

## In the Context of Covid-19, Differences between China and “the West”: Culturally, Politically and Ideologically

MWS                      Modern Western Science

### Introduction

It is commonplace to remind readers in “the West”<sup>1</sup> that Chinese civilisation is the longest surviving, still extant civilisation in the world. Other civilisations had come and gone, such as, to name the following few: the Maya Empire, the ancient Greek Empire, the ancient Egyptian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Achaemenid Persian Empire, the Roman Empire, the Mongol Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire.

Let’s construct a “potted” account of their histories via some key dates in their respective timelines.

### China

According to some timelines for China in Western publications, Chinese civilisation began with the Shang dynasty (1600-1050 BCE) – see History 22 March 2019.

According to Chinese historiography, however, the timeline, begins with the Neolithic Period ca 8000-2000 BCE for which today rich archaeological finds exist to establish that there were several different Neolithic cultures which, amongst others, include Yangshao, Hemudu, Dawenkou, Majiayao, Longshan, Liangzhu.

The Neolithic Period was succeeded by the Xia Dynasty. Again, Western scholarship questions its existence but Chinese scholarship, since the 1960s has established that this dynasty is not a figment of the imagination of the ancient Chinese who in their texts had mentioned that such a dynasty existed – for instance in *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of Documents*, not to mention in *The Shiji/Historical Records* by Sima Qian in the early Han dynasty. In 1959, a complex of 20 sites was discovered by an archaeologist and his team in a village called Erlitou in Henan province which has been confirmed after careful study to be the capital city of the Xia dynasty. Carbon dating of the artefacts recovered, including the spectacular bronze dragon laid out in one of the sites yielded results in accordance with the timeline which traditional texts mentioned above have assigned to the Xia dynasty. Furthermore, the site of Erlitou also accords with the traditional assignment of its location. The artefacts uncovered include bronze but also some jade objects.<sup>2</sup>

The Shang dynasty (16<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> BCE) followed the Xia but Western scholars in the past also doubted its existence until its script (The Oracle Bone Script/Jiaguwen) was finally discovered at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and identified as the script of the (late) Shang dynasty. Not only that, the Shang bronzes in great quantities were also discovered in 1899 in Anyang, Henan province.<sup>3</sup>

After the Shang dynasty, the Chinese timeline is not subject to suspicion and doubt in the way that the earlier periods fell prey to Western scepticism.<sup>4</sup>

A succession of dynasties follows:

Zhou (11<sup>th</sup> – 221 BCE)

Qin-Han (221 BCE – 220 CE)

The short-lived Qin dynasty (221-207 BCE) under its powerful first emperor, Qinshihuangdi, who defeated the other rival states to unify the country politically and legally, economically (through standardising weights and measurements at different levels of activities), linguistically (and therefore also culturally) by endorsing as official script one out of a number of competitors.

The Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) consolidated the project of Qinshihuangdi except in one respect – the Han constructed a new ideology for the dynasty using in the main Confucian values. This ideological underpinning has sustained Chinese culture and civilisation for two millennia and continues to do so even today in spite of the upheavals of the last century. It is also this ideological orientation which the East Asian Pacific countries have borrowed and which continues to remain active and alive in moments like the present pandemic.

Three Kingdoms-Jin-Northern and Southern dynasties (220-589)

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<sup>1</sup> This term is within quotes as it is intended to refer to countries whose cultures have not historically (pre-Modernity) been exposed to and impacted by Chinese culture; therefore, it rules out East Asian Pacific countries such as Korea and Japan.

<sup>2</sup> Other sites recently discovered which are identified as possible sites of the Xia dynasty are: Taosi, southern Shanxi province (2600-2000 BCE), Wangchenggang in Dengfeng province (2200-1835 BCE), Xinzhai in Henan province (2200-1900 BCE). See Gill 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Should you wish to look at the images of some of them, click on this site: <https://www.bing.com/images/search?q=shang+bronzes+at+anyang&qpv=Shang+bronzes+at+Anyang&form=IQFRML&first=1&tsc=ImageBasicHover>.

<sup>4</sup> Click on this website for an account in Chinese, dated 22 February 2021: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1692390706173755931&wfr=spider&for=pc>. Retrieved 30/09/2021.

Sui-Tang dynasties (581-907)

Five Dynasties (907-960)

Song (960-1279)

Yuan (1279-1368)

The Mongols, a nomadic tribe from Mongolia, conquered the Han people and established the Yuan dynasty

Ming (1368-1644)

Qing (1644-1911)

The Manchus, a non-Han tribe from the north, conquered the Han people and established the Qing dynasty.

Republic of China (1911-1949)

People's Republic of China (1949 -)

(See the sources already mentioned.)

Lasted roughly 10,000 years

### Maya Empire

Archaic Period (7000-2000 BCE)

Olmec Period (1500-200 BCE)

Zapotec Period (600 BCE-800 CE)

Teotihuacan Period (200-900 CE)

El Tajin Period (250-900 CE)

Classic Maya Period (250-950 CE)

Post-Classic Period (950-1524 CE)

(See Maya Civilization 6 July 2021)

Lasted roughly 7500 years

### Ancient Greek Civilisation/Empire

Neolithic Period (7000-3000 BCE)

Early Bronze Age (3000-2000 BCE)

Middle Bronze Age (2000-1550 BCE)

Late Bronze Period (1600-1100 BCE)

Dark Age of Greece (1100-700 BCE)

Archaic Period (700-480 BCE)

Classical Period (480-323 BCE)

Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE)

Ruled over one of the largest empires in the ancient world

Hellenistic Period (323-146 BCE)

End of "Ancient Greece" Period (30 BCE)

(See Greece Timeline 2021.)

Lasted roughly 7000 years

### Ancient Egyptian Empire

Its unification c 3100 BCE

Its conquest by Alexander the Great in 323 BCE.

It has been dated earlier to 5000 BCE; however, some historians are not keen on the grounds that the Predynastic Period (5000 – 3100 BCE) lacked written documents or even artefacts

Best then to discount this dating

(See History 2021).

Lasted roughly 2625 years

### Babylonian Empire

Hammurabi (c.1810 -c 1750 BCE), reigning from 1792 BCE until his death

Was the sixth and most famous ruler

Unified Mesopotamia under Babylonian rule based on military might

Drew up the first law code in human history

Built his capital city, Babylon

Mathematics and astronomy flourished

Empire fell apart after the death of Hammurabi.

The Babylonians were finally defeated by the Kassites in 1595 BCE, a people not of Mesopotamia but from the Zagros mountains in today's north-western Iran. This dynasty, though non-Mesopotamian in origin ruled Babylon for almost 450 years, the longest -ruling dynasty in the history of ancient Mesopotamia

(See Babylonian Empire 21 March 2020.)

Lasted roughly 200 years dating from the reign of Hammurabi to the Kassite dynasty. If this dynasty is deemed in the light of evidence to have gone more or less native, then the total would add up roughly to 650 years.

#### Achaemenid Persian Empire

Lasted from c 550 BCE to 330 BCE

Founded by Cyrus the Great (c 600-c530 BCE)

Reached its greatest extent under Xerxes I (c518-465 BCE) covering central ancient Greece including the city of Athens in 480 BCE, extending from the Balkans and Eastern Europe in the west to the Indus Valley in the east.

Empire defeated by Alexander the Great c 330 BCE

(See *World History Encyclopedia* 11 May 2011.)

Lasted roughly 200 years.

#### Roman Empire

Founding of Rome in 753 BCE

Beginning of the Roman Empire in 27 BCE

Fall of empire in 476 CE

(See Roman Empire Timeline 2021.)

