

## Notes for The Rise of China – Whither the West?

- China: centralised power structure (CCP)
  - empire state: internal divisions
- The West: led by the US
  - includes Europe and Australasia;
  - plus Japan and South Korea?
- Is conflict inevitable? With the US or the West?
- Compare cultural strengths and weaknesses
- Argue West still holds important advantages
- Discuss Chinese intentions, and whether they can be accommodated
- Conclusions and prospects

In a 6-part TV series entitled *Civilization: Is the West History?* Niall Ferguson gave six reasons for the triumph of the West over the Rest.

Ferguson's six keys to Western dominance are: competition, science, property, modern medicine, consumerism and hard work. How do these stack up with respect to China?

Of the six, property and modern medicine, related specifically to Western dominance in South America and Africa rather than China, and can be set aside. Hard work hardly differentiates the West from China, while consumerism in the form of economic production and trade differed in degree only before the Industrial revolution.

So that leaves competition and science.

Competition : Western Christendom, even at the height of the Holy Roman Empire, was never politically unified. Contending kingdoms frequently at war. Kingdoms competed culturally as well as militarily.

By contrast, for the last 2000 years, China was most powerful when unified, so political unity has always been the ideal.

Most important is that those who fell foul of the authorities in one state could find refuge in another. This was not possible in China.

Science was far more significant, since the scientific worldview lies at the heart of Western modernity.

But there is much more to the West than science

Samuel Huntington is best known for his argument that the fundamental source of conflict in the future will not be primarily ideological or economic, but cultural, and that at the core of the cultural difference between civilisations lies religion. Personally I don't buy this argument, despite the current imbroglio in the Middle East. But that is another discussion. I do, however, agree that religion lies at the core of differences in worldview.

Huntington published another, less well-known paper in which he argued that the West is unique, not universal. The modernity of the West cannot, in other words, be transferred in just the form we know to other civilisations with quite different traditions and values. With this I agree, if only because every civilisation is unique, so each form of modernity will be different. The best example is Japan, widely now counted as part of the West, whose ultra-modern society is still deeply culturally Japanese.

Huntington lists the following distinguishing characteristics of the West:

- Classical legacy: Greek rationality and science, Roman law
- Language
- Christianity and its relation to temporal authority (separation of church and state)
- Individualism (rights and freedoms)
- Social pluralism and civil society (tolerance of difference, freedom of association)
- Rule of law and equality before the law
- Representative institutions of governance

Imperialist ambitions: propensity to proselytise

Classical legacy: From the Greeks we inherited rational inquiry into the natural world, civil society and the good life. From the Romans we inherited the concept of law as universal in application – crucial not only as a principle of governance, but also for the development of science.

To appreciate the significance of this, we should recall that rejection of universal laws of causation was what brought the great age of Islamic science to an end. Fundamentalist Muslims do not believe that causal relationships are expressions of universal laws, but rather depend on God's will. They can be altered at any time.

China's classical legacy derives from Confucianism; which is to say it focuses on the maintenance of a hierarchical social order through moral instruction. The concept of law in China applied to the system of punishments meted out to those who disturbed the social order, as decreed by the emperor. They were not

universal. The inventions for which China is famous – gunpowder, paper and printing, the compass, all eagerly borrowed by the West – were practical technologies, not the fruits of scientifically established causal relationships.

Language is central to cultural and political identity. There are important structural differences between Indo-European and Sinitic languages, which I won't go into. What we should note is that in divided Europe Latin served as the common language of intellectual communication, while in unified China this role was played by the written script. Only since 1949 has Mandarin been taught as the national language throughout China.

For modernity to take hold in any civilisation, intellectual space must be ceded by religion. This was relatively easy for Christianity because it had always recognised a separation between church and state (Render unto....). Justification for investigating laws of nature as revealing the glory of god. Considered blasphemous in Islam, where no separation exists between political and religious authority: the caliph combines both.

Some separation does exist in China, not within Confucianism, which considers the emperor to be the representative of Heaven, the embodiment of cosmic and social harmony; but between Confucianism as social and political philosophy and Taoism as mystical practice. The investigation of nature could be defended as revealing Tao.

Individualism in the West proclaims the rights and freedoms of the individual with respect to belief, occupation and lifestyle. This has two corollaries: one is tolerance of difference; the other is equality of opportunity to develop whatever talents and pursue whatever interests one happens to have. The liberalism and non-conformity of the West contrasts with the conformist collectivism of China. I shall return to the social significance of individualism later.

Social pluralism and civil society permitted the establishment of recognised corporate institutions endowed with a degree of independence from the centralised power of either church or state. These included professional guilds, from skilled artisans to lawyers and merchants, municipal bodies, universities, and even monasteries independent of ecclesiastical authority. This contrasts with the centralised bureaucracy of China, and the religious foundations (madrassas) of the Islamic world. Their significance lies in the degree of freedom of thought that they permitted.

