

## **China's Secular Ruler's Pragmatic Re-appropriation of Traditional Chinese Sacred Resources: A Critical Assessment**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a critique of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) pragmatic retrieval of traditional precepts, arguing for a fuller re-embrace of the traditional Chinese mores as a way to resolve the crisis afflicting China today. It begins by addressing Beijing's current sweeping offensive against a corrupt officialdom, contending that in order to restore moral rectitude China needs to transcend the prevailing secular temperament and reabsorb the ancient sacred ethos anchored on *Tien*. The next criticism is Beijing's stoking of ethnic and cultural pride to coalesce a fragmented country. If committed to a harmonious world a unified China ought to be founded on Confucian universalism in lieu of the prevalent ethnocentric nationalism. Finally, for a comprehensive response to a looming ecological disaster, the case is made for China to undertake a fundamental realignment in worldview, from the present anthropocentric to the ancient anthropocosmic view of the world.

**Keywords:** *China, Confucianism, corruption, nationalism, environmental crisis*

### **1. Introduction**

Once maligned, traditional mores are being re-appropriated to deal with the multifaceted malaises vexing the People's Republic of China (PRC) 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 paper 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 re-embrace 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-centred 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 is 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 essay 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.

## 2. 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.

### 2.1. 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 oversights (deLisle, 2015).

The Communist Party is not indifferent to the need for political reform. In the past decade or 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 (Fewsmith, 2013).

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.

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

## 2.2. *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 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 (Gerth and Mills, 2009). 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” (Lau, 1970).

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 spectre 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.

### 2.3. *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 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 mould 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' school 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 instil 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 humaneness. It is the result of such a disciplined inculcation, set within an ethic-centred cultural habitat that the history of Imperial China is invigorated by the coming to the scene of the noble scholar-officials and the rarefied wise rulers, to enliven the Sinic civilization with their much touted benevolent kingship.

#### ***2.4. 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 violates 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 behaviour 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 (Feldman, 2010).

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 (Juergensmeyer, 2003).

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 (Tu, 1985).

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, 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 (Tu, 2001)).

## 2.5. Modern China in Crisis

As was the case, the dawn of the 20th century witnessed a tumultuous China abnegating its sacred past in favour 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 disjunctures across economical as well as social planes. At the outset, critiques point to a mismatch in official moral codes, post-Mao China no longer sustain the praxis to cultivate the avowed communistic values.<sup>2</sup> 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 (Wang, 2002).

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 turned 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 (Wang, 2002).

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 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 walks of life (Ci, 2009).

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 the 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 (He, 2015). Arguable, the endemic corruption afflicting the PRC is an outgrowth of a disenchanting mainland bereft of its traditional ethical inhibition and moral compass.

Therefore, in summing up, in order to deal with the moral exigencies 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 centred Chinese polity can be re-established 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.

### **3. 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 fissure. 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 pre-eminence 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 re-emergence 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 fervour, 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 remonstrations 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 (Gries, 1999).

### ***3.1. 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 (Bloom, 1997).

Now, even as all are born equal, Mencius proceeded to explain that humankind subsequently diverge, as people 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 set 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 us 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 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 religiosity. It is not uncommon for a Chinese to plead 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 (Ching, 1993).

In fact the Confucians reject any pretence 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.

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 (Bell, 2014).

### 3.2. *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 (Dikotter, 1992).

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 endeavours are also accompanied by the aforementioned periodic outbursts of ethnocentric nationalism, raising scepticism 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 pragmatists rather than ideologues, their behaviour dictated by opportunistic utilitarianism rather than dogmatic convictions (Zhao, 2004). 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 (Zhao, 2004).

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 multi-ethnic 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 endeavour 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 people 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.

#### 4. 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 and social schism, the toxication of mother earth could trigger dire political repercussions. And we are seeing Beijing ramping up conservation efforts, i.e., enacting stringent laws to procure a more sustainable developmental model. Non governmental organizations including grassroots religious movements are mobilized to foster a greener way of living. These are vital measures but to stem the looming catastrophe at its source, the Chinese milieu needs a fundamental turnaround in attitude towards nature. And this calls for a corresponding metamorphose in worldviews, from the prevailing secular dualistic towards the traditional sacred holistic view of reality.

##### 4.1. Holism versus Dualism

As explained, the Chinese in antiquity regards all things, terrestrial and celestial, as emanating from and converging back to the singular source of energy, *chi*. Embedded within a circular cosmology, this cosmo-genesis frames the primordial Chinese idealization of a holistic existence, holding in creative tension the dialectic between reason and sense, the mundane and the transcendent. It sets the Chinese on a perennial pursuit of a flourishing civilization, one that exudes both outer material vibrancy as well as inner spiritual exuberance (Chan, 1963).