Lasted roughly 450 years

#### Mongol Empire

Reign of Genghis Khan (1206-1227)

Sacking of Beijing (1215)

Establishment of the Mongol Chagatai Khanate in Central Asia (c 1227-1363)

Invasion of northern Iraq and Western Asia (1235)

Karakorum in Mongolia declared capital of the Mongol Empire (1235-1263)

Defeat of Hungary led by its king (1241)

Hulegu Khan led army to invade Persia and the Middle East (1253 -1260)

Vietnam invaded (three times, in 1257, 1281, 1286)

Kublai Khan captured Karakorum from rival (1262) and made Xanadu, the capital of the Mongol Empire (1263-1273)

The Yuan dynasty established to rule China (1271 -1368)

Kublai Khan died in 1294

Last Yuan dynasty emperor died at Karakorum and in ruins (1370)

Xanadu definitively long abandoned (1430)

The Empire, at its peak, extended across Eurasia and was the second largest kingdom in human history

(See Mongol Empire Timeline 2021; *National Geographic* 2019.)

Lasted from 1206 to 1368 roughly 160 years

#### Ottoman Empire

Reign of Osman I (c 1300-1324?/1326?)

Bursa becoming capital of the Ottoman Empire (1326)

Murad I defeated European army led by the Serbians at the Battle of Kosovo (1389)

Battle of Nicopolis/the Nicopolis Crusade, defeating a Western Christian army (1396)

Mehmed II sacked Constantinople (1453)

Reign of Selim I when the Ottoman Empire doubled itself (1512-1520)

Reign of Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566)

He continued the military campaigns, fought brilliantly given his talents in this domain, enlarging the empire even more.

History has come to admire even more his achievements in law, literature, art and architecture as well as appointing men of talents to be his viziers (top officials/administrators). Should you visit Istanbul, you can admire the famous mosque named after him, designed by the great State architect, Mimar Sinan (1489-1588).

Battle of Lepanto when the Ottoman navy was defeated by the Holy League (1571)

Abdul Hamid II deposed by the Young Turks party (1909)

Defeat of the Ottoman Empire in WWI (1918).

(See Ottoman Empire Timeline 2021.)

Lasted roughly 500 years

#### British Empire

Began (at least according to one source): 1583 when Newfoundland was claimed on behalf of Elizabeth I of England

Ended and had fizzled out by 1997

At its height, it ruled over a quarter of the world's population, spread out geographically over a quarter of the globe. Historically, at various different moments, it covered the continents of North America, Africa, Australia, the sub-continent of India, parts of Asia. It was said that the sun never set in the British Empire. As for its end, some date it in general to the end of WWII and, in particular, to India getting independence in 1947, or with the last post being sounded in 1997 when Hong Kong was returned to China. However, remnants of the empire still exist today, 14 in total – these consist, in the main, of islands and outcrops, dotted in the Mediterranean, the South Atlantic, the Caribbean Sea, South Pacific, not to mention a chunk of Antarctica – see *Yahoo News* 20 April 2016. (See *British Empire 2012*.)<sup>5</sup>

Lasted roughly 400 years

What can and does a close study of these timelines tell us? It suggests and appears to support the following theses:

1. At least on the surface, the Chinese narrative is indeed the longest and still extant. The Maya and the ancient Greek civilisations are next longest in duration but they are no longer extant.

2. However, one needs urgently to address the problem posed to the Chinese narrative of cultural continuity given that two foreign dynasties, the Yuan and the Qing were established on Chinese soil. Generally speaking, successful foreign conquests usually mean not only the physical occupation of the land, the exploitation of its resources and its people but also the subjugation if not the total elimination of the culture/civilisation of the conquered. Indeed, both the Mongol and the Manchu conquerors initially severely persecuted those whom they perceived to constitute the most obvious threat to their rule, namely, the scholar-official class which had not merely provided the bureaucracy for the Chinese state but also was the intelligentsia which upheld Chinese political/social/cultural values.

3. Chinese writing as a mature system had existed by the Shang dynasty and so China had been a literate society (amongst its elites) for at least 3500 years. Its foundational texts could be roughly and broadly categorised as belonging to the *Daoist* philosophy tradition/*Daojia* on the one hand and the *Confucian/Rujia* tradition on the other. Under the former *Daojia* category, one includes *The Yijing/I Ching*, *The Laozi/The Daodejing*, *The Zhuangzi*, *The Hanfeizi* which can be dated at least to the Warring States period (475-221 BCE), if not earlier. The Confucian canonical texts include *The Analects/Lunyu*, *The Mengzi*, *The Great Learning/Daxue*, *The Doctrine of the Mean/Zhongyong*, not to mention even *The Yijing* which was a favourite reading of Confucius and which he rated to be China's most important text – if this claim is reliable, then obviously *The Yijing* as a mature text must have existed before the Warring States period, given that Confucius (551- 479 BCE) lived during the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BCE).<sup>6</sup>

4. In other words, not only was the territory which the Mongols and the Manchus conquered large, it was also the case that they had conquered a people with a highly developed culture and civilisation, with a powerful literate set of elites. They conquered on horseback, using their superior military might, but they soon found they could not rule from horseback. They had no choice but to rely on the scholar-official class. Not only was Genghis illiterate, the Mongols had no written script until they adapted the Old Uyghur alphabet to suit the Mongolian language in 1204 when Genghis realised that he needed a written script to run the large empire he had created. Typically, Genghis used to dictate his message to the messenger entrusted to deliver it to its recipient by singing it out to him until the messenger got it word perfect. When Genghis's descendants established the Yuan dynasty in China, they realised presumably that using the newly minted Mongolian script would not solve administrative problems.

5. The Manchus confronted more or less the same problems when they conquered China. However, one of their far-sighted leaders, Nurhaci (1559-1626) had already, one could say, anticipated what could be waiting them should they be without a written script as they extended their military might at the expense of China. So, the Manchus adapted the Mongolian alphabet to suit their own language in 1599. By the time, they established the

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<sup>5</sup> There is view which even says that as the British Empire never existed officially, there could be neither official dates for its beginning nor its ending. Well, to the people whom England (and later the UK) colonised and ruled, the empire was real enough. In any case, as a general explanatory hypothesis, it constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum*, as very few phenomena in world history could be affixed with an official beginning and an official ending. Regnal dates in countries and cultures with well-established bureaucracies and a sense of historiography do obtain, but events in general are fluid and dynamic in character and so are essentially beyond the possibility of being caught by the procedure of official dating.

<sup>6</sup> See Lee 2021.

Qing dynasty (1644) in China, they already had a written script; all the same, they had to rely on Chinese as an administrative language. So, they had two official languages, Manchu (which was called the “national language”) and Chinese/Han language – all official communication was recorded bilingually.

6. The Manchu rulers also appeared to have learnt a lesson from the Yuan dynasty which did not last long. To ensure that their dynasty would not be a short-lived one (it lasted 268 years as opposed to the Yuan dynasty which lasted 89 years), they adopted numerous Han<sup>7</sup> practices not because they embraced Sinicization but because they saw it as a political tool to legitimate their rule in the eyes of the conquered Han people. For instance, they continued with the Ming dynasty administrative bureaucracy but at the same time they made sure that all offices were held jointly by a Manchu and a Han but with the Manchu official being superior, having the final say. Other measures adopted to make sure that they would not be overwhelmed or lose their identity was the ban on Han people to settle in the Manchu homeland, in the north. To maintain separation of the smaller set of the conquerors from being swamped by the large population of the conquered, not only was intermarriage forbidden but the Manchus were also not allowed to become traders or manual labourers.

