The Fourth Rise of China: Cultural Implications

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This article considers the rise of China with reference to questions concerning the cultural changes occurring in China today, notably issues pertaining to the challenge and threat that a strong and prosperous China might pose to the region. I shall therefore not only deal with culture as conventionally understood, that is, as a culture of values seen through the people’s religion, social cohesion, education and the creative arts, but also offer some thoughts on political culture and the culture of trade, industry and economic development.

Clearly the phrase “the rise of China” is the key and it is that which governs the significance or otherwise of China’s culture for its neighbours and beyond. If China were not rising, China’s cultural problems would only have been of interest to the Chinese themselves. When you consider historical examples in which the cultural developments of a country actually became significant, there was always the assumption that it was the countries’ wealth and power which had determined whether that culture had a notable impact on the cultures of others. If that culture was not accompanied by wealth and power, it is likely instead to have remained a set of local phenomena that might be intellectually or aesthetically interesting and, therefore, worthy of belonging to museums and appreciated beyond the country’s borders.

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It is on record that Chinese culture had made universalist claims as a civilisation in the past. I shall not discuss whether these claims were justified or not, or whether much of the culture was essentially a local expression of one people’s genius that had influenced other peoples in China’s neighbourhood. One could also ask if the culture of modernity that is predominant today (that is, the modernity that has been globalised by the West, in fact, largely originating from Western culture) is justified in making the universalist claims that it does. This culture of modernity has been successfully proactive in the region for more than a hundred years, and it is now one that most countries, including China, have accepted as the major guiding culture of the future. Is this modern culture universal? If so, then once that culture is widely accepted, all the countries that embrace it could eventually be expected to share in the same cultural values. If given that scenario, what would be the significance of China espousing that culture? We should allow for the possibility that a China that has truly risen would so transform that culture of modernity in its own way that a new manifestation might emerge. If that were to happen, what would be the implications, not only for the region, but also for what we now describe as modern culture?

With these questions in mind, what does “the rise of China” this time round really mean as compared with the many times in the past that China may be said to have risen? For example, I can refer to three main eras when China rose to become the most powerful and prosperous country in the region. These were, first, the Qin-Han unification of the first bureaucratic empire that lasted from 3rd century BC to AD 3rd century; second, the Sui-Tang reunification that followed a series of tribal invasions and the ascendancy of Buddhism within China; and third, the last and most powerful rise before modern times of the Ming and Qing dynasties when the Confucian tradition was reconstructed and reinforced as a new orthodoxy. From that longer perspective, the present rise of China after 100 years of decline since the late 19th century, and 40 years of division between 1911 and 1949, may be quite different from the previous three. It may be argued that China’s reunification will not be complete until Taiwan returns to the fold, and that the current division is an active component of the rise of China today. It is certainly necessary to consider whether the past has left indelible marks on the leaders today and what this might mean for China’s future position in the region. This rise of China needs to be seen in a longer perspective. We need also to note what were the experiences of China’s neighbours during the previous times when China was wealthy and prosperous.
We know that the Qin-Han centuries left a strong impression on the cultures of the various Yue peoples in what is now southern China. It has also been argued that the influence of that culture was so extensive that the commonly adopted name of China had come from the name of Qin because of its success in unifying such a large empire. Also, the people who created the core of that culture have borne the name of the Han dynasty for two thousand years. These are examples of the impact of the Qin-Han empires’ political culture. Of course, the cultural implications of Chinese power can be distinguished between the direct and the diffuse. The direct impact was felt in the agricultural lands among its immediate neighbours, notably Korea and Vietnam, countries that absorbed major elements of Chinese culture for a long period of time. While the impact was long-lasting, it was confined mainly to the elites of those two countries. The diffuse implications, however, were more extensive and included the impact of China's export goods and technology, the best-known of which were silks, paper and printing, ceramic ware and features of military and maritime technology. In both these examples, it was China's economic culture that made an impression on all of China’s neighbours.1

Where the culture of values was concerned, Qin-Han China seemed to have been far less successful. Indigenous religions and their rituals and practices did not spread much beyond its borders. The educational ideals offered were elitist if not esoteric even for the Chinese populace itself. The written language was unique and complex and, from the start, hard for anyone to master. The ubiquitous family system was so intensely linked with an almost sacred place for male ancestors that many neighbouring societies that did not share this particular emphasis on lineage simply rejected the culture that stressed its importance. As for the creative arts during this first period of prominence, except for the techniques and designs associated with trade in manufactured goods and thus associated with economic culture, not much seems to have been appreciated outside China’s borders.