And as noted earlier, in dualistic traditions such as Christianity, reality is demarcated into distinct, asymmetrical realms, where the material, mundane is deemed as fundamentally different and inferior to the spiritual, transcendent. Encapsulated within a linear timeline, the earthly is deemed as ephemeral, to be superseded by the interminable heavenly. This teleological vision defines the Christian ultimate telos, namely, spiritual salvation in the afterworld. Certainly, life in this world remains sacred yet due to an innate

bias, impudence towards the temporal persists. In extreme cases, this lead to repudiation of the present existence. The afore-discussed idiosyncrasies of religious fundamentalism is an apt illustration of how the inordinate fixation with the hereafter could result in the abnegation of the here and now.

In secular dualism, the converse is true, the earthly takes precedence over the heavenly. In point of fact, with reason as the supreme guide the secularists' ambition is entirely rationalistic and this-worldly, dispensing the non-rational and other-worldly desideratum. Surely, the modern world is not divested of the sacrosanct. But a general disinclination towards the spiritual realms remains and this contempt can lead to extreme disenchantment, as was the case with 20th century China.

Swept up by the enlightenment euphoria, modern China chose to abjure its presumably primitive premodern *Weltanschauung*. And the Chinese revolt against the "unenlightened past" was so thorough the mainland withered into a cultural desert divested of sacred oasis. Turning to science as the new beacon of hope, the PRC sets out to actualize a socialist utopia. At one level, the communist earthly quest has been "miraculous". Decades of unrelenting industrialization reconfigured China's hinterland into engineering marvels, adorning its coastal mega-cities with stupendous architectural monuments. Yet today's ostentatious display of material prosperity belie a hollow shell bereft of spiritual vitality. As afore-explained, dissolution of the socialist ethos and modernity irreverence towards *Tien* in particular has engulfed the Chinese world in a moral crisis.

Indeed, dismissal of the transcendent has denuded the Sinic civilization into an utterly mundane world. Divested of metaphysical aspirations, the Chinese personhood is correspondingly pared down into a mere homo economicus, whereupon self-fulfilment is focalized on this earthly existence, achieved chiefly through the acquisition of material abundance. Cut off from its traditional spiritual moorings, the Chinese today are left adrift, battered by the vicissitude of nihilism and hedonistic cravings. The Communist Party's unquestioning faith in economic rationality has turned the PRC into a behemoth economic beast with a ravenous hunger for natural resources; and derogated the Chinese masses into a population of hyper-consumers with an insatiable appetite, exhausting the planet's finite reserves. Therein lies the cultural backdrop and root cause of today's worsening ecological tragedy, namely, secular dualism truncated worldview and modernity lopsided notion of material progress (Tu, 1979).

Now compounding this materialistic exploit is another dualism proclivity, namely, anthropocentrism, where the human species are set over and against the rest of creation, justifying the unrestrained domination of the natural world. This is a disposition present in secularism as well as in religious traditions such as Christianity.

#### 4.2. *Humanity versus Mother Earth*

According to the Biblical genesis story, Adam, created in the image of God, was set apart from and has dominion over the rest of creation. This, together with the divine injunction commanding “man to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and subdue it” (Genesis 1: 27-28) critiques argue, fostered the establishment of an exploitative way of life in the Christian West that is largely responsible for the destruction of the environment (White, 1967).

Rejecting the creationist mythology, modernists turn to the evolutionary theory for a scientific interpretation of reality. And as elaborated, it advances a harsh depiction of the state of nature whereupon only the fittest prevails. And this is as much an intra as it is an inter-species struggle for survival, a battle between fellowman as well as between humankind and the untamed wilderness. While imputed divinity predestined Adam’s primacy, in Darwinism, the animistic instinct to survive compels the homo sapiens to assert mastery over the natural world. It is this brutish interpretation of nature, in conjunction with secularism’s lopsided development, that inform modern China’s scientific economic conquest of mother earth as a realm of natural resource to be tamed and exploited for the propagation of the human race. An execution so successful that the explosive proliferation of the anthropoid population is now endangering the planet, and with it, ironically, fate of the species itself.