7. At the same time, the Manchu rulers realised that to be viable they had to retain many Han Confucian institutions (the Manchus held shamanic beliefs), such as Court practices and temple rituals presided over by the emperors.<sup>8</sup> Although the Hans were barred from military positions as well as the highest offices in the civil service, nevertheless, the civil service system itself was maintained. Furthermore, they also felt it politic to undertake large scale literary and historical projects which ultimately served to ensure the survival of ancient texts. For instance, Kangxi (reigned from 1662-1723) ordered a compilation of a new dictionary in 1710 to improve on earlier dictionaries which was published in 1716 and called *The Kangxi Dictionary/Kangxi Zidian*. Earlier in 1705, he had ordered a compilation of Tang poetry called *Quan Tang shi*. His grandson, Qianlong (reigned from 1711-1799) emulated him by ordering in 1772 a compilation of the most important texts pertaining to the four traditional domains of Chinese knowledge, namely, classical, historical, philosophical works and *belles lettres*, called *The Sikuquanshu*.<sup>9</sup> The editors and their team of scholars had to cull from the contents of entire libraries both imperial and private. The enterprise took ten years to complete. Upon completion, seven series of the 36,275 volumes all copied by brush were lodged at the principal imperial palaces in Beijing, in Yuanmingyuan (outside Beijing, famously ransacked, looted, burnt and finally destroyed by Eight-Nation Alliance in 1900), to Jehol/Rehe/today called Chengde and Mukden (now Shenyang).

8. However, almost simultaneously, Qianlong also ordered in 1774 the identification and destruction throughout the country of what in the eyes of the Manchu ruler were seditious books, that is, any publication containing any anti-Manchu sentiments. An index was drawn up. It is said that about 2,600 titles on it were destroyed. Even *The Sikuquanshu* was not reprieved when Qianlong discovered that it contained some passages which he considered to be seditious – to be fair, he did not order its destruction, only that the poor compilers had to pay for the corrections. This compilation in one sense could be seen as Qianlong’s literary inquisition, to eradicate any sign of resistance on the part of the literati against the idea of Manchu domination.

9. By way of summing up the strategies of the early Qing emperors, one could say that they were conducted within a *yinyang* orientation. They flattered the Hans; giving the impression of how much Han culture was admired by themselves constituted the *yin* approach. At the same time, they were pretty ruthless in enforcing a *yang* approach to show who was the boss. This *yinyang* complementarity in fact was implicit in every strategy they used. For example, at a more-lowly rather than the high-minded strategy of compiling a dictionary or a whole corpus of texts, take the endorsement of the Han practice of widow chastity. Again, it appeared it was done less to become assimilated into the Han culture and more as a way of showing to their conquered subjects that they, the Manchus were not vulgar barbarians but could be just as benign and refined as the Hans.<sup>10</sup>

10. In the same spirit, they made sure that their princes (that is, would-be rulers) were given a thorough education, no different from that of Ming and other princes down the long line of Chinese history. They hired the best tutors available from the scholar-official class to teach their heirs. So, this layer of Manchu society was all highly proficient and immersed in Han culture and in that sense could be said to have sinicised or domesticated themselves in order to retain hegemonic control of the country they had conquered. They did calligraphy, wrote poetry in the Chinese/Han language (at least the Qianlong emperor did), revived the tradition of commissioning

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<sup>7</sup> The Han people were the people who lived in Zhongyuan/Central Plains irrigated by the Yellow River; there they developed a culture which today we call Chinese culture and also Han culture. The Han people in modern China remains the most numerous in the country’s demography.

<sup>8</sup> See Pélissier 2021.

<sup>9</sup> See Kent 1987.

<sup>10</sup> See Knight 2015.

porcelain artefacts from the official kiln at Jingdezhen which had become increasingly decrepit during the last years of the Ming dynasty. The emperor Yongzheng had steeped himself in the Han tradition of aesthetics in porcelain and commissioned many exquisite pieces from the kiln,<sup>11</sup> while his father, the Kangxi emperor also introduced new designs and new palettes.

11. However, the three powerful emperors at the beginning of Qing dynastic rule (Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong) never forgot they were Manchus ruling over the conquered Han people. They adhered to their distinctive cultural practices and norms. Their eight Banner system (every Manchu belonged to a Banner or group) came into existence, having evolved from the original four under Nurhaci which played an important role in creating and sustaining Manchu identity. Although there was created a Chinese Banner, this was self-contained. They strenuously ensured that the ruling class remembered that their ancestors were men on horseback, who hunted and were not sedentary and military-averse like the Han people they had conquered. Every year the ruling house would organise the imperial hunt started by Kangxi in 1681 until the dynasty fell in 1911. The imperial hunting grounds were at Mulan in today's Weichang Manchu and Mongol Autonomous County, near the summer residence of the Qing emperors at Chengde. This was a conscious exercise undertaken with the aim of renewing and sustaining their Manchu identity.

Banner men were not allowed to marry non-Banner women, although Banner women were allowed to marry Han Banner men. Marriage between Manchus and ordinary Han people was very rare. Very exceptionally when a Bannerman fell on hard times and could not afford to marry a Banner woman, then he would turn to marrying an ordinary Han woman.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, one must remember, in the China of those days, concubinage was standard practice amongst those who could afford it. A Manchu nobleman could take a Han concubine should he so wish.

12. The Qing rulers decreed that Han males must adopt the hair style of the Manchu male, with the front of the head shaven clean and the rest of the hair plaited into a queue. On the surface, it looks as if it was a measure to promote cultural similarity, but in reality, the measure only served to emphasise cultural differences between the Manchus and the Hans. In Han culture, hair was a gift from one's parents and there was a duty to treasure and look after it. Civil servants in the Chinese bureaucracy, for instance, were given a day off to wash their hair and bathe themselves – in the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) it was called *muyu* day which occurred after every five working days and in the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), it was called *muhuan* day after every ten working days.<sup>13</sup> Shaving part of the head and wearing the hair in a queue to the Han male were signs of their status as subject people humiliated by foreign rule.

It bears labouring the point that the early Qing emperors, in particular, Kangxi and Qianlong,<sup>14</sup> were careful to ride two horses, one which embodied the *yang* approach of dominance and control, the other the *yin* approach of emollience and pacification. This nuanced *yinyang* strategy had the effect of preventing a total rupture in the main of the Han cultural tradition.

13. In respect of territorial conquest following military campaigns, Kangxi acted swiftly and effectively in Tibet, when the Dzungars<sup>15</sup> crossed into Tibet and took Lhasa in 1717. Kangxi marched in with his army, expelled the Dzungars in 1720 and incorporated Tibet as part of Qing China which Tibet remained until 1911/1912. In 1724, Kangxi also seized two regions of Tibet (Amado and Kham) and turned them into the province of Qinghai.

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<sup>11</sup> He also chose to bury himself in Yixian County, Hebei province, the location associated with *The Yijing*, in a site which became known as Qingxiling (the Western Qing Necropolis). This meant he was buried away even from his own distinguished father, the Kangxi emperor and his other Manchu ancestors in Qingdongling (the Eastern Qing Necropolis).

<sup>12</sup> See Chen 2016.