By the time of the second rise of China, the powerful culture of the Tang empire had consolidated all over southern China and then spread overland towards the “Western Region” and to what was later known as Manchuria and Mongolia. In addition, key elements of that culture crossed the sea to Japan, and the memory

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of that cultural contact still resonates in Japan today. However, with the exception of Japan and the parts of Manchuria closest to the Tang border, much of that culture did not take root and most of the western and northern areas of penetration shook it off when the Tang dynasty fell. Nevertheless, Tang political culture was quite different from that of Qin–Han. It was the product of a mixture of Buddhist spiritual and tribal military conquest, some popular and localised religious responses, and an elitist Confucian restoration. Within China, it was indeed a powerful amalgam which shaped the cosmopolitan culture that is often identified with the Tang capital of Changan. But its appeal as political culture outside China was limited. More important was the culture of trade, industry and development based on that openness for which the Tang Empire has always been associated. As a result of that, foreign merchants and travellers came from afar and did much to enrich the lives and tastes of all Chinese. The new cultural ingredients that were brought to China during the period of division between the 4th and 6th centuries had strengthened Chinese culture and led to one of the truly efflorescent periods of Chinese history.2

The impact on the region of the culture of values that emerged is harder to determine. The advance of Buddhism to Korea and Japan may be included because certain key features of Mahayana Buddhism had undergone sinicisation before transmission. In Vietnam, as in parts of Southwest China like the Nan Zhao kingdom in Yunnan, the Buddhism that took root was influenced by other sources as well. In any case, apart from religion, the impact of the Tang Chinese classical and literary education and creative arts (including music and dance, painting and calligraphy, architecture and the plastic arts) was greatest among the aristocracy and official classes. This was even truer of the Confucianism that had been

diminished for over 200 years and restored to importance in the 7th century. Whatever influence this had was packaged with the more popular features of Buddhism and Taoism before being exported. Indeed, despite its overwhelming wealth and power, Tang China probably imported as many cultural artefacts from great distances as it exported to its immediate region. It would seem that at the time, what might have been seen as universal were in fact China's Buddhist manifestations which had already begun to permeate many parts of Chinese philosophy and the creative arts. The rise of China did have cultural implications in what it exported. Equally important, however, was that what it imported in turn enhanced its own cultural richness.

In comparison with the Qin-Han and the Sui-Tang images of power and wealth, the third rise of the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the peak of development occurring between the 15th and 18th centuries, was less spectacular but no less powerful. China's cultural impact during this period was of a different quality. By this time, after having its brilliant culture of the Song dynasty virtually demolished by the Mongol invasion and subjugation (the Mongol Yuan dynasty lasted over 90 years), Chinese political culture had become far more conservative and inward-looking. The Ming founders concentrated on the physical defence of its borders and on restoring the great institutions of the Han and the Tang. Indeed, apart from the networks of officially approved trade and the aberrant maritime expeditions of Zheng He to the Indian Ocean, the Chinese were not much interested in projecting their culture. Chinese scholars themselves recognise that the closed-door policy of the Ming itself had become a source of weakness. When this policy towards its maritime frontiers was largely retained by the Manchu conquerors after 1644, and Chinese culture became increasingly protective, it is no wonder that there was little capacity to resist the incoming new cultures brought to the region by enterprising and aggressive Europeans. The Manchus and their northern frontier allies, the Mongols, did expand overland into Central Asia when they thought it necessary for their own security. But what was significant was their retention of much of the political culture of the