The Sinic civilization possess no equivalent Christian myth of a divine Adamic race nor the Darwinian brutish naturalism that pitches humankind against the natural world. Instead, according to Chinese anthropo-cosmology, humans have evolved out of the same wellspring of life, *chi*, that begets stones, plants and animals, as such are an integral part of the cosmic order (Tu, 2001). In this seamless “field of material force”, the universe is perceived as unified, interconnected and interpenetrating. All life forms, including the homo sapiens genus, are fused into an organic symbiosis, the vitality of each is dependent on the creative dynamism of everything else. This cosmogony shapes pre-modern China’s attitude towards the sublunary world, whereupon humanity is perceived as essentially co-terminus with the wider cosmic reality. Imbued with a profound sense of reverence in being one species among many, the ancient Chinese strives for a harmonious co-existence, free of domination or exploitation, with all things, including mother earth.

Now notwithstanding a wealth of eco-sensitive spiritual resources, critiques point out that the history of Imperial China is also tarnished with environmental mishaps, not unlike the modern era (Tuan, 1967). This is concededly true but there are crucial distinctions. With the former, to the extent nature is defiled, the idealistic Chinese stand accused of a dereliction

of avowed credo. The same cannot be said of the latter. The prevailing secular ideology, as argued, justifies the diminution of nature as means for human-centric ends. As such, modern China's maltreatments are not practical lapses but consistent outgrowth of an anti-ecological *Weltanschauung*. Moreover in comparison to past devastations which are accidental anomalies, reports are warning that the degradation today is far more systematic in scope and historically unprecedented in scale, with potentially irreversible damage to the planetary whole (Economy, 2010).

### 4.3. A Fundamental Reconfiguration in Worldviews

To recap, in light of the looming ecological catastrophe, Beijing's priorities ought to be, among others, enact tougher environmental laws, increase investment in greener non-invasive technologies and create more sustainable growth models. But over and above these countermeasures is the necessity for a deeper transformation in terms of values and worldviews. Granted that espousing a specific vision does not accordingly lend to full realization of the ideals. It remains vital nonetheless to affirm an appropriate creed for the reason that worldviews define the aspirations of a civilization, formulate the ethical norms of a society; and as argued, has qualitative impact on practical outcomes even if the extolled values are not consistently acted upon.

On this account and with regard to the crisis at hand, the imperative for China today, at the outset, is to regain their forebears' sacred reverence of mother earth. And to recultivate the age-old symbiotic mutually-dependent interaction with nature, as a correction against secularism anthropocentric subordination of the natural world. Additionally and more importantly, modern Chinese should re-embrace sacred holism in lieu of secular dualism. At base, this means recapturing the ancient's creative synthesis of the dialectic between reason and sense, natural and supernatural, without collapsing one over the other. And, among others, to rehabilitate the modern man from a homo economicus into a holistic selfhood, who personifies outer physical eminence as well as inner spiritual refinement, whereupon self-fulfilment is attained through the acquisition of material as well as nonmaterial enrichment. In broader national terms, this calls for transforming the PRC from an emerging hard (economic, geo-political, military) superpower into a flourishing civilization imbued with the softer currency of cultural sophistication, social-moral vivacity, and metaphysical acumen. By taking on these rudimentary renewals, the Chinese world can then be reorientated towards a less materialistic "China Dream", a more balanced way of life, and a sustainable model of growth that will exact a lesser toll upon mother nature.

## 5. Conclusion

Assailed by a multifaceted crisis, the secular rulers of modern China are hearkening to antiquity for recourse. But as argued above, the root of today's many-sided exigencies can be narrowed down to one overarching misstep, namely, the radical disenchantment of 20th century China. As such, to prescribe a comprehensive remedial response, secularized China must undertake a foundational shift in worldview, namely, to become reacquainted with its sacred past.

One germane example is the ongoing campaign against endemic corruption. Beyond political and legal reform, China also requires a cultural renaissance, to rescind the pervasive brutish naturalism with a reconstitution of the Confucian benevolent ethos anchored on the sacred veneration of *Tien*. Similarly, to strengthen the social cohesion at home without subverting harmony abroad, it is vital that Beijing resists the unscrupulous exploitation of ethnocentric nationalism with a principled reaffirmation of Confucian universalism. And finally to save a decaying ecology, the Chinese world has got to rise above the prevailing anthropocentrism to re-embrace the ancient anthropocosmic vision.

To conclude, contemporary China needs a realignment in *Weltanschauung*, a changeover from the present radical disenchantment towards a rekindling of its ancient enchanted ethos. It is through these fundamental turnaround in beliefs and convictions that the Chinese sacred traditions can be effectively reappropriated to revitalize an ailing modern China. And in so doing, we are more likely able to ascribe the "miraculous" in terms of ethical-religious vivacity to the momentous events unfolding before us, which many has lauded as China's "economic miracle".

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## Notes

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1. 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, 2012).
2. 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 (Wang, 2002).

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