



A Tale of Two Cultures

Recognizing the greatness of both the USA and China –and the differences

By Ruby Tsao

Chinese culture is a culture in pursuit of harmony. Western culture is a culture often wracked by confrontation. In this shrinking world, can the two cultures coexist peacefully? Or is it inevitable that the world will end in war? As a US citizen who spent her childhood in China through eight years of the War with Japan, graduated from National Taiwan University, and came to the US for graduate school, I recognize the greatness of both the USA and China and the differences in their cultures. The ideal would be to combine the best qualities of both countries. Together, they have the potential to provide leadership in world peace and prosperity.

The dominant faiths in China have been Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Their proponents have co-existed peacefully in China for 2,500 years. All three faiths are compatible in their beliefs of peace and harmony. Their recurring theme is “peace, love, harmony”—harmony among humans (Confucianism), harmony with nature (Taoism), harmony with all life (Buddhism). These three spiritual philosophies form the core value of Chinese culture, with Confucianism as the mainstream ideology.

Explosives were invented in ancient China but they were for use in fireworks, not in guns and canons. The Great Wall was a defensive structure. Even today, China maintains weapons for defense, not for invasion. Zheng He (1371-1435), a Muslim Chinese admiral during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), led seven naval voyages encompassing some 20,000 men that sailed as far as the east coast of Africa, preceding Columbus’s expedition by 90 years. In a 1405 expedition, Zheng He’s fleet had 62 treasure ships the size of football fields plus 190 smaller ships with 27,800 men. One can only imagine how he commanded the movement of 252 ships at sea. China had the world’s most advanced technology at the time.

Unlike the Columbus expedition that launched the conquests of Colonial powers, Zheng He’s expeditions were for goodwill and trade. In the last 2,000 years after Han Wudi, (141-87 BC, Emperor of Han Dynasty), there has been no major Chinese invasion of other countries. It was during Han Wudi’s reign that Confucianism became the state doctrine. Ever since, it has been the dominant ideology, not only in China but in some other Asian countries. In the

426-year history of the Han Dynasty, 206 BC—220 AD, all the ethnic groups were united in China to form a melting pot of one people called “Han.” “Harmony” was the mainstream ideology of Confucianism; “world peace” was its goal.

Character development among the “eight virtues” of loyalty, filial piety, kindness, love, trust, righteousness, harmony, and peace have formed the core values of Confucianism. From self perfection to family harmony to good government to world peace is the Confucian roadmap to “Utopia.” China’s civil service examinations that took place over the centuries in imperial China proved to be a democratic force. Anyone could aspire to fame and fortune and rise to the top with a good performance in the examinations. Even though the content of the examinations eventually became quite out of date, the entrenched practice has fostered life-long learning and hard-working habits among the Chinese people starting from childhood.

People with Confucian qualities value hard work, family harmony, education, and frugality. Instead of spending and wasteful habits, they have had the amazing ability to accumulate wealth. Today, countries in the West are facing bankruptcies, while money is flowing to nations in Asia. Just witness the success of countries with a strong Confucian influence—Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and other Southeast Asian nations, not to mention today’s China—all the countries where chopsticks are used. We can say that throughout history China “conquered” Asian countries by Chinese culture, not by military force.

China’s leadership in an alliance with Southeast Asian nations with strong

business ties is forming an important Asian economic block. China is increasing its international presence by cooperating with other countries, building railroads west to Europe and south to Singapore; oil and gas pipelines to Siberia and Eastern Europe. Some one hundred fifty years ago, the transcontinental railroads in the US and Canada were completed with the help of Chinese labor. Now China has plans to build railroads for fast trains not only in China but in other countries as well. Its economy has been growing at the rate of 10% a year for some 20 years. China thus has the potential to be a new engine for world economic growth.

Christianity is the dominant religion in the West, with a code of ethics of universal values that have been a positive influence in the West. However, the exclusivity of “the one and only God” has also been the cause of religious wars against non-believers. It was the motivation for the Crusaders to wage wars against Islam. Wars with Muslims have lasted for more than a thousand years and are still troubling the world today. Thus even the religion of the West is a part of a Western culture of war. Since ancient times in the West there have been numerous wars among European nations, averaging one war every five years. The culture of war has also resulted in Colonial conquests, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, etc—all the major wars of global scale.

After World War II the US became the most powerful nation, admired for its ideas of equality, freedom, democracy and the rule of law; for the innovative spirit and advances in science and technology. Its constitution has served as the model for the world. It is still the unchallenged super power in



People with Confucian qualities value hard work, family harmony, education, and frugality. Instead of spending and wasteful habits, they have had the amazing ability to accumulate wealth. Today, countries in the West are facing bankruptcies, while money is flowing to nations in Asia.

economic, military and technological strengths.

However, in recent years, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are beginning to drain the US economy. There is a lesson the US could have learned from history. That is the record of the Korean War, 1950—1953. It was the first, but not the last, war that the US did not win. General MacArthur, the commander of US forces in Korea, never in his wildest dreams expected that his mighty country, the wealthiest and most powerful nation with the most advanced weaponry, could not overcome the ill-equipped barefoot soldiers coming from impoverished war-torn China. Yet President Truman realized that the US was not ready for another war — China was too big a country to be conquered and its vast population would not have succumbed to foreign occupation. MacArthur thought he knew better than Truman. He was fired for insubordination when he openly defied the President. In retrospect, we repeated history when we got into the Vietnam War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for which we are still paying dearly. Wars on terrorists do not win people's hearts, they only bring more hatred and produce more terrorists while bankrupting the country.

We can say in this, the second decade of the 21st Century, that human beings have made amazing progress in science and technology. Yet we have advanced in “civilization” without becoming more “civilized.” We desperately need to build trust for world peace through mutual understanding. A fusion of the best from the East and the West is an ideal we can aspire to.

The rise of China is often viewed as a threat to the West because there is a

lack of understanding of Chinese culture. If China were not viewed as a threat, the US would have less need to carry a big stick—a very expensive stick—and the US might save at least a billion dollars a day. With less of a military burden, the US would still be the richest and most powerful country in the world. The money saved could be better spent on “construction” than “destruction.”

In many ways, China, in its modernization efforts, is learning from the US. Can the US learn from other cultures? A super power like the US is so involved in affairs around the globe that there is a great need for better understanding of other cultures to formulate US foreign policies. It's important that China maintains a good relationship with the US, not only for the benefit of the two countries, but also for the world at large. The US and China also depend on each other to grow their economies.

We have hope that these two great nations can move towards a more friendly and cooperative partnership in order to lay a solid foundation for world prosperity. We hope at the end of the tunnel there is not a head-on collision but instead world peace and prosperity.

###



We can say in this, the second decade of the 21st Century, that human beings have made amazing progress in science and technology. Yet we have advanced in “civilization” without becoming more “civilized.” We desperately need to build trust for world peace through mutual understanding. A fusion of the best from the East and the West is an ideal we can aspire to.

Ruby Tsao was born in China in 1935. She attended Taipei First Girls High School and received a B.A from the National Tainan University in 1957. She graduated from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor with a M.S. in 1960. Ms. Tsao was a librarian at George Mason University, (HARRISONBURG, VA.) and at the Florence Public Library (FLORENCE, ALA.). She is president of General Resource Technology, Inc and is treasurer of the Tsao Foundation.