<sup>13</sup> See Ancient Chinese Bath Culture 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Yongzheng, the son of Kangxi and the father of Qianlong, appeared to have been an exception. He did not engage in literary inquisition and persecution. For this, not only were the Han elite of the time grateful but it also turns out that the Han populace at large down the years since his death had been equally grateful. As mentioned earlier, he chose to bury himself away from his father and other Manchu predecessors. Chinese/Han culture included the "honourable" occupation of tomb-robbing. Yet, today, should you visit Qingxiling/Western Qing Necropolis, you would find that his tomb is the only one which has never been robbed and stands intact. A plausible inference to make is that even Han tomb robbers since his death had been touched by his refrain in persecuting the literati and even treating them in a more fair-minded fashion than his father and later his son. Today, in China, there are no more tomb robbers as tombs, especially ancient imperial ones are state property, protected by security forces, and anyone caught violating the law would be duly punished. However, historically, it had been a thriving business.

<sup>15</sup> As we shall see in the "potted" history presented here, the Dzungars figured significantly in the territorial expansion and shaping of China under Qing rule. Who were they? In a nutshell, they were tribes who formed a confederation which eventually led to the unification of the West Mongolian tribes. Geographically they stretched from the western end of the Great Wall of China to present-day eastern Kazakhstan and from present-day northern Kyrgyzstan to southern Siberian, the greater part of which is located in today's Xinjiang. They formed a powerful nomadic empire. (See Perdue 2005.)

As for Qianlong, his grandson in respect of what today we call Xinjiang, the story is more violent. Qianlong in 1759 “resolved” the on-going problems in that region posed by the Dzungar state and empire by ordering a genocide against the Dzungars,<sup>16</sup> using as his troops mainly Manchu Bannermen and (Eastern) Mongols who were rewarded with Dzungar women as spoils of battle after their men had been mercilessly killed. Qianlong without a shred of irony ordered the eradication of the Dzungars on the grounds that they were barbarians. He pronounced: “To sweep away barbarians is the way to bring stability to the interior”. He appeared to have suffered amnesia for the fact that the Hans had long regarded the Manchus as barbarians, although the Hans did not eliminate them in the way that this Qing Manchu ruler eliminated the Dzungars. Qianlong encouraged the Muslim Uyghurs in the region to help him in his genocide against the Dzungars. These policies paid off handsomely and in 1884 that area became known as Xinjiang, literally meaning “the new frontiers”.<sup>17</sup>

14. Qianlong also very shrewdly at the same time proclaimed that China was not the land of the Han people but was a multi-ethnic state – in other words, he created the new China. People who lived in Xinjiang would no longer be called *yi*, meaning “foreigners”; the Manchus, the defeated but surviving Dzungars, the Uyghurs and the Hans were all “one people” united under Qing rule.

15. At the same time, he proclaimed he was a Confucianist but this did not again prevent him from “confucianising” the newly conquered land and its people – names of towns were changed, such as Urumqi to Dihua in 1760, and state-funded schools were ordered to teach Confucianism to Muslims in Xinjiang. Manchu officials backed the migration of Han people to the region. Qianlong justified his policy of genocide in official records by claiming that it was but a continuation of what the Han and the Tang dynasties had done in the region. However, he did not seem to have noticed that history did not record that these two earlier dynasties committed genocide of the people in the region, whatever other means of control they might have used. Many Han officials at the time when Qianlong was conducting his genocidal campaign had memorialised him that Xinjiang was not part of China and therefore, he should not incorporate it. This advice he rejected on the grounds that China, from then on, was going to be multi-ethnic with the Han people being only one ethnic group amongst many others. One can see the logic of his “new China” of which he was going to be the pioneering architect and from which he was not going to be deterred in the name of either Confucian values and/or of “fuddy-duddy” Han Chinese officials at his Court.

Look at Maps 1 and 2. They are more or less identical in terms of the territory they occupy. They both show Xinjiang, Tibet, Qinghai; what the Qing called Mongolia is now only Inner Mongolia and what the Qing called Manchuria covers Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning. In other words, today’s China is, by and large, the Qing dynasty newly minted “New China”.



Map 1: Qing Dynasty's New China (See BBC 2021.)

<sup>16</sup> See Westad 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Up to then, that region was referred to in general in Han writings as “the Western region”/*xiyu*.



Map 2: To-day's China

Compare Maps 1 and 2 with Map 3 below which shows the size and the territory of Ming China. Ming China did not cover Tibet, Qinghai, Xinjiang. Historically, Inner Mongolia marked the boundary between the Han people and the northern nomadic tribes, who continuously entered Han territory to raid it. Hence, since as early as the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BCE), a wall had been built. This building carried on during the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE), the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BCE), the Han Dynasty (206 BCE- 220 CE). The construction of the Great Wall as known today, however, was a Ming project which began around 1474 as a defensive measure against northern invaders. This Ming wall stretched from the Yalu River in Liaoning Province to the eastern bank of the Taolai River in Gansu Province; it passed through winding its way east to west Liaoning, Hebei, Tianjin, Beijing, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Ningxia and Gansu. In the end, the Great Wall did not keep out the northern invaders as the Manchus succeeded in conquering Ming China in 1644, establishing the Qing Dynasty.



Map 3: Ming Dynasty China, shown in light pink



### The provinces of China in the Ming dynasty<sup>18</sup>

Jinshi, Bei Zhili (modern Hebei) 08  
Shandong includes Liaodong peninsula 16  
Shanxi 15  
Shaanxi 07  
Henan 14  
Huguang (modern Hubei and Hunan) 10, 06  
Jiangxi 13  
Sichuan 02  
Yunnan 05  
Guizhou 12  
Guangxi<sup>19</sup>  
Nanjing, Nan Zhili (modern Jiangsu) 20  
Zhejiang 21  
Guangdong 11  
Fujian 19

### The 23 provinces of China today

01 Qinghai  
02 Sichuan  
03 Gansu  
04 Heilongjiang  
05 Yunnan  
06 Hunan  
07 Shaanxi  
08 Hebei  
09 Jilin  
10 Hubei  
11 Guangdong  
12 Guizhou  
13 Jiangxi  
14 Henan  
15 Shanxi  
16 Shandong  
17 Liaoning  
18 Anhui  
19 Fujian  
20 Jiangsu  
21 Zhejiang  
22 Taiwan  
23 Hainan

The 15 Ming provinces more or less have counterparts today. The PRC administrative map has 23 provinces; the additional ones include Qinghai (became part of Yuan China), Taiwan (became part of Qing China) and Hainan (became part of Song China). Two of China's five autonomous regions include Tibet and Xinjiang and were part of Qing China. Two others are Inner Mongolia and Ningxia (earliest incorporation was in Qin-Han period, then the Tang, the Yuan dynasty before the Qing).

The Qing dynasty's nuanced policy in terms of *yinyang*, so to speak, towards the Han people and Han culture meant the continuity of Han civilisation in spite of the injection of some Manchu characteristics into it. As for the Han language, the biggest threat to its existence came after the Qing dynasty collapsed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The preceding century contained many traumatic moments for the Chinese nation<sup>20</sup> and its psyche; they prompted people, especially the elites to reflect upon every aspect of their own history and culture. Overwhelmingly, they came to the conclusion that Chinese culture in all aspects needed reforming and modernising. The mantra of **Modernisation** as the way to salvation from then on became seared into the Chinese consciousness.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Ming dynasty map and geography. 2021. URL = [www.chinaknowledge.de](http://www.chinaknowledge.de) . Retrieved 04/09/2021.

