

# Civilisation and Its Discontents in Contemporary China 現代中国における文明への不満

Stephan Feuchtwang

## Civilisation and Its Discontents in Contemporary China<sup>1</sup>

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The governments of both mainland China and of Taiwan have turned their civilisation' into a national heritage, in different but often converging ways. But civilisation was transmitted before without its being a tradition' (*chuantong*) or a material and non-material heritage in the UNESCO-speak that prevails. Sinocentric views of civilisation speak a language of national pride and exaggeration of longevity and continuity, just as do Eurocentric and other nationalist views of their civilisations. All these claims need to be taken with at least pinches of salt. This article will be a handful of salt. Taking a more dispassionate and distanced concept of civilisation, which most importantly does not judge from the standpoint of any one civilisation and certainly not just from a civilisational elite in pronouncing what is and is not civilised but includes all ranks in a civilisational hierarchy as subjects of that civilisation and of aspirations within it, I shall seek answers to what has happened to civilisation in China under its present government. I will focus on the People's Republic of China.

It will be an essay on the mixing of civilisations. However, it will not be on the mixing of Chinese with a neighbouring civilisation, but with so-called modern civilisation', which according to the great French anthropological theoretician of civilisation, Marcel Mauss

(2006), is a truly global civilisation that spread from Europe. Marshall Sahlins (1996, p. 395), referring to its origins, called it the native anthropological themes' of Western cosmology.

Its principal features are a self-consciousness about culture' and civilisation', a mass schooling system, secular authority of science, a narrative history of a people, and a state that is greater in its powers, particularly its administrative bureaucracy and its organisation of physical force, than any previous kind of state. It can be said that the state justifies its existence by claiming to lead and serve a people and to further the project of modernisation. Modernisation is a project of change and growth through the accumulation of capital and its investment through a mixture of market competition and monopoly (corporate and state), professing to realise equality of opportunity in its ideology of individual freedom and universality.

In order to assess the relevance, continuity, transformation or demise of what I consider to be Chinese civilisation', I will start with a brief overview of what I consider to be its key characteristic of sage rule through self-cultivation, concentrating on how this was sustained in the last two imperial dynasties (the Ming and the Qing).

### Sage Rule and Self-Cultivation

Every civilisation includes self-cultivation by bodily disciplines, rituals and aspiration to immortality and moral personhood, conceived in different ways. Civilisation in China was characterised by its association with sage rule

in human mediations in a cosmography and a cosmocracy. What I mean by this, briefly, is that as son' of heaven, the emperor was the supreme mediator between heaven and earth, so long as he still had the mandate of heaven. The Chinese state's key guiding principle (derived from Mencius, Confucius' leading follower), was that a ruler's success depended on storing wealth among the people' (*cangfu yumin*): a regime of keeping tax low, storing grain for relief, and guaranteeing plots of land for subsistence cultivation including the provision of land in military colonies for forcibly conscripted and induced migration of land-short farmers (Deng 2003).

With the mandate of heaven (*Tianming*) the sage ruler becomes the exclusive mediator with the source of the ordering principles of change and constancy. In contrast, a poor ruler allows his officials to be self-seeking, his court to be extravagant, and the common people to seek the aid of spirits in their attempt to find their own mediations to the encompassing Heaven (*Tian*). According to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE text *Guoyu*, the sage ruler, aided by ritual experts, through his sacrifices orders the places of the spirits in Heaven and of men on Earth (*Di*), while the ruled simply revere the spirits and obey. Yet and at the same time another classical compilation which includes texts of the same period, the *Guanzi*, asserts that each person has an essence of vital energy that can be cultivated as a spirit. Through cultivation, any person can achieve sagehood. Knowledge and the attainment of sagacity or of being a true person according to the *Guanzi* was not a question of status by birth, as in succession to an imperial dynasty. Sagehood was an attainment by means of learning, discipline and technique in a system of discipleship and a line of masters.<sup>2</sup>

In a related tradition, the imperial exclusive claim to dynastic rule through its ancestral cult could be challenged by having an ancestor buried in a particularly auspicious grave. The

spread to commoners of the privilege of having an ancestral cult was enabled by the slow spread into China and the Chinese transformation of Buddhism and was authorised in the Song dynasty (twelfth century), along with the possibility of intergenerational status mobility into the imperial service.

Arts and exercises of self-cultivation have since then proliferated. They centre body and location in relation to others in fields of vital forces, creating microcosms and responsive relations to various externalities, insides to various outsides.<sup>3</sup> These fields, which are circuits of vital forces, are determined by the basic principles of Heaven-made authority or destiny (*ming*), although it is a destiny that itself shifts and fluctuates in the auspiciousness of time, direction and place. Self-cultivation is always a cultivation of a relational self in a circulation of forces or vital energies, auspiciousness, and the proper conduct of relations with others within an environment that is also a circulation of vital energies. They combine or clash, are blocked or allowed to flow. Body and place are microcosms in which the forces and principles of the universe are tapped and can be concentrated. They are part of the system of deciding where to build or position graves, temples, capital cities, and imperial and ordinary residences. They are also principles applied in traditional Chinese medicine, healthy eating, martial arts, and other exercises for the concentration and radiation of vital energies through breathing, movement and meditation. The immortality to which they aspire is of a lasting line of male descendants, or to salvation and moral merit and ultimate release from the karmic wheel of rebirth, or more rarely to bodily and historical transcendence as a spirit of heaven. Linked to both is the more mundane aspiration to intergenerational upward social mobility. In the latter we find another aspect of self-cultivation, that of face, the building of social capacity for making and maintaining personal relations and

trust. The cultivation of social capacity is based on a moral economy of conduct, of etiquette and of rites, the *Li*, particularly those of greeting, offering, receiving, praising and parting, through which respect for other people's and therefore one's own face is attained.