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Ming Chinese. By then, this had become highly integrated and complex, and somewhat daunting to people not familiar with its main features. In short, it was not a culture that the Manchu Qing could or wanted to export much beyond the neighbourhood, notably the yet to be sinicised parts of southwestern China (Yunnan and Guizhou, in particular). Nor did it wish to export it to the neighbouring states of Korea and Vietnam, and even there and in Japan it was largely a question of what the rulers and elites of these countries were prepared to accept.4

Underlying this was the relatively closed and tightly controlled trading relations with foreign states reinforced by an official ban on private Chinese trade abroad that inhibited the growth of a more extensive entrepreneurial culture. It may nevertheless be argued that, despite such discouragement, Chinese economic or trading culture did greatly affect the development of the port cities and kingdoms of Southeast Asia. But, since this coincided with the advent of far bolder merchants from Europe who were backed by their ruling classes, the cultural implications were relatively subdued and indirect.

Between a defensive political culture and a constrained economic culture, it would have been surprising if the culture of values could have been more prominent. There were exceptions, however, mostly to do with the Chinese sojourners who did manage to leave China and make their homes in the region. At one level, there were the members of the literati who escaped to Japan, Korea and Vietnam at the fall of the Ming dynasty in the 17th century. At another level, there were the anti-Manchu Chinese and their supporters who did the same after several failed rebellions during the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, there were pockets of exported Chinese values that survived throughout the region wherever small communities were able to form. Some of these migrants replicated cultural institutions as manifested in art and architecture; temples, shrines and

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cemeteries; drama and classic stories; even some educational centres where families had settled down. Apart from Japan, Korea and Vietnam, however, there are few signs to show that their culture of values reached out to the peoples among whom these Chinese settled.

This fact, and other indications that China’s culture during this period of the rise of China did not travel far, alert us to two complementary interpretations that may appear contradictory. The first says that this third time that China rose under the Ming and Qing cannot be compared with the first two so far as their regional impact was concerned. This was because the world, and also the region, had not remained unchanged. There had been considerable developments, including those arising from imported ideas and institutions from outside the region, and not least because of earlier Chinese influences. Also, simultaneously, there was the presence of peoples from the West who were more technologically advanced and who had their own dynamic cultural values to offer against the relatively stagnant if not decadent Chinese values that severely limited Chinese influence. The second would question the link between cultural implications and China’s rise. The fact that China has risen may not necessarily have cultural implications. Much depends on the total environment in which China may be said to have risen. For example, the rise of China relative to what, and what kinds of rise would be meaningful? We need to look closely at the guiding ideas and institutions that lie behind the rise.

This brings me to the rise of China today. Bearing the two interpretations in mind, we may legitimately wonder if the current rise of China is not a lesser phenomenon than many people suppose. We may also question if China’s rise would necessarily have cultural implications of great significance.

We could assume that China’s rise to regional power for the fourth time will have cultural implications for the region. The significance of these implications could be determined either by making comparisons with the three earlier times, or by using new sets of criteria to meet the dramatic changes in the world that have occurred since the 19th century. We could compare the present with the

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first flush of power of the Qin-Han, or the second burst of revivalist strength during the Tang, or the third complacent and defensive phase. Which is the most relevant?

It would be quite easy to argue that the revolutionary force of modern China may be compared with the explosive power of the Qin-Han unification. To a similar degree, that force totally transformed the polities that existed before and established new kinds of relationships with China's neighbours. It is also possible to show that China today is more like the Sui-Tang recovery. It is an example of a country whose power has been renewed after fighting off invaders, absorbing new foreign ideas and opening the country to external trade and new technology. And there is the view that focuses on the borders of the Qing Empire as the foundations of a new modern nation-state. These borders are new and encompass dozens of recognised minority nationalities, and the impact of such an idea of nation is still to be fully felt. Here is a credible appeal for continuity with the Ming-Qing heritage that is central to the new force of Chinese nationalism.