<sup>19</sup> Guangxi was a province but since 1958 it has become an autonomous region, a change of administrative status designed to help foster the cultural autonomy of the Zhuang people, the largest demography in the region. China altogether has five autonomous regions, of which the other four are: Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Ningxia and Xinjiang. Eastern Guangxi was conquered by the Han people as early as the Qin dynasty; this was continued through the Tang, the Song dynasty. The Ming dynasty put in a system of rule which involved notable Zhuang leaders while the Qing imposed direct imperial rule.

<sup>20</sup> Note that history is dynamic involving processes of re-grouping and change. By the time of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, faced with Western imperial powers who came to China from afar with their gunboats and their accompanying "diplomacy", the older divide between the Manchus as Coloniser and the indigenous people (the majority of whom were/are the Han people whose ancestors inhabited the Central Plains around the two great river basins, especially that of the Yellow River, and who also saw themselves as the descendants of the Yellow Emperor) as Colonised gave way to a new grouping with the Western powers identified as The Coloniser and the people of China (Manchu, Han and others) as The Colonised.

<sup>21</sup> This was not simply the lesson which the Chinese drew from such humiliating confrontation. The Japanese had thought it wise to modernise themselves at their own pace and under their own terms rather than to do so when external circumstances forced the process on themselves, as happened in the case of its neighbour, China. Japan entered what historians call the Meiji Restoration period after the ascension to the throne of the young Meiji emperor in 1868. The new political leaders pursued an extensive and intensive programme of political, economic and military reforms along Western lines with the explicit goal of making the Western powers accept Japan as an equal. In other words, Japan aimed to join the club of The Coloniser to escape the fate of The Colonised, a fate which befell the Chinese. To quote some of the language used: "Using the barbarian to control the barbarian", "Enrich the country, strengthen the army". Other forms of modernisation involved building a rail network, and a modern education system set out in 1872. A high-ranking mission to Europe and America came back in 1873 with a report which argued that economic development was an indispensable base of power. For a short but succinct account, see Beasley 1981-1982. In this project of Modernisation, Japan turned out to be very successful. Indeed, it acted out the role of The Coloniser in Asia, leading up to WWII. Even after its defeat at the end of WWII, its reputation at the level of "soft power" remained though not at the level of military might – for instance, Japanese people in apartheid South Africa were considered to be "honorary Whites" unlike Chinese people who were not.

Obviously, the Chinese army and its collection of naval vessels had proven useless against the superior military might of Western powers. What about education? Surely, the old learning based on the Confucian classics was an irrelevance in the new age of Modern Western Science (MWS for short) and its Technology? Some intellectuals even went further to identify their written language as a big drag upon progress, as it is a non-alphabetic script. None other than Lu Xun (1886-1936), one of China's intellectual giants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century thought that Latinisation was the way forward.<sup>22</sup> His evidence seemed to have rested on the observation that the most successful societies which were Western all used the Latin alphabet;<sup>23</sup> hence to be successful and progressive, the Chinese language must abandon its traditional writing and opt for Latinisation. Furthermore, these Western societies at that time also had a higher literacy rate than in China. The Latin alphabet, after all, has only twenty-six letters; once mastered, it appears as if one could readily learn how words are spelt rather effortlessly by comparison with learning Chinese characters/words, which are so much more complicated, even if they are modular in construction.<sup>24</sup> He and others were convinced that one major, if not the sole cause of being backward as a nation and which prevented China from modernising itself was its written language. His reasoning was somewhat simplistic and therefore misleading to say the least, if not logically flawed outright; but at that time his fellow elites who were just as desperate as himself found it compelling.<sup>25</sup>

The Latinisation project did not die with the death of Lu Xun;<sup>26</sup> it lived on and was still a thorny issue leading up to the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The seriousness of the matter is reflected by a conversation between Mao Zedong and the American journalist, Edgar Snow in 1936 about the necessity of sweeping away its feudal past including its written script.<sup>27</sup> However, things turned out to be otherwise. The PRC would have embraced Latinisation but for the fact that Mao himself and many other senior Party members were devotees of Chinese calligraphy; they realised that Latinisation might in the long run undermine and even destroy this very ancient art form.<sup>28</sup> It is said that they refrained and introduced another reform: to modify and simplify the strokes required in writing a character/word. The modified script is called *jianti* while the so-called traditional script is called *fanti*.<sup>29</sup> Increasingly, the latter is used officially and systematically only in Taiwan;<sup>30</sup> the UN has

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<sup>22</sup> Lu Xun denounced Chinese writing in the most forceful language possible. In 1936, he wrote that if the Chinese system of writing was not destroyed, China would certainly perish in *An Outsider Chats about Scripts* – see Mair 2002.

The Latinisation project was viewed as a nationalist project, cutting across the Left-Right political divide. The party led by Chiang Kai-shek and that by Mao Zedong, both endorsed it.

<sup>23</sup> Britain, France, the USA (and earlier in Modern Western history, Italy and Spain) would come to mind. The Russians, too, used an alphabet, though not the Latin but the Cyrillic alphabet; and they ran a powerful empire, like the Spanish, the British and the French.

<sup>24</sup> See Lee 2008, Part II for details.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, he and others appeared to have overlooked the fact that the Japanese language used three different scripts, including Kanji, that is the Chinese/Han script. The other two are phonetic alphabetic scripts, called Hiragana and Katakana, with 46 letters each. This did not prevent Japan from emerging as a modern power which the rest of the advanced world had to take note of, to say the least. The three scripts are still used today, sometimes with all three appearing in one sentence. The Japanese appear happy with such an arrangement even though in principle and technically, Kanji could be dropped.

<sup>26</sup> Neither did the process of Latinisation even begin with him. As early as 1605, the Jesuit, Matteo Ricci, had published a book in Peking using the Latin alphabet primarily to teach foreigners (mainly fellow missionaries presumably) Chinese. It is called *The Miracle of Western Letters*. Another Jesuit in China, twenty years later, Nicolas Trigault, produced a similar teaching aid, based on Ricci's earlier publication, called *Aid to the Eyes and Ears of Western Literati*. The scholar-official of the late-Ming to early Qing dynasty scholar official, Fang Yizhi (1611-1671) was the true precursor to Lu Xun as his motivation was also one of modernising a script which he considered to be too cumbersome and complicated for China's own good. He set out the flaws of Chinese writing while singing the praises of Western alphabetic languages – see Mair 2002. However, *Pinyin* per se would not solve any serious problem of learning Chinese as there are so many different regional speeches and dialects that a foreigner having learnt one set for one specific regional speech would have to learn another set of *Pinyin* to cope with a different regional speech. In 1949, the PRC solved the problem which eluded Qinshihuangdi (the First Qin Emperor) by using the speech of Beijing as the Common Speech. Attempts which preceded it appeared not to have addressed this problem; at best they would have limited use and application and hence, would have been a waste of time and effort on the part of the student unless they intended to stay put for the rest of their lives in that geographic-linguistic location.

<sup>27</sup> Snow reported Mao as saying: "Chinese characters are so difficult to learn that even the best system of rudimentary characters, or simplified teaching, does not equip the people with a really efficient and rich vocabulary. Sooner or later, we believe, we will have to abandon characters altogether if we are to create a new social culture in which the masses fully participate."

<sup>28</sup> To the Chinese, calligraphy is the highest art form, even above that of painting.

<sup>29</sup> No one should get over excited by the distinction between *fanti* and *jianti* and be obsessed by the myth that the former is truly traditional and ancient while the latter is new-fangled and not rooted in history. In reality, some *jianti* characters/words are simply reversion to much older versions, older than the *fanti* versions, as a matter of fact. In other cases, they are versions found in manuscripts of scholars down the ages – indeed, the committee in charge of the project culled a lot from the manuscripts of none other than Lu Xun himself. For accounts of this convoluted and complex relationship in English, see, for instance, De Francis 1984, Curt 1991, Gu 2013, and Lee 2008.