Unlike the hierarchy of caste and of sub-caste mobility, Chinese hierarchy is one of ranks and statuses through which there is mobility of family and individual.

Furthermore, a different version of imperial sagacity and its *Li* is imagined in the territorial cults and rituals of efficacy, with which Daoism is closely associated. I call this a civilisation of *fa*. The civilisation of *fa* is made concrete in visualisations of imperial power to respond to the petitions of ordinary people. They are imperial subjects' own versions of socially just and effective rule. *Fa* refers to the capacity of a ritual performed by experts to be magically effective. These ritual experts are often lumped together as Daoists', but they are called a variety of names: *fashi*, *daoshi*, *yinyang*, and other local designations. *Fa* also refers to the Buddhist dharma (rules of conduct and renunciation) and *fahui* are rituals of healing and salvation addressing Buddhist versions of the gods of popular pantheons as well as bodhisattvas such as the most popular, Guanyin. Lastly, it refers, on the one hand, to law in general (*falu*), and on the other hand, to the method or capacity to get things done.

The protocols of rites (*Li*) also have their own local experts, which are called *lisheng* in some places. These are experts in the writing of eulogies and the conduct of ceremonies that do not involve salvation or effectivity, but are often conducted in conjunction with them, for instance in death rituals, in syncretic sects such as the Three-in-one, and in ancestral halls that combine ancestor worship with the welcoming of a protector god (Dean 1998 and Dean and Zheng 2010).

These civilisations, or aspects of a consolidated civilisation, make up an ideal or model of good rule. It is an ideal, not of democracy, but of what might be called charisma by self-cultivation and exemplary responsiveness. The idealised moral person, an ancestor stripped of the personal and ambivalent characteristics that immediate descendants could have recalled, a god that is an historical legend and an archaic metaphor for the historical present (Feuchtwang 1993), is not elected but respected. Ancestors are forgotten when they lack descendents. Gods, or particular manifestations of a god, can be abandoned or they can be supplanted by others reputed to be more efficaciously responsive, more charismatic – each of course in retrospective proof of results attributed to their invisible presence made present in figures and rituals – or, less magical (*less fa*), they are taken up as exemplary models for the present.

When that ideal is patently not met by an emperor, the famous mandate (*ming*) of Heaven is thought to have lapsed from the current claimants of authority, and the justification for rebellion comes into force in which new sage rulers are sought. A sage can come from any place and family. Cults of local protector gods, each with their own festivals and their spread to and from other places, rehearse this ideal of the good ruler. Each local cult, often depicted as a pantheon, is imagined and treated as being located in a hierarchy, leading up in space and back in time to a cosmogonic origin and a supreme deity that both precedes and is superior to the actual imperial ruler. Centring a locality as a version of the universe in this way is possible anywhere. Yet a centre is always singular and for much of Chinese history, this was not just imagined but was applied in architecture and the design of capital cities, their temples, altars, and sacrifices. Centring in places other than the political centre was not an act of rebellion unless the place became part of a movement to restore a sage ruler with a

mandate of heaven. Such rebellion was infrequent compared to the much more common ritual action of recreating an encompassing centre that is distinct from, but not a rival to, the political centre.

Sage rule was not a necessarily peaceful ideal; it involved the use of force, actual local militia and the imagery of gods' demonic soldiers. The ideal of sage rule can be and was abused. It could lead to terrible civil war between rival sage rulers, each claiming the mandate of heaven. Such states of chaos and confusion, of rival charismatic authorities and claims to sagehood, are civilisational ruptures and periods of civilisational renewal.

Finally and of utmost importance, I consider this and any other civilisation to be a mode of learning and transmission, rather than a set of defining practices and traits. A civilisation is a *style* (as Mauss called it) of varying and changing material practices and products. It is a *way* of forming hierarchies of aspiration, which may change in time and vary through space. It is also a way of absorbing new conditions and transgressions of habitual norms and it is irreversibly changed by what it has absorbed. Absorption brings about confusion, a multiplication of hierarchies of aspiration. For this historical civilisation, in China, the new and the transgressive are adjusted and learned through an ideal of sage rule and the disciplines of aspiration and self-cultivation in which commoners are performers of their own centrality of place and of themselves as mediating bodies and emotions.

Applying the above discussion to current times, we must envisage the possibility that for some, the sage rule and self-cultivation that had been the habitual framework of learning and transmission in the past have now disintegrated and have been abandoned. In dynastic times, a state of confusion was described either as vital or as threatening and devitalising (Wang 2004). Similarly today, the sense of a moral crisis is

easily found among Chinese intellectuals, policy advisers, and among ordinary people but is it vitalising or destructive, and is it a transformation of the old or the composition of entirely new civilisation(s)?.

### **Absorption of the Civilisation of Modernity and the Modernising Project**

The things learned in the course of adopting the modernising project include what every other civilisation has absorbed: an idea of scientific knowledge, the necessity for a vastly extended state and its armed forces, a temporality of progress (modernisation), and, as complement to hugely extended state power, the state's legitimacy through its claim to represent a people. The modern state and its legitimacy are conveyed through a mythic history of common descent and unity among other peoples in a world of states and peoples, with their own myths of origin and unity in their own homes and sovereign territories. Absorption of these things has turned China from a civilisation of eternal principles (Tianli) that seeks sage rule and adapts to changing circumstances, to a civilisation that is set on a progressive project of self-strengthening in a struggle for survival and a struggle to establish its prominence in the international arena of globalising industrial and financial capitalism.