But what is most striking is that all three of the earlier eras may have contributed to the shape and direction of China's rise today. Mao Zedong as Qin Shihuang the great unifier, and the PRC as a redefined Han empire, recalls the first rise. A China opened to an outside world of new ideas and technology and new markets reminds us of the second, a cosmopolitan Tang China. And the challenge of ethnicity and nation moulding after being introduced to new concepts of sovereign borders tie the present to the third, the immediate past of the Manchu Qing. These analogous features of the past three eras do not make the task of examining future cultural implications any easier, but they are important in helping us recognise the many unpredictable elements in China’s long history. We need to place all these elements in a global 21st century perspective.

The world has clearly changed beyond recognition after European colonialism and imperialism. The dominance of the region by the West for 200 years and the present superiority of American wealth and power provide a totally different backdrop for this fourth time in history that China is rising. It is tempting to say that China’s past is not relevant as long as the new power equations remain. But there are some given factors that will not go away. For example, the size of China in the region and the political weight that this carries cannot be wished away. Also, the memory of its historical power both within China and among its neighbours, albeit dormant for the time being, is not far from the surface of regional consciousness. If proof is needed, the number of recent studies
reflects the theme’s potential to engender concern and uncertainty. Not least, the implications of the cultural vestiges transmitted to some neighbours via language and value systems need also to be taken into account. In addition, how do the Chinese feel about the cultural challenges ahead? What resources do they have to deal with the culture of modernity and what do they expect to contribute to that culture? Trying to answer both these questions may be the most useful way to tackle understanding the cultural implications of the rise of China this time round.

I shall say a few words about political and economic culture, then devote the remainder of this discussion to the culture of values. On political culture, it is so obviously important that I shall simply assert the following. China’s decision in the early 20th century to jettison the Confucian state in favour of a revolutionary creed was a major shift in political culture. This new creed derives from the historical experiences of Western Europe that vainly projected a Utopian ideal, a liberation from the cycles of endless tension, from the Darwinian culture of war that nation-states needed in order to survive. It has left a legacy of aggressive nationhood that China as a new nation-state has to learn to cope with. The failure of revolutionary socialism has now opened China to the rival secular and materialist faith in capitalism. Under the conditions that China faces today, any attempt to return to a traditional political culture is likely to fail. The continuing struggle to forge a new cultural amalgam without accepting the full force of liberal ideology that accompanies capitalism will engage China’s leaders for a long time to come. The implications for the region are that China needs to be left alone to digest and internalise these changes, but would be keenly sensitive to any kind of threat to itself during a difficult period of re-adjusting to the new stage of global politics. Given its size, China only needs to be internally stable and united for it not to fear its immediate neighbours. But it knows enough history to fear that a power further away, like the United States, could invoke a “China threat” scenario to instigate a hostile alliance in the region against China. It seems to me that, under the circumstances, it would be sheer stupidity for China to provide any power with that excuse to disrupt China’s own developmental and survival agenda.

6 The essays in Herbert Yee and Ian Storey, eds., The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality (London: Routledge, 2002) survey the literature on this topic comprehensively.

A new economic culture is needed to help China survive the challenge of a globalised market economy. Here the commitment to development is absolute and the cultural implications of an increasingly competitive environment for the Chinese people are grim. But China has passed the point of no return on two vital points: it has to meet the expectations of its 1.3 billion people and must generate adequate resources to prevent the country from ever being successfully invaded again. Thus the task of maintaining the rapid economic growth it has so far achieved, and organising an equitable distribution of the new wealth created (a sharp test of social justice?) into some kind of balance, will be so demanding that it is likely that China will have to stay on this treadmill at all costs. It seems misleading to me, therefore, to talk of China catching up and threatening other great powers. What is at stake are the following: the survival of the Communist Party in the face of massive discontent, the stability of existing social institutions, and ultimately the fate of a China trying to stay united within its present borders. The implications of this economic culture are that it needs peace and goodwill, particularly within the region. This need is not just for now, but for the long haul, for the unenviable task of attaining a relatively fair and equitable xiaokang (little prosperity) society for its enormous workforce.8