<sup>30</sup> *Fanti* is officially endorsed in Hongkong and Macau but many people would not find *jianti* too difficult to cope with once familiar with it and vice versa for people used to *jianti* with regard to *fanti*. The context usually tells the reader how to read the

recently decreed that the official Chinese script is modified Chinese. Latinisation does play a minor role in China in general and education in particular in the PRC; it is called *Pinyin*. Young children are taught to speak what is called *Putonghua* /Common Speech via *Pinyin*,<sup>31</sup> and street names, for instance, appear also in *Pinyin* to enable foreigners to read them readily. Forty years or so down the line from 1949, the electronic revolution took place; *Pinyin* conveniently already exists which serves as a handy way of inputting Chinese characters in a computer.<sup>32</sup>

On this score, the Chinese, as a nation, collectively can heave a sigh of relief as they need no longer worry about the country being held back by its seemingly archaic manner of writing. On this score, too, the Chinese need not feel the need any more to regard their system of writing as sub-standard, flawed in one way or another, requiring to be replaced by a foreign system such as the Latin alphabet. In other words, on this issue, they need no longer play the role of The Colonised.<sup>33</sup> Instead, *Pinyin* stands out as a successful way of coping with new challenges posed by an ever-changing world without compromising the identity and integrity of the Chinese system of writing with a history dating from the Chinese Neolithic Age according to the latest findings of Chinese scholarship.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the Chinese today can be comforted by the fact that its adult literacy rate stands at 96.84%,<sup>35</sup> a respectable figure for a country with the largest population in the world and also given that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the illiteracy rate stood at 80% - see McCutchen 2007. The Chinese still have work to do but they have come a long way from the bad days of yore.

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character, whether as *jianti* or *fanti*. IT has made any check very easy indeed, as there are software programmes available free online for instant conversion.

<sup>31</sup> To understand this need, one must recall that China is a vast country geographically-speaking but also a linguistically diverse and rich place. Apart from something like three hundred non-Han speeches and languages, even among Han speakers, diversity reigns supreme. Just to cite three major examples: Cantonese (Yue), Fukienese (*Minnan*) and *Putonghua*. A Cantonese speaker would not understand *Minnan* speech and *vice versa*; both speakers would not understand *Putonghua* without having been put through the paces. (Some older people in Hongkong today whose mother tongue is Cantonese would find *Putonghua* unintelligible.) Even amongst those who speak what in the past was called Mandarin (now called *Putonghua*), there are immense differences between such speakers from region to region. However, what unites all these diverse linguistic phenomena is the written language itself – the same character/word may be pronounced differently by different groups from different regions of the country, but they all write it the same way. For this, the nation has given much thanks to the First Chinese Emperor (r. 246 BCE – 210 BCE), Qinshihuangdi, who during his very short rule, nevertheless, managed to introduce massive reforms including the linguistic – his own favoured font/script was *Xiaozhuan*/Lesser Seal Script, which is still used today in seal carving. It is not the unity of speech but the unity of script which had preserved China as a cultural entity down the ages. The scholar-officials in the bureaucracy would write their reports using the same script, even though between them on the level of speech, a Tower of Babel might well exist. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the son of the Persian ambassador to the Court at Peking/Beijing was given an education through tutors hired by the father to put him through the paces of the civil service examination. He was successful; according to the rules, he was eligible to be appointed as official, was duly appointed and sent out to the provinces on official duty. He stuck at it for a while, but then resigned and went back to his homeland – he found it difficult to cope with the local speech(es) and felt his professional efficiency impaired as a result of such incomprehension. (Unfortunately, I have mislaid the set of notes made many years ago regarding this point, and so cannot cite more precise historical and bibliographical details. If any reader knows, please pass the information to me.)

<sup>32</sup> However, this is not to say that *Pinyin* is the only means available. Other techniques exist, which, once mastered, may even be faster than *Pinyin*, one is assured. *Pinyin*, though, has the virtue of requiring no further investment of time and effort.

<sup>33</sup> However, one should recall that although the Chinese were never officially colonised (Hongkong island, apart), it was unofficially so. Witness the Treaty of Nanking/Nanjing and the Treaty of Versailles which ended WWI. Hence the conceptual distinction between Coloniser and Colonised applies to it.

<sup>34</sup> Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese scholarship had identified the writing of the late Shang dynasty to be its earliest form of writing. This writing is called *Jiaguwen*/Oracle Bone Script, used in the divination rites of the Shang dynasty. The ox shoulder blades and tortoise shells with writing inscribed on them were traced to a village called Xiaotun, in Anyang County, in Henan province. It turned out that Anyang was a capital of the late Shang dynasty. However, in the light of new discoveries since then, the history of Chinese writing could be pushed back to much earlier times, to the Neolithic period. In the 1980s, archaeologists discovered thirty tombs belonging to a late Neolithic culture called the Dawenkou Culture (4500-2500 BCE). On some of the pottery shards were what looked like writing; scholars ultimately succeeded in deciphering seven, which demonstrates that they are part of a writing system preceding the Oracle Bone Script, the forebear of the Shang script. In March 2003, scholars at the Gansu Research Institute studying a painted Neolithic pot concluded that the seven marks on it were actually seven different ways of writing the same character/word. Then in 2007, after some twenty years of study, scholars made known their investigation into a discovery in Ningxia province of some rock carvings at a huge site called Damaidi. They revealed that they were convinced that these carvings were no mere squiggles but that about two thousand marks are actually characters/words – what impressed the scholars most of all was that they appear not to be isolated but systematic symbols. If their interpretation survives critical scrutiny in the longer run, this would mean that the Chinese writing system could be dated to between seven and eight thousand years ago, putting back the beginning of that writing some three thousand years earlier than the dates of other known texts and inscriptions. It would also mean that Chinese writing would not only be the oldest in continuous use but also the oldest in the history of human civilisations, roughly eight thousand years old. See Lee 2008, Part II.

<sup>35</sup> This is the overall rate for 2018. The gender break-down is as follows: men (98.47%), women (95.16%) – URL = <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271336/literacy-in-china/>. Accessed 18/11/2021.

One can plausibly argue that Chinese writing is part of Chinese identity, whether the writing is conceived merely as a mundane tool of communication or as an expression of Chinese aesthetics via its calligraphy. These two aspects of the writing are constitutive of Chinese civilisation. Although China went through anxious soul-searching during the last century and teetered on the brink of going down the road of radical language reform, Mao and his comrades, in the end, drew back from embracing such a project. They realised that one cannot detach the utilitarian role of the writing from its aesthetic expression, and that the latter would not survive should the non-alphabetic character be replaced by its approximate (Latin) alphabetic equivalent. They could not contemplate the loss of so much cultural heritage.