Industrial capitalism was eventually absorbed and developed in China, which already had a long history of mercantile capitalism. Learning and adopting industrial capitalism and Western sciences in China has undoubtedly transformed the Chinese empire and its civilisation. The Chinese response (physical, spiritual, personal, educational, technical, and economic) to the partially enforced industrialisation, imposed by imperialist powers, was to turn the older self-cultivation (*zixiu*) into a movement of self-strengthening (*zhiqiang*). This involved adopting state policies, school curricula and pedagogy, large-scale industry, weaponry and military organisation learned by Chinese people who



studied in Europe, North America and Japan and also from European, American and Japanese advisors and investors in China.

In order to focus on one important topic, instead of trying to offer a comprehensive and synoptic account, I shall consider public good' and its provision as a sphere in which the two civilisations overlap, the one absorbed by the other.

### **Ideas of Public Good' in the Transformation of Chinese Civilisation**

In the second republican revolution culminating in 1949 led by the Chinese Communist Party, a scientific vision of (revolutionary) progress prevailed. People (*min*) became *renmin*, a people that was, ideally, not just the store of good rule but the masters of their own liberation organised by the Party. Peculiar to Maoism was its emphasis, in ideological work such as thought and study meetings, on the project of turning the people into members of a collective subject. Party-led campaigns of self-fashioning put the public first, a greater self, and the individual self second (*da gong, wu si*).

We can gain an insight into this and its post-Mao sequel, by reflecting on Maoism's *da gong* (the great public good) as a version of earlier promotions of public good. The ideal of a public realm (*gong*) in which the good of all should be maintained impartially was associated with sage rule and with responsive but steeply hierarchical relations of respect. It was the basis for condemning self-serving rule. However, it must be noted immediately that imperial public good could be achieved according to quite different ideas and traditions of statecraft (*jingshi*). They range from the universal rule of clearly defined *regulations* constraining selfish impulses,<sup>4</sup> to the rule of appropriate *rites* of both Daoist and Confucian sagehood, and the ideal of a wise ruler whose responsiveness to others spreads proper social conduct throughout the empire by example.

More specifically, public good was the organisation, first of funding then of realising good works locally. They included the creation of public institutions, such as rights to ownership and use of land, of irrigation systems and their maintenance, or mediation of disputes over access to them, the provision and organisation of militia for guarding crops or patrolling streets, the building and maintenance of bridges and paths, and the building of schools, academies and of temples where the young and the old could be nurtured.

In political discourse, *gong* became an object of reform during the last, Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Gu Yanwu, an influential seventeenth-century scholar, described the state of confusion in his time as one that needed a reform of local government, more in line with the golden age of the Zhou dynasty, which he as did others before and after him, interpreted as natural' government. But Gu transferred the ideal of sage rule down to the enlightened self-interest (*si*) of local gentry, recognised and rewarded by public institutions (*gong*) (Wakeman [1975] 2009, pp. 194-197). He advocated local literati serving in their own places of residence, in order to restore simplicity and reduce ornamentation of rites both by the people and at court. The nineteenth-century School of Statecraft was to base its programme of local self-government and practical reform on Gu's notion of enlightened self-interest, along with its championing of literati autonomy and what later came to be thought of as public opinion.

After the defeat of the Qing in the Opium Wars of 1839-41 and the wars that followed and the consequent impact of the West in the second half of the nineteenth century, this statecraft was radicalised further in the writings of Liang Qichao, one of the most influential intellectuals advocating reform. For him citizenship was public-mindedness based on personal morality in a conception that made the quality of the person the very basis for public good (Zarrow

2002, pp. 139-42).

Maoism's *da gong* turned this public-mindedness into selflessness, serving others and identifying self with work unit (*danwei*) and team (*xiaodui*), substituting cadres for literati. Maoist mobilisation converted older loyalties and identifications into collectives, but it never eliminated them entirely. Instead, they were *partially*, not totally, transformed. Years of mass mobilisation campaigns were formative in the literal sense that they were a practical education in identification of political classes and revolutionary ideals of leadership and self-sacrifice. Nevertheless, residential patterns remain unchanged. Local gentry and intellectuals in many cases had joined the Communist-led movement and become officials and cadres. Or else local loyalties could be retained through the promotion of poor peasants into positions of leadership (for example see Ruf 1998). In other words, the public field was and remains hybrid. When the local *dadui* (brigade), as an organisation and a public space, replaced the village as it did during the Maoist period, and now when the administrative village (*xingzhen cun*) and village committees have replaced brigades, places have been renamed and remade at least twice over but in the same settled population. At the same time, pre-Liberation institutions such as domestic altars and their orientation as centres of places have been re-established. And in many regions so have temples, shared ancestral homes or halls, monasteries, nunneries, mosques and churches. They have been built beside the school and the headquarters of the Party and of elected representatives in both rural and urban communities and in many instances they are rival architectural centres of these territories as places and rival focal points for fund-raising and the organisation of public works and charitable relief.

So we have a layering over of revived older loyalties with Maoist class and collective

loyalties, as well as an institutional juxtaposition with Party-led administrative politics on one hand and local electorates on the other. Within all this we can see the emergence of an individual, a small-family person (Yan 2009). This person, on one hand, is an opportunist for wealth and social mobility, and on the other hand, loyal to the place of his or her residence and place of origin, loyal to both ancestry, state, and to a number of other cultural or moral authorities. Closer to home but at the same time a matter of governance, parental and grandparental self-sacrifice for children and grandchildren is reciprocated by children's highly pressured willingness to work very long hours to pass examinations and to fulfil the expectation later to support their elders with at least affection and concern.

The modern state has a far more direct and extensive relation to its population of subjects than did the imperial state, particularly through the apparatus of schooling and of higher education, which is now a major concern of every family. Vanessa Fong and others have singled out four core and somewhat contradictory ideals learned through family, schooling and campaigns promoting the newly minted civilisation' (*wenming*) that has replaced simply being cultivated (*hua*). They are: 1) excellence (mainly in achieving formal qualifications); 2) caring for each other and for kin; 3) independence, self-reliance and individual judgement; and 4) obedience to teachers, parents and bosses (Fong 2010). Teachers, parents and bosses, including those of the state, expect obedience and trust whereas students and children are also expected to exercise (and may themselves assert) independence.

