no means responsible for the misery inflicted on the Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution.

months after passage of the Constitution of Republic of China). The nearly absolute power of Mao Zedong was justified by the need to continue the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Once these needs no longer existed, there was no support for Mao's absolute power. Representative institutions and separation of powers are still weak today. But the values of equality, popular sovereignty, and the separation of power were internalized in Chinese culture during the first half of the twentieth century. The trend of strengthening representative institutions and the separation of power will be unstoppable in the future, even though there may be setbacks at various points.

Human rights (apart from the right of political participation, which is embodied in the value of popular sovereignty), which are also essential to liberal democracy, did not gain ground in China before the 1990s. It was only after the 1990s there was more discussion on the meaning of human rights. The special value of human life has also been increasingly recognized. The spread of human rights has been due to at least three factors: first, the extensive international dialogues between China and the outside world, not only at the governmental level, but also academically and journalistically and in the realm of civil society; second, the one-child policy, however unintentionally, resulted in families taking human life more seriously;<sup>5</sup> third, the improving living standards that have allowed people to enjoy and value life beyond merely the level of survival. In 2004, a pledge to protect human rights was written into the constitution.

Individualism was also introduced during the New Culture Movement, but it was not fully internalized. After it was introduced, it was very often mistaken as egoism, and thus was often criticized. This mistake is still common today in China. But individualism is increasingly understood and accepted by the younger generations. Some surveys show that the rise of post-modern values including individualism among people

<sup>5</sup> In particular, this is the case in the urban areas. The fact that many people in the rural areas prefer boys and even kill females because of the policy is symptomatic of a lack of value attached to human life. Human life is instrumental, to take care of the elderly, for the glory of the nation (during some modern periods), and so forth.

born after the 1970s in China resemble the rise of the same values among people born after the 1950s in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.<sup>6</sup>

When hierarchy, “the ruler as the son of the heaven,” and the lack of supreme value to human life no longer dominate Chinese mentality, there remain few elements in traditional Chinese culture that oppose liberal democracy. The future thus promises a better synthesis of traditional Chinese culture and liberal democracy.

Traditional Chinese culture contains elements that are both compatible and incompatible with liberal democracy. Because the changes in the twentieth century eliminated most of the incompatible elements, Chinese culture is ready for a productive encounter with liberal democracy.

So far, we have been using the term traditional Chinese culture. Francis Fukuyama uses the concept of “Confucianism” to refer to the East Asian countries. As detailed above, it is inaccurate to use Confucianism to describe Chinese or East Asian cultures. Yet following his method, we can examine the synthesis of Chinese culture and liberal democracy by reviewing the synthesis of liberal democracy in other East Asian regions and countries.

Taiwan and Hong Kong are strictly Chinese cultural regions. Taiwan became a liberal democracy in the 1990s. Liberty and the rule of law are deeply rooted in Hong Kong today. To what extent it will become a democracy depends on the direct elections that the Chinese central authorities have promised to introduce in 2017 for the chief executive and in 2020 for the legislature. Therefore, there is still some uncertainty. Singapore may also be considered part of the Chinese cultural world. It is neither a liberal democracy nor authoritarian. It is somewhere in between and democratization is likely when the nation is no longer dominated by its founding fathers. Japan and South

<sup>6</sup> Zhengxu Wang, “Postmodern Values in Seven Confucian Societies: Political Consequences of Changing Worldviews” *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 8(3) 341–359. (December 2007); Reprinted in Wei Pan, & Si Lian, (Eds.), *The Thirty Year Changes of Social Values in China*, Beijing, China Social Science Press, 2008.

Korea can loosely be regarded as within the sphere of Chinese culture (or East Asian culture). Japan became a liberal democracy after World War II. South Korea became a liberal democracy in the 1990s. In all these cases, liberal democracy, both as a set of values and a set of institutions, was imported from abroad. Initially, it was alien to the local Chinese culture (in the broad sense). But after centuries, a synthesis of local Chinese culture and liberal democracy finally emerged, despite some still lingering uncertainties.

It is obvious that there are differences among the particular forms of liberal democracy in the above cases. Liberal democracy in Taiwan is very different from that in South Korea or Japan. In mainland China, the synthesis will definitely produce unique institutions due to the differences in terms of geography, population, ethnicity, religion, social and economic structures, historical legacies, and international relations. But the values that emerge from the synthesis will basically be identical to those in China's East Asian neighbours.