On this point, it is instructive to compare briefly the respective historical turns taken by China and Turkey. These two countries were faced with a similar set of problems, the challenge posed to them with the passing of the old feudal orders (the collapse of the Qing and Ottoman dynasties) and the aggressive dominance of Western powers. In the name of modernisation, progress and secularization, Ataturk upon establishing the Republic of Turkey in 1922 embarked on a radical course of language reform by 1928. He ordered the Arabic Ottoman script to be abandoned and the Latin alphabet to be used in its place. As a result, apart from some elderly people and specialists, the ordinary Turk could not access their Ottoman past (1299 – 1922).<sup>36</sup> One could argue that this is no great loss in one sense, as the Chinese people today, educated only in modern Chinese (the modified or the traditional script), also cannot readily read texts in classical Chinese, without additional effort and some training. However, what is important is the impact on the national psyche which is more psychological than intellectual – the Ataturk language reform of 1928 was intended to make the Turkish people conceive themselves as *building* afresh a “new modern nation” modelled on Western nation states. It was meant ideologically to cut the people from their old roots, so that present and future generations could no longer directly draw inspiration or pride from the past, which was considered at best an irrelevancy, at worst a pernicious impediment to progress. China, in the end, rejected this option. As a result, the Chinese people remain in touch with their rich and long past, an enduring history of cultural achievements of which they can be proud, and to which they can, to an extent, still directly access, in spite of the modified script in use in the Chinese mainland. This access is also helped by the fact that the Chinese language in daily use retains and employs many idiomatic expressions which are based on or derived from historical happenings and personages.<sup>37</sup>

The continuity of the written tradition has made written Chinese unique in more ways than one in the history of writing in the world. It is the only living non-alphabetic language. It has probably the longest unbroken history of any written language. If the latest scholarship turns out to survive critical scrutiny, it may also be the oldest form of writing in the history of writing itself. Unlike Ottoman-Turkish civilisation which suffered severe rupture, Chinese civilisation has not suffered such a rupture; today’s China is, therefore, able to call on that long cultural tradition to help it negotiate a path between the Western model of governance and political economy on the one hand and Chinese own historical continuity on the other – it has tried hard to evolve an alternative model of governance which combines certain aspects of Confucian/*Rujia* values with some aspects of Western political

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<sup>36</sup> However, in 2014, Turkey’s Education Council changed its policy regarding the teaching of Ottoman Turkish in all its schools. It is now available not simply in Islamic high schools but as an elective also in secular schools – the president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan backed this decision on the grounds that younger generations should not lose touch with their cultural heritage. See Humeyra 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Just to give two examples of such idiomatic expressions which are usually cast in a four-character formula. The first is *san gu maolu* and may be roughly rendered as: The talent-seeker must make obeisance three times before he could engage the lowly but talented. This expression refers to a period of Chinese history and to historical personages in that history which every Chinese would know about. The episode occurred during the Three Kingdoms period (220-265 CE), following the end of the Han dynasty when China broke up into three competing states. Liu Bei (who was of high birth himself), the ruler of Shu, wanted desperately to subdue his two rival states. He heard of a very talented person called Zhuge Liang living in a grass-thatched hut in isolation far from the world of politics. Liu Bang called upon the lowly Zhuge Liang personally three times but each time he was not at home. Liu Bei remained patient, courteous and respectful in spite of grumbles against his grovelling before a nobody on the part of his own generals and advisers. Finally, Liu Bei’s strategy of humility paid off and Zhuge Liang, the talented military and political strategist agreed to help him. From this idiomatic expression, the Chinese children who grew up with the tale behind it would have implicitly if not explicitly be taught at least four things about their own cultural tradition: (a) respect for learning and talents, (b) a meritocracy in which high birth and status were not the real requirements for success, (c) in the hierarchy of values, talents and wisdom counted for most, and above all (d) that sincerity and persistence on the part of the seeker of truth/knowledge/talents would be rewarded and not because of their power and/or their wealth. In this sense, Chinese culture may be said to be deeply “moralistic” but not in the way Western culture is moralistic by adhering to a known religion with a transcendent God which orders its believers to adhere to its Commandments on pain of punishment by hell fire.

The second is equally “moralistic” and comes from the most revered and foundational text of Chinese culture, *The Yijing/I Ching*, a *Daojia* text, a favourite of Confucius as early remarked. It is said that more than two hundred such expressions are based/derived from the text. We will only cite one example here. *Zi qiang buxi* whose meaning can roughly be rendered as follows: when one’s predicament is dire and the future truly bleak, one must not despair but strenuously try to get out of such a seemingly hopeless situation – in this way, one becomes strong. This comes from the discussion in the text of the trigram called Qian which has three *yang* (with no *yin*) components.

economy and social philosophy. It describes itself, as already mentioned, as “socialism with Chinese characteristics”. (See Zhang 2012.)

The Chinese script (whether modified or not) serves to remind those who use it that Chinese civilisation itself is Wholist in orientation,<sup>38</sup> unlike modern Western civilisation which is mechanistic, atomistic and reductionist in orientation. There is room to give only one example of this aspect of the Chinese language. For this purpose, I have no choice but to introduce a few Chinese characters.

- (1) This is the character which means “tree” but derivatively means “wood” and “wooden”; it is written as shown below.

木 *mù*

- (2) Put two of these 木 *mù* or trees together, and you create yet another character, looking like this:

林 *lín*

meaning “grove” or “wood” as in *shùlín*. The logic behind this kind of construction is that two trees huddling close together represent many trees grown together, though not densely so, which amounts to a grove or wood.

- (3) Add another of these 木 *mù* to 林 *lín*, and you create another character, looking like this

森 *sēn*

meaning “full of trees,” and hence “forest” as in *sēnlín*. It also means “dark and gloomy.” If you have ever walked in a forest; especially a pine forest, you would know how dark and gloomy a forest is. The leaves at the top of the tall trees shut out the sunlight. That is why the *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* tell us how frightening forests can be, especially when such forests have wolves and other fearsome beings in them.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, the character *lín* (meaning grove or wood) has emerged Wholistically from the character itself; its meaning is not “two trees standing side by side” which a reductionist understanding may lead one to infer. A grove or wood consists of many trees, though not densely planted together. The same is true of *sen* (meaning forest) has emerged Wholistically from the characters of *mu* and *lin*; its meaning is not “a collection of three trees” which a reductionist understanding may lead one to infer. There emerges a new concept, that of a forest. One may then be permitted to conclude that Chinese civilisation is not only “moralistic” in character but is also deeply Wholistic in orientation, as the script is a very important part of Chinese culture.

On top of that, the culture also focuses on a very important concept called *tianren-xiangying* or *tianren-heyi* which Lee 2017, 277-282 renders as Macro-Micro-cosmic Wholism. In a nutshell it means: that whatever is in greater Nature or the universe out there (the Macrocosm) is also present in the individual human being (the Microcosm). The Macrocosm and the Microcosm form a Whole. If *yinyang* is present in the Macrocosm, then *yinyang* would also be present in the Microcosm, as the latter is part of the former larger Whole. In Daoist philosophy/*Daojia*, the Dao which *The Laozi/The Daodejing* speaks of is the *dao* of *yinyang*, the *dao* of *Tianren-heyi*. This deeply ecological philosophy tells us if we humans wish to live and survive as a species (that is from generation to generation) then humans (the Microcosm) have no choice but to live harmoniously within the larger Whole/the Macrocosm and follow its patterns and regularities. This philosophical/cosmological narrative comes ultimately from *The Yijing/I Ching* which as a *Daojia* text, is interpreted as a text about the concept of change in Nature (the Macrocosm) and hence also in humans and human society (the Microcosm).<sup>40</sup>

As Chinese culture and society is Wholist in orientation, it is crucial to appreciate the distinction between two terms which sound alike but which stand for two profoundly different concepts. These two terms are:

he 合: meaning to organise different parts to form a unit/  
organisational unity; its opposite is to divide

he 和: harmony/to harmonise or produce harmony  
within groups and society; its opposite is to  
produce conflict

The central goal of Chinese social and political philosophy is to produce a harmonious society where different groups may live in peace without conflict. Such a philosophy necessarily implies Wholism, a notion of a good which holds for the Whole of society and that to achieve such a “common good”, some groups within society (depending on the context) may have to bear a greater burden of “cost” to help other groups who may be unable

<sup>38</sup> Note that this term is a departure from normal spelling: (a) normally, it is spelt as “holist” whereas the spelling here is “Wholist” with “w” as part of its spelling to emphasise that Wholism is about a whole, not about a hole as in a hole in the wall. This may sound as being finicky about English usage but it is intended to carry a serious philosophical message.