As if these ideals were not enough there has also been a huge proliferation of commercial advertising and the government's own propaganda in favour of material incentives to work hard for self and family and to spend and consume. The emphasis on material well being,

despite state admonitions to cultivate public virtue, encourages a hedonistic carelessness about the rest of society. Cultivation has become self measured against an advertised and propagandised progressive, modern civilisation of material well being. It is cultivated in the form of rising in consumer status, in particular of private housing in guarded estates of various qualities.



**Contemporary gated community**

We find a mediated public context that stresses the interpersonal ideals of family and the more public admonitions to promote the newly minted civilisation' (*wenming*) that has replaced simply being cultivated (*hua*). The newly minted Chinese civilisation emphasises modernity and prosperity, particularly academic and professional qualifications, hygiene, and civic responsibility. The Party and its state have been promoting a series of campaigns to improve the quality of the population (*renkou suzhi*), through the steep hierarchy of schooling and tertiary education (Fong 2004; Kipnis 2009). Admonitions to be

civilised (*wenming*) on streets, billboards, notice boards and the mass media, are reinforced by an elaborate system of awards to households, work units, buildings, urban neighbourhoods and villages. They are accepted as the expected activity of a state civilising mission.

The distinction between public and private is no longer at issue the way it was before because the borderlands have shifted and been redefined between a state and the people it claims to represent. Governmental civilisation (*wenming*) penetrates in its thought-work (*sixiang gongzuo*) the public spaces of urban communities' (*shequ*) and village teams, work places with their Party branches, and the home, particularly its reproductive capacity monitored by community and team cadres. *Wenming* is also the promotion of a family filial ideal that was always linked to loyalty to dynastic rule but is now linked to Party-state patriotism and order. Confucianism and the sage himself in his birthplace are deliberately promoted as 'Chinese civilisation', at the core of which is this filial ideal, loyalty to the Party-state, and the harmony it proclaims through state-sponsored self-governing communities in cities and villages.

### **An Elite Confucian Modernisation of Sage Rule**

The great Chinese anthropologist and sociologist, Fei Xiaotong, provided a part-academic, part-advocacy analysis of what should happen in China in the 1940s. In *Reconstructing Rural China (Xiangtu Chongjian Zhongguo)*, he advocated a new class of literati. He was a successor to Gu Yanwu, the nineteenth-century School of Statecraft, and Liang Qichao in promoting local self-regulation such that rule by elders and local gentry should become a new kind of elite promoting rural industry as well as agriculture. According to Fei's vision, assemblies of elected representatives would eventually replace local

gentry. National government would then have to be a public administration of the central state responsive to such local assemblies (Hamilton & Wang (1992), pp 144-5). Fei's reforming text is peppered with Confucian aphorisms that were addressed to *junzi* (the literati of pre-imperial and imperial China).



**Citizens admonished to cultivate civilisation**

A more fully elaborated modern Confucianism that explicitly discusses sage rule is found in the work of a renowned US sinologist, Thomas Metzger. Metzger (2004) contrasts European intellectuals' autonomy with Chinese intellectuals' heteronomy or dependence on others. Civil society is in his version everywhere led by intellectuals, which is to say that civil society amounts to the influence of ideas produced by a minority. In the European tradition, influential intellectuals are, ideally, autonomous. In China, Metzger argues that the tradition of deference to an enlightened elite idealised as sages and working alongside the state, is still alive. The modern literati, those with the best educational qualifications, see themselves as responsible to give a moral lead to state governance. This is another aspect of heteronomy—deference to what should be and is expected to be sage leadership. Even among

the Chinese intellectuals in Taiwan, Metzger claims that there is a lack of what he calls 'perspicacity'—a willingness to discuss policy, which is the basis of the European public sphere.

From his account, sage leadership is used by the people, but the sage does not himself depend on or use the people. Sage rule is an ideal of morally trustworthy leaders, a practical ideal because it had once existed so it could again through a remaking of a great togetherness or harmony (*datong*). It is the moral way of tuning into universal principles (the *dao*) of responsiveness (*ren*), in which the only hierarchy is that of age, gender, and merit.

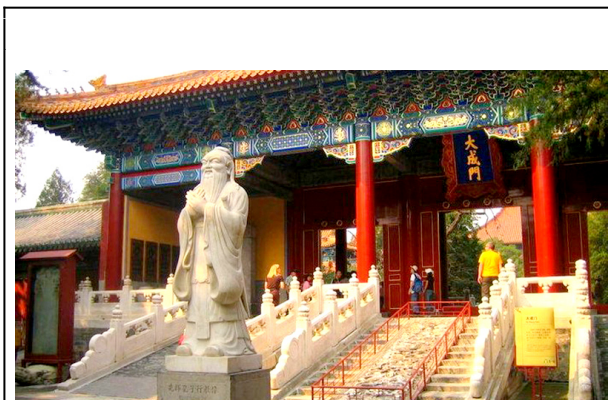
Metzger recognises this tradition of moral leadership and consensus to be the means of learning and absorbing what Chinese elites brought from the European tradition and institutions of civil society, which is mostly based on what they have learned from Christian missionaries and other Euro-American teachers. He claims that Chinese absorption retains a tradition of what he calls 'epistemological optimism', that is, we can and must achieve unity and rely on the possibility of ending corruption and establishing good conduct. Where there is abuse of power and corrupt use of office, there is trust in the moral rectitude of superiors, for instance in the leadership of the Party, capable eventually of rectifying it. To this he contrasts the European tradition of 'epistemological pessimism' in which civil society and democracy can correct human untrustworthiness and the state's inherent fallibility by reaching the current best knowledge through reason and debate.