Finally the governance of society in the West entails the rule of law applicable to all citizens equally, along with political representation of all social groups. While all Muslims must live in conformity with Sharia law, different rules

applied in China to the emperor, the mandarin, merchants and peasants – and de facto still do for members of the communist party. Neither in China nor in the Islamic world prior to abolition of the caliphate did political representation curb autocracy – though in China there was a tradition of speaking truth to power, so long as one was prepared to lose one's life doing so!

What I have given you is essentially a list of unique characteristics of Western society. But a list is not an explanation of close to three hundred years of Western dominance. For that we need to understand the process of sociocultural change. I would argue that this process is evolutionary, in the sense that it conforms to the precepts of Universal Darwinism. Let me explain.

Darwin explained the evolution of life on earth through natural selection. The process has three key elements: a source of variation, a means of selection of some variants in preference to others, and a means of replicating and transmitting selected variants. Populations of anything from computer viruses and algorithms to ideas and fashions and organisations will evolve so long as the mechanisms of variation, selection and inheritance apply. There are now flourishing disciplines of evolutionary anthropology and evolutionary economics, not to mention linguistics and epistemology.

The human lineage has evolved like any other in the animal world. In the course of evolving, human beings have developed two internal evolutionary systems. One is the immune system, which produces variant antibodies to selectively target invading antigens. The other is conscious cognition, which produces variant ideas about what to do and selects the behaviour that will best further individual interests in relation to a given set of circumstances.

Societies evolve when the behaviours of the individuals comprising them change in frequency in response to changing circumstances – in just the same way as species evolve when variant genes are selected in response to a changing environment. In the modern world, sociocultural change has become increasingly rapid, driven in large part by new technologies. We have only to think of how computers and the internet have changed our lives.

For the societies that comprise nation states to meet new challenges they must generate new ideas. So societies that promote innovation, allow rational selection, and permit communication will meet international challenges more effectively than societies that don't.

So what has all this to do with China and the West? It is my contention that future competition between them will depend on how well each promotes

variation, permits rational selection, and encourages communication of the most effective ideas and behaviours.

So let us compare China and the West along these lines. Like mutations, a brilliant new idea can occur in any mind. Or to put it another way, genius can arise from the most ordinary of backgrounds, from a rural town or a working-class suburb, within the family of a middle-manager or a peasant farmer. The goal of any society should therefore be to promote equality of opportunity through education. But not just any education. Much of what passes for education in China is little more than rote learning. Education should encourage whatever talents, imagination and creativity children have. In other words, it should recognize and promote their individuality. Education in the West tends to do this better than in China, because of the emphasis placed on individualism.

China has a venerable history of higher education, in Confucian academies designed to prepare candidates for imperial examinations for the mandarinates. In other words higher education formed part of the bureaucratic system of governance: academies were not independent institutions dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge as in the West. Since the 1990s China has poured money into tertiary education to create a world-class university system. China now has three universities in the top 100. Chinese researchers now publish almost double the number of peer-reviewed research articles in science and engineering as do their Japanese counterparts. A tension exists, however, between universities as state institutions furthering the goals and interests of the Communist Party and as independent research establishments disinterestedly pursuing knowledge. Chinese universities encourage conformity and suppress criticism – and not just of the Party. This does not encourage original thinking. Large numbers of Chinese students attend Western universities – around 10,000 in Australia.

China's economic performance has been spectacular, but we should remember that though the Chinese economy is now the largest in the world, GNP per capita is a fifth that of the US. Moreover the big companies at the cutting edge of new technologies – in electronics, software, engineering, design, and military applications – are overwhelmingly Western. The equipment in university laboratories in China is German and American. The new computer and internet technologies mostly derive from Western ideas commercialised by Western companies, American and Japanese, along with Samsung – a product of South Korean modernisation grounded in education and Western institutional models. Indeed there is now a good case to include South Korea within the West.

China has also greatly increased its military spending. Its armed forces are large and growing larger, but its equipment cannot match that of the American military. Recently China launched its first aircraft carrier, but its force

projection capacity still remains limited. By comparison remember that Japan was building aircraft carriers in the 1930s, and by 1942 was able to launch an attack against Pearl Harbour – a feat the Chinese are certainly not yet able to perform.

Advanced military technology always provided the basis for Western superiority and domination – and it still does. The US remains ahead of China in areas like drone warfare and surveillance, radar-evading aircraft, and missile technology. China is investing heavily in military innovation, but must labour under the same disadvantages that affect commercial innovation.

Selection of variation depends on the exercise of social power by individuals empowered by organisations and institutions capable of assessing both the nature of a challenge and the best response to it. Here too, it seems to me, the West holds an edge over China. A single-party state can make rapid decisions, but democratic processes allow a wider range of views to be heard. In China members of the ruling communist party are trained to accept party policies and party discipline – just as members of the mandarin state were. The party constitutes a political and administrative elite that is not answerable to the people they ruled, and whose own interests will not always coincide with those of the nation-state.