What about China’s culture of values? Does it provide a counterweight to the apparent leaning towards modern political and economic culture, or does it inevitably follow where politics and economics lead? Like Japan, India and the Islamic world, China has a deep-rooted ancient culture of values and, in its own way has tried to resist having this culture replaced altogether by values from the West. It recognises there is much in the new values that are appealing because they are modern and progressive. The Chinese people, inheriting a humanist and rational tradition, are prone to opt for the secular alternatives to their outworn ideas and institutions. In the act of rejecting Confucianism and all manifestations of religion, the generation of revolutionary leaders have made it easier for all Chinese to embrace the scientific and philosophical premises of the Enlightenment Project.9

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8 A fine example of current thinking on this subject may be found in the document, Decision on Issues Regarding the Improvement of the Socialist Market Economic System, adopted by the Third Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee, Oct. 2003. See Beijing Review 47, no. 2 (8 Jan. 2004).

The result of this acceptance of totally new assumptions for the building of the new state and society has been profound. It has rendered it far more difficult for the next generation of Chinese to contemplate any return to an earlier set of cultural values. This is not to deny that traditional values have survived well in the countryside among the millions of rural families and lineages. But the rate at which urban and industrial society is growing and the necessity for rural workers to seek their livelihood in that society is posing a great challenge to the values these workers are either happy to abandon or are forced to leave behind.

The last 100 years have been a most trying time for the majority of Chinese wanting to keep faith with their culture of values. The transition has been long and bitter. The battle for a convergence between the old values that people are comfortable with and the new values that promise to free them from drudgery and poverty is likely to go on indefinitely. For the moment, if we observe what is going on among the young in the major towns and cities of China, it might appear that the result is a foregone one. The culture of modern values, whether coming directly from the West or indirectly from Japan, Korea, or Chinese communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, are winning hands down. Only a handful of the older urban elites and their counterparts in the countryside care enough to try to recover respect for older values. It seems clear to me that they are in no position to reverse the tide, certainly not by the old methods of moral exhortation and upbraiding.\(^\text{10}\)

Does this mean the end of the inherited culture of values for China? I am not sure, but I do not believe that developments in history follow logic and straight lines. The roots of that heritage are deep and manifest themselves in many different ways. The gains and losses registered so far have been in political and economic culture but the impact of that transformation can be both a threat to, and an inspiration for, the culture of values. Precisely because cultural values are diffusely found at all levels of society and can permeate people’s consciousness deeply, and because they are notoriously slow to change in every society, what happens to them is unpredictable. In aesthetics and philosophy, through literature, drama, film, music and dance and the fine arts, in every classroom and lecture hall, and

\(^{10}\) The newspapers, weekly and monthly magazines published in the cities of China today that reflect these trends are astonishingly wide-ranging, especially the reading and entertainment pages and the variety of advertisements. For attempts to chart these developments, see several essays collected in Orville Schell and David Shambaugh, eds., *The China Reader: The Reform Era* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).
through every kind of design and fashion, creative convergences occur readily and can give fresh life to older values. Even the challenge of new religions, whether indigenous or foreign in origin, can produce unexpected consequences. As more and more Chinese seek spiritual expression in their lives, they have the collective power to transmute inherited values into new manifestations that could serve new and yet unforeseen needs.11

As China's recent rise exposes its people to such radical changes in the culture of values, what are the implications for the region? The mental and emotional turmoil that Chinese people experienced during the 20th century is still little known today among China's neighbours. And, as long as the Chinese themselves are engaged in the travails of reinventing themselves, their culture of values is unlikely to be exemplary for others. Most of China's recent experiences seem to have been particular rather than common to the region, and the task of identifying some of its universal features to warn others who are striving for similar changes has yet begun. There are, of course, lessons in China for others to learn from if they choose to. But, as far as I can tell, the more immediate lessons are those pertaining to its political and economic culture rather than its culture of values. Until such time when the Chinese can demonstrate how they have retrieved and revived key parts of that culture of values through their innovative use of the modern culture that they have full-heartedly accepted, the cultural implications of China's rise are likely to be peripheral and unconvincing. But the region will do well to study the history of China's multiple struggles. However painful and devastating these have been, they have jolted most Chinese to a fresh energy and dynamism that China has not seen since the first unification of China over 2,000 years ago.

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