Under Mao offices for petition-letters requesting investigations into local grievances were established at every local level branch of government. They continue to this day. This is perhaps an example of Metzger's epistemological optimism, even when petitioners' slim chances of success have to be



backed up with vocal, trouble-making protest (Chen 2008), usually quite brutally suppressed by local government forces.

Another much younger and more influential Confucian is Kang Xiaoguang (Kang and Han 2008). Kang describes government in China today as rule by an autocratic government selectively using graduated controls over non-government organisations in a marketised economy. In his view, such autocratic government is fine so long as it is benevolent, based on the human capacity for empathy, a necessarily authoritarian government by those who have shown they are true Confucians, sage and virtuous (Ownby 2009). However, anyone can be a sage and the people have the right to demand to be ruled by a sage. For Kang, this would be reinforced by Confucianism organised as a religion, a Chinese variant of Christianity in the USA. It will encourage modernisation, reform, and renaissance of cultural root identity.



**Confucian temple in Qufu, Shandong, now a UNESCO World Heritage site**

Kang Xiaoguang, a nationalist of Confucian China, promotes a conception of civilisation that is just a larger scale of cultural or ethnic holism. I advocate instead a more analytic and descriptively accurate concept of civilisation as a spread from one or more centres and absorption of and mixtures with other

civilisations. However, his and Metzger's emphasis on the tradition of sage rule, into which the European conceptions and institutions of state and governmentality have been absorbed and which they have in turn transformed, should be heeded. Kang and Metzger could be right in saying that absorption into a tradition of sage rule creates a specific kind of public sphere or political society.

As against these conceptions, I add just one from a series of studies by Isabelle Thireau and *hua* Linshan (2002) that seriously challenge but do not entirely refute Metzger's claim of a common Chinese reluctance to discuss policy but to rely instead on the demand for morally good leaders. In their study of several villages in the Pearl River Delta near Guangzhou (Canton) they find what they call the opening of *local mediation spaces* where different ways to identify and manage common issues can be mobilized, confronted, and eventually combined, diverse links being established between the spaces coexisting in a single locality' (p. 159). In these spaces, issues are discussed and trustworthy leadership is negotiated. They include spaces between the official institutions of the Party-state and non-state locally maintained institutions such as temples, festivals and lineages. Within them, villagers have created officially recognised mediating organisations such as an elderly people's association and a cultural association. In the leadership of these organisations, there is usually a retired cadre or official or an army veteran, fellow-villagers who have shown that their co-residents could trust them, based on their past record. Thireau and *hua* point out that such people would anyway be consulted by the appointed and elected village leaders to make sure that their decisions will not be opposed.

One villager told them that:

Since the reforms officials care about their

reputation, they care about what people say about them. This is a great reform. And when they don't care about villagers' opinions, they care about what others outside the village will think about them. This is why it is sometimes so effective to write to the media (p. 180).

Thireau and *hua* observe that 'One cannot actually spend a few days in a given locality without witnessing discussions evaluating and often criticising officials' actions' (p. 179). These are the spaces that allow for the identification of morally trustworthy leadership and for discussing local policy issues and the public good.

Learning from superiors in transformed hierarchies of possession of goods and the fostering of public good has set new standards and therefore ways to keep a distance from and transgress those standards. They are partially accepted ideals, accompanied by an expectation that leaders of a popular we' in general, supposedly empowered to check leaders in state institutions, will on the contrary *not* abide by them. Such ironic distancing accommodates a new confusion or multiplicity of moral and cultural authorities. Any of them, in any combination, can be and are used to judge whether rule in any place, or in China as a whole, is good or improvable and in what way.

The means to initiate moral recovery or to secure from government better responses to grievances are equally varied. In other words, there has been a proliferation of resources for the cultivation of moral selves, revived Maoist, post-Maoist and absorbed from abroad. However, at the same time, there is also an enormous incentive for material gain that appeals to ruthless and amoral self-interest. This is idiomatically designated as 'chaos' (*luan*).

Putting all this together, we could conclude that even while Chinese statecraft has become a civilising mission of a quite different

kind—one that can be described as a nationalist and modernising pedagogy—the politics of the governed has among its resources standards of sage rule and self-cultivation. This would include the ideals that a teacher, a Party cadre or an official should be a model (*mofan*) or a pace-setter (*biaobing*). But this is too rosy a picture. We have to consider what has provoked and continues to provoke a rethinking and re-learning of moral worth.

### Chaos (Luan): The Destruction and Reconstruction of Human Relations

In the long course of the transformations of Chinese civilisation there had already been moments, several generations long, of extreme turbulence and of confused or no rule when the mandate of heaven and the possibilities of self-cultivation were curtailed or destroyed. These periods of devastation and confusion were also periods of infusion of values and power associated with other civilisations.

Disorder as always comes from outside the centre as the centre is riven and collapses. In the past, order was restored with a new mix of outside and inside, re-establishing sage rule with a different organisation and a new sense of mission. However, this cannot be said of the disorder and devastation that resulted in republican rule and further civil war. Let us examine this difference more closely.