<sup>39</sup> This brief observation is necessarily simplistic. For a more detailed and nuanced deconstruction of the Chinese language as well as the English language, see Lee 2008/2018, where Lee shows that there are instances in the latter which are analogues of strategies found in the former.

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed account and assessment, see Lee 2017, Chapters Five and Six.

to bear fully the burden of “cost”. Let’s just use two examples in two very different contexts to illustrate this philosophical orientation.

Example 1: Take the Chinese family. Some members may economically be better off than other members; the economically better off members may have moved away from the “ancestral” town or village, while the parents continue to live in situ with the less economically better off members of the family. An economically better off member living away from home feels it a moral duty to send as much of the wages home to support the rest of the family. As Zhang 2012 points out, the Chinese are imbued with the value of *sheji weijia* (sacrificing oneself for the family) as the good of the family trumps the good of the individual member of the family. The same spirit inspires them also to make sacrifices for the good of their country: *baojia weiguo* (defending one’s family and safe-guarding one’s nation).

Example 2: The one-child policy initiated in 1979 and implemented from 1980. Each couple was permitted one child only; such a policy meant improved education for all, that the families following this policy would have access to childcare and healthcare. However, this policy only applied to the Han people as they constituted the largest demographic and if the problem was fear of unsustainable population growth, then it would make sense to curb the reproduction rate of the Han people while allowing the other ethnicities to be exempt. For instance, the Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang continued to have as many children as they wished. The Han people, in general, did not complain as they appreciated that it was fair for them to bear the weight of the one-child policy given that they formed the overwhelming demographic in China, in order that the country would not become over-populated. (Rural families did complain but on the grounds that tilling and tending the soil required a pair of strong hands in the next generation – as a result, rural families which produced a daughter were permitted to try for a male child.<sup>41</sup>)

In the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 epidemic in China, it appears that the Chinese people had responded morally in the spirit of *baojia weiguo* and ontologically so to speak that of Wholism, rallying in co-operation with the strategies to control the new viral phenomenon and in solidarity with those caught up in the epicentre of the epidemic in Wuhan-Hubei. This spirit of solidarity may be found linguistically in the well-known idiomatic expression, *yi fang you nan, ba fang zhi yuan*, meaning: if one section/place/area/region faces difficulties, succour and assistance would come from all quarters. It was in this spirit that resources were sent to Wuhan and other cities in Hubei province, volunteer medical professionals from other regions went to Hubei province to provide support and to look after the afflicted. (See Wei 2021.) The non-afflicted provinces adopted Hubei in order to assist it.

## Conclusion

If the account above of the continuity of Chinese culture throughout its history is plausible, then its main claim may in turn be said to be plausible. This claim may be spelt out as follows:

1. The speed and the thoroughness which China was able to deploy resources to ensure success when Wuhan-Hubei found themselves at the epicentre of SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 bear testimony to the continuity of Chinese culture, a culture which had begun many centuries ago and which has evolved down the ages, having survived two periods of foreign rule, Mongol and Manchu. The “moralistic” aspect (the term “moralistic” is not used here with negative connotations) of Chinese culture as shown in the crisis brought on by the viral phenomenon is very much intact; ontologically, Chinese culture is shown also to be firmly wedded to Wholism in general, and more specifically to the concept of *tianren-heyi/tianren-xiangying* (Macro-Micro-cosmic Wholism).
2. Their “moralistic” universe demands of the ruling power to promote their well-being in its policies; for the Chinese people down the ages the “Mandate of Heaven” was not an absolute given but conditional and so could/would be withdrawn from the ruling class if and when they perceived that the ruler had not carried out its side of the “social/political” contract. In such a system of thinking, the ruling power or government is regarded not necessarily as evil and to be resisted, as it is expected to do good to and for the people. The people would continue to obey but the obedience is always conditional upon whether the ruling class keeps to their side of the political/social bargain. Historically, rebellions and revolts had broken out when the people felt that the “contract” has been broken by the powers that be.

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<sup>41</sup> Other consequences of the one-child policy included the abortion of female foetuses which led in turn to the population being skewed with more males than females – see *The Globalist* 2015.

3. In the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 epidemic,<sup>42</sup> the Chinese people appeared to have realised:
- (a) That their government in the name of good governance was adopting measures, stringent though they might be, to save lives, even at the expense of GDP/the economy.
  - (b) That the goal of saving lives (and hence promoting the welfare of the people) meant/means that the government is keeping to its side of the (implicit) political/social “contract”.
  - (c) That these measures were/are in accordance with the Chinese cultural/moral tradition of promoting the “common good”, of concern for “Others” at the expense of the “Self” or sectional interests. The people of Wuhan-Hubei accepted such reasoning whether implicitly or explicitly, while the rest of the Chinese people in other regions, again in accordance with the Chinese cultural/ethical tradition, rallied round to assist those at the epicentre of the epidemic.

4. All governments in the COVID-19 crisis have been faced with the economic implications of their choice of strategies. Some strategies run the risk of severe economic costs but are/were premised on the expectation based on epidemiological understanding in general that they would be effective and short-lived. This kind of strategy was in the end adopted by China in coping with their epidemic. In other words, GDP was sacrificed in the short-run to save lives and suffering. For China, this paid off. Other strategies, mainly adopted by Western economies such as the US and the UK, did not see fit to go down the Chinese route. Their measures, in the end, have/had the effect of prolonging the pandemic, costing more loss of life and suffering. However, there is irony here: such countries while perceiving a trade-off between health and GDP, assumed/assume that GDP could be saved at the expense of lives lost. Yet the data available appear not to support this trade-off. On the contrary, they show, in the opinion of one analyst, that:

...among countries with available GDP data, we do not see any evidence of a trade-off between protecting people’s health and protecting the economy. Rather the relationship we see between the health and economic impacts of the pandemic goes in the opposite direction. As well as saving lives, countries controlling the outbreak effectively may have adopted the best economic strategy too. (Hasell 2020)

5. In contrast, in an over-simplified and simplistic nutshell, modern Western civilisation (roughly since the 17<sup>th</sup> century) is based on individualism, that society is made up of individual human beings conceived as “social atoms” interacting with one another. Their transactions take place within a framework which says that each individual is a rational, calculating agent; in other words, an individual would act only if the consequences promote his self-interest. In such a system of thinking, there is no conceptual or moral room to postulate something called “societal interest”, the “good of society” as a value which can conflict with the interests of the individual and over-ride them in some contexts. It is a reductionist system of thinking; as such it is necessarily incompatible with Wholism as a way of thinking and of living.

Furthermore, such countries in their economic thinking, as already observed, are wedded to the goal of promoting GDP as the supreme measure of economic health and wealth. In a context which involves a conflict between that goal and saving lives, lives yield to GDP, although as we have just mentioned, with ironic consequences in this pandemic.

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<sup>42</sup> For the latest assessment of these methods used in different countries which meet the researchers’ criteria of study, see *BMJ* 2021.

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