Disorder is an opportunity for upward social mobility, not just for an aspirant emperor, but for military leaders, officials and elites of lower ranks. One of the first to study upward mobility attained through banditry or suppression of banditry and through the organisation of local militia and armies for the suppression of the Taiping and subsequent rebellions was Chou Jung-te (1966). He presented it as mobility confined to those who already had gentry status. However, we should remember that it worked through the organisation of physical force, the opposite of a refined, literate channel of social mobility. Out of the capacity to be

brutal and ruthless, a negation of civility, came the possibility of constructing something other than the ideals of a moral person among the gentry. This must always have occurred in periods of violent disorder. The difference is that the means of violence and the extent of the violation and mutilation of a population in modern civil war and the establishing of a modern state's organisation of physical force are far greater. Examples of the leaders of such violence are of course the two most successful Chinese military leaders of the twentieth century, Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) and Mao Zedong, under whose regimes physical violence was of two kinds. One addressed targeted categories of population, Communist bandits' or Rightists' and in both cases traitors'. The other was a violence of indifference to the affected population in general, expected to sacrifice their lives for the Party that identified itself with the people and the country and substituted itself for them (Feuchtwang 2011). On the local level, both kinds are exemplified by cadres acting brutally in the civil war and land reform, and subsequently acting ruthlessly in implementing Maoist policy during the Great Leap Forward famine, such as those in the village studied by Thaxton (2008).

Upheaval briefly gave way to a more settled order during the so-called Nanjing decade of Nationalist Party rule from 1927-37. A longer reconstruction crucially including a restoration of access to land for security of income lasted from 1949 to 1959 and again from 1961-1978. This time it was a Communist-led command economy adapted from the Soviet Union. The dismantling of direct economic command and of the organisation of mass mobilisation from 1978 opened the economy to global capitalism. This has led to another upheaval, a long period of rapid social and economic transformation, urban destruction and expansion which opened up opportunities for upward social mobility and the geographic mobility of rural migrants.

What was learnt and through what means

during the periods of chaos and upheaval including the present day?

To describe the experience of such devastation as a process of learning is possible only if it starts from learning, often without success, of how to subsist and maintain bare life, how to live without a sense of future beyond the next meal. Such was the case during the greatest Chinese famine, which occurred between 1959 and 1961 during a frenetic episode of top-down collective construction. A local official who was also a poet and calligrapher described it as a destruction of human relations (*ren yu ren guanxi*)' (Feuchtwang 2011: 95). Recovery from such devastation involves reconstructing human relations. What is reconstructed tells the anthropological historian much about the ideas of human relations that were betrayed and abandoned in learning just to survive and what, then, gained the possibility of renewal.

Obviously, what is learned in such a period is limited to whatever sources of moral guidance are available to the people at that time. They are not confined to state propaganda and education or to what is transmitted through familial generations and popular, local institutions. They include what was in fact revived, the honouring of ancestors and petitions to gods. But they also include information about people's own imaginative constructions of what modernity' is. In any case, the eventuality of devastation or of socially destructive economic change entails a moral or cultural crisis in which habitual assumptions are at least partially questioned and other realities are envisaged.



**Daoists conducting offering to orphan souls in a temple in southern Fujian, 2010**

### Moral crisis

Most significant in the context of the destruction and reconstruction of human relations is the fact that labour migration from village to city has been a major base of economic growth in China, as everywhere else in the economy of industrial capitalism including its originating heartlands. For an employee, earning an income is a basis for declaring some individual autonomy—an example of individualism. In China, individualism first became universal paradoxically with the collectivisation of work and shares of the total product according to individually-calculated work-points. This was applicable to all adult females and males, although this was a shareholding in collectively organised work and a pooled product, and although distribution in kind and cash went not to the individual but the household head. Decollectivisation after Mao's death and the introduction of markets and their determination of prices, including labour markets, created a new moral crisis, including hedonistic individualism, and increasing gender differentiation even while women continued to enter the labour force. In terms of public good, as Yan Yunxiang (2003, chapter 1) describes,

Maoist local leadership of collective life—coercive but at the same time often though not always respected for sharing the general poverty of fellow villagers—declined into a cadre force of bullies without moral worth. They levied taxes to pay their income and to get promotion, whereas villagers, no longer bound by collective regulation, migrated to find jobs, and households retreated into their private spaces no longer controlled by local cadres.

The conditions of labour, insecurity of employment, health and injury risks, and low or no pay (as in some cases in construction work) make up the dark side of China's boom viewed through the lens of rural migrant workers (Cai 2008 and Pun & Lu 2010). Insecurity is greatest for the migrants living in rented or dormitory accommodation in cities. They have rural household registration, partly of their own volition to retain the opportunity of gaining compensation from municipal governments' compulsory purchase of the land on which their village houses are built, but at the same time, lacking registration in the cities where they live and work, they are denied access to public schooling and medical treatment that their fellow urban registered residents claim. This is a world of long hours of hard labour under a boss—whether Chinese or international—who is not constrained by ideals of moral leadership in the pursuit of profit. Though some dream of starting businesses of their own, the vast majority remain subject to the will of a boss, a gang leader, an official or an employer - an experience of extended rupture filled with anxiety about the short time before losing their physical powers of resilience (Xiang Biao 2010).

This is the baseline of moral vacuum in a time of great opportunity and social mobility. Out of it, new hierarchies of competitive comparison (*pobi*) with the material achievement of others (Zhang 2010) have emerged. These are hierarchies of material status, both rural and



urban, that do not reach a political centre, though some wealth is as before converted into education, charity and new kinds of civilisational centre, such as communities of faith or of place.

The possibility of migrating to find work has affected income in China in two ways. First is that even the lowest-paid employment has, at least, relieved rural families in poverty of feeding the migrant member. More, savings and remittances from even the low paid have enabled siblings to extend their education and, via increased income to acquiring television and mobile phones, and so access to an outside world, in and beyond China. Second, the sheer adventure of earning and living in a city has increased possibilities for making new relations (for example, finding marriage partners) and of acquiring new goals and means for self-fulfilment.

Within the post-Mao moral crisis of ideological leadership and the moral vacuum of economic opportunity, people have turned to the morality of reciprocity and responsiveness in interpersonal, human relations (*renqing*). At the same time, most people have modified their sense of self through engagement with a consumer habit, wearing new kinds of clothes, sharing music, and much else, including for the richer the opportunity to build houses, that Charles Taylor has described as a social imaginary of self-constitution through mutual display and identification (Taylor 2004). The very pursuit of economic opportunity, particularly in business relations, includes the art and morality of making and maintaining personal relations by attending and hosting banquets and engaging in gift exchange. This is a manifestation of the cultivation of face and the formation of a hierarchy of deference and mobility. But of course the business done, settled or started in banquets includes other kinds of relations altogether, for instance contracts with investors both domestic and foreign. In the same way, traditional ways of

remembering and reminding through numbers and aphorisms, or ways of treating human relations (*renyuan*) as destined (*ming*) and of decisions as auspicious (*fu*) are mixed with business and financial calculations learned in management, finance, and business schools. We can say that they are mixed in a flourishing of more or less instrumental cultivation of human relations in a Chinese style.

What do we make of these continuities? They convey the temporalities of self-cultivation toward perfection, ancestral reproduction, reputation for face and trustworthiness and karmic retribution or release as before. Rituals that address gods convey a temporality of heroic responsiveness in a hierarchy of centred origin, as before. However, all these are juxtaposed to a state's teleology of improvement—a progressivist self-cultivation. This historical temporality of rule for, if not by, the people and its self-strengthening, can also be a personal project of betterment. The different temporalities interact. Each becomes a vehicle for reflecting on the other temporality, the break with the past reflecting on continuity from the past, and the continued and revived practices reflecting and commenting on the economics, politics, and consumerism of the project of modernisation and constant renewal, political nepotism, corruption and brutality, and the amorality of economic opportunism and ruthless exploitation.

### Civilising Mission, Protest, and Urban Privacy

The Chinese republican state, in both the Republic and the People's Republic, has used 'civilisation' as a governmental instrument of personal formation. It is a modern state with its own kind of civilising mission aimed not only at its own population, but also the rest of the world. In the process sage rule and popular self-cultivation have been transformed into a quite different state relationship—so different

that it is barely, if at all, recognisable as sage rule. The expectation of the moral trustworthiness of superiors in the state's hierarchy has been recreated as loyalty to a party and its government. Its relation to the people is one of legitimation with its masters', the people', no longer that of a cosmological mediator who corrects and absorbs popular cults of gods by imperial endorsement. The Party-state rules localities and their own civilisational institutions for the creation of public good by different kinds of control, that is, through Bureaux of Culture and Tourism, or through law enforcement by treating popular cults, masters of self-cultivation and their following, and ritual practices of divination as fraudulent, criminally sectarian or superstitious.

The boundaries that are maintained on both sides of the relationships and imaginings of a state are created, on one side, by the government through its means of coercion, schooling and propaganda, on the other side by the people who are nominally entitled to be masters of the state. People's is according to party and government a population to be formed. In fact, as in every country, it is a multifariously formed people whose entitlements include knowledge of the law and of policy by which to demand or petition and locally to realise their other entitlements through elections or demonstrations. Trouble-making protests to get results can become social movements of expectation of trustworthy and responsive moral leadership but also of demands for rule of law. The boundaries of the relation between state and people are arenas of struggle, making and remaking those boundaries.

So, from the top down we have a rupture from and a barely recognisable transformation of sage rule and self-cultivation. But from the bottom up we have a mixture of renewed institutions of rehearsing the heroes and ideals of responsiveness and social justice, mixed with

the new institutions of social mobility and remonstrance, including that hybrid of new and old petitioning, the offices of letters and visits and the new remonstrance by recourse to the ideal of rule of law. It is difficult to say that the practices of self-cultivation and the ideals of sage rule remain a vehicle for absorbing the new ideas of rule and of material status.

This difficulty can be illustrated in the changes that imperial domestic and urban architecture has undergone. The various styles of courtyard compounds for large and small domestic units were repeated on larger scales in the buildings of imperial authority (palaces and popular temples), all of them making the inner invisible from the outer lanes and spaces. A similar compound but on a larger scale contained the work unit, which was also a collective unit of residence, the *danwei* (Bray 2005). Like the former imperial residences and ordinary homes, *danwei* were still centred architecturally, in this case by the most prominent building beyond the main gate, housing the central administration and Party secretary. Chinese designers of the now ubiquitous guarded compound estates of middle income city residents claim to be following the imperial tradition. But they also know that they are catering for a huge variety of commercially promoted international styles and that the units of residence within them are either detached and semi-detached houses and gardens or high-rises of apartments with corridors and stairwells or lift-shafts, neither a collective nor a work compound (Hulshof and Roggeveen 2011: 114-119) and without architectural centring. The urban boundary between state and people is filled with the commercial organisations of property development that are at the top rung of the subcontracting through which these estates are built and upon whom local states rely for much of their revenue. The predations of this public-private initiative on local residents, including urbanised rural residents, are the subject of a great deal of petition, protest and legal action.



**A Shanghai community. Photograph Paula Morais**

The government encourages mediation, arbitration and, if they do not work, then trial in a court to resolve complaints against government officials, in addition to letters of petition. At the same time local state governments persecute the so-called nail' households and self-educated lawyers acting for fellow residents and sometimes organising them into collective protests who stand out and challenge compulsory purchase under-compensation or pollution by industrial installations and developers working with local officials. This recourse to law, on one hand as a way of preventing disorder and protest and on the other hand as an instrument of a protest demanding rule of law, is entirely new, quite unlike the litigation under dynastic rule that was decried in official discourse (Diamant et al (eds) 2005: introduction). From the bottom up it is a demand for a state accountable to law. The accusation from below is of chaotic government. It is an old word, but the demand is for a standard of government that has no equivalent in dynastic China.

In sum, chaos is the brutalisation of human relations and the abandoning of whatever was civilisation and this was the condition for great numbers of Chinese people for several, if not

most, decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, including the decades of the cheap labour boom. Chaos' is also the small-family retreat into the housing classes of fashionable but quickly decaying paradises' built by property developers (Zhang Li 2010). What has been the civilisation learned from this experience in the re-establishing of human relations and out of the growing mix of moral guidance and senses of public good? One conclusion is that it is a mix of fragmented civilisation, of amorality with several civilising discourses including the new discourse of human rights and the rule of law. But this needs to be further elaborated in concluding my findings.

## Conclusion

The dominant temporality of progress is a narrative of events and unpredictable new realities read backwards as economic development and as new historical, social scientific, economic, scientific and technological knowledge. It is congruent with the temporality of the narration of Chinese civilisation as the story of a people and its advance into further modernity – a future-oriented project, rather than the temporality of civilisation as it existed under dynastic rule, which was a constant adjustment of an ideal to transgression, contingency and learning from outside. Whatever the politics of its government, the republican state has inhabited and promoted the temporality of constant change and of a break from the past, even while selecting certain features from the long history of Chinese civilisation as its own historical authority.

In the process of responding to the powers of capitalist industrial expansion and state-imperialist-power, the statecraft of sage rule has been the means of learning to construct a modern state to stand up against external powers. In this process, the vehicle of learning has become the object of transformation by

that state. As a result, sage rule is now treated by it as history, a past in a progressive narrative of glory, humiliation, recovery and glory again and not continued as a pulse of adjustment, confusion and readjustment. Civilisation has become a past to be preserved as culture' (*wenhua*) and selective heritage in state ceremonial and spectacle and a part-nationalist part-commercialised tradition for internal as well as external tourism. At the centres of the republic, ceremonies such as the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Olympic Games and buildings for them have replaced imperial rituals, palaces, temples, altars and tombs, which have themselves become museums and displays, similar to the new processions and spectacles of the civic calendar. Pride in these displays of *the past as spectacle* is now the unifying mode, replacing reverence and the expectation of just reward and salvation.

On the other hand, some of the characteristics of the expectation of rule to be sage informed the socialism that Mao established in China, but with a Party whose leadership is enjoined to respond to and be accountable to its masters' the People, even though it is an ideal that has not been realised (see Lin Chun 2006: 140-142).

In addition, many exercises of self-cultivation have been continued in popular culture, reproducing the cosmology of centring and of balance and return to harmonious equilibrium (Farquhar and Zhang 2012). So too rituals of ancestral veneration reproduce a temporality of family reproduction. Death rituals of passage from purgatory to the Western Paradise reproduce a temporality of karmic moral economy and release. Gods in temples and heroes in theatrical productions reproduce an archaic world of the invisible made visible that rehearse good, just, responsive and fierce rule. Spirit-mediumship and other ways of making gods, ghosts and ancestors visible convey a temporality in which the past is present in the

bodies and fortunes of living people. Centring self-cultivation of all these practices scale up to cosmologies of vital energy, of heroic myths of past lives effective in the present, and of karmic retribution and salvation. But they have no single political centre, just nodes on extended strings of places of dwelling and belonging within and beyond the territorial boundaries of China' and outside its state spectacles. Among them death rituals in particular recreate the sense of inside and outside, including destinations of migration that can be treated, in cities in or beyond China, as a frontier for the gathering of resources and the formation of new centred dwellings at the risk of failure and wasting away in the wilderness, becoming a ghost instead of an ancestor.

The moral person of now smaller families who reaches up in cosmologies of self-cultivation also reaches up in hierarchies of wealth, housing and personal status in interpersonal relations and the moral person of ideals of republican democracy, including those of the public self of Mao's time, the new translations of sage rule into republican unity and its admonitions to be civilised. But this person also has at their disposal reference to international law, and to political philosophies with centres elsewhere, in Japan, Korea, North America, Europe and Australia.

The moral persons of Muslim, Christian and Lamaist Buddhism and other (for instance shamanic) virtues have been to some extent ethnicised alongside the Han race-nation-state and its cultivation of national origins, be they personified in the Yellow Emperor, Peking Man, or Confucius, or of Chinggis Khan in the new geography and temporality of peoples' and places and their cultures (*wenhua*).

Chinese civilisation as *wenming* has become one hierarchy of moral authority and aspiration among others, with its temporality of the modernising project and of turning the past of



sage rule and self-cultivation into spectacle and heritage. The political centre has been transformed into a new centre of culture', its national heritage proclaimed as a moral authority for the world. The civilisation of sage rule and self-cultivation and its cosmocracy no longer has a single political centre, just local centres of moral judgement and aspiration. Its persistence is frequently an appropriation and reversal of top-down *wenming*.

All of these moral and amoral persons are mixed but not mutually absorbed because they share no unifying centre. There is no demonstrably dominant ideological structure repeated in them all, just a very powerful state and the spaces that are arenas of struggle in which its borders are defined.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is a longer and revised elaboration of an article Chinese civilisation in the present' that appeared in The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology Special Issue on Civilisation and Empire: Anthropology of China in Perspective edited by Liang Yongjia, volume 13 number 2, 2012, pp 112-127.

<sup>2</sup> For the contrast between these two classical points of reference, I rely on Puett (2002, pp. 104-17) who also refutes previous scholars' taking these passages to mean that the emperor was a shaman. Rather, he was the unifying moral leader of humanity in its relation to Heaven. I agree that by this time rulers were not shamans. But that does not preclude the possibility that rulers in earlier periods honoured their ancestors because they were their shaman-spirits.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Zito (1997) for the concept of centring and the point that court ritual makes the invisible principles of order visible. However, I am extending it to the centring of places by focal buildings and the centring of dwellings by their ridge poles and their shrines, as well as the centring of bodies, as gathering points of vital energies.

<sup>4</sup> Associated with the first unifier of a Chinese empire, Qin Shi huangdi, and often referred to as Legalist.