

Being Authentically Chinese

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When I was young I used to really agonize over why China had to be so poor, so weak, and so backward compared to the West—surely that didn't mean that Chinese, i.e. Chinese like me, were inherently inferior to the whites?

Growing up during the sixties in North America, my self-esteem was repeatedly battered by popular culture. It was bad enough that Asians were portrayed either as vicious communist “Red Chinese” or Vietcong “gooks,” or as utterly helpless though good “Hop Sing's,” who couldn't fend for themselves and had to depend completely on Americans, i.e. white people, for protection. What's worse, however, was that the TV shows that I had come to love, their (white) heroes that I had come to admire, and movies that were all the rage among my (white) friends and classmates, viciously, though perhaps unintentionally, put down Asians, mainly Chinese.

Every week I would look forward to such shows as “Gunsmoke,” “Have Gun, Will Travel,” or “The Untouchables,” and then one day they would have an episode where the heroes fought evil Chinese, who were all absolutely useless—why, just one of the white heroes, with whom, alas, I had earlier identified, would dispose of ten top-notch kungfu masters simultaneously without even breaking a sweat! And all the prettiest and classiest Chinese women swooned at the first sight of the white heroes, abandoning hapless though very elite and patrician Chinese lovers to throw themselves at mere plebian whites.

And James Bond! James Bond, whom everyone I knew loved, everyone, that was, unless you were Chinese like me, did the same to top elite Chinese men and women except on a much grander and fancier scale. I remembered watching my first James Bond movie in sixth grade and getting very angry but very choked up, with a big lump in my throat and tears starting to come into my eyes, one part of me feeling totally ashamed of being Chinese—we were so inferior—but another part of me shouting in a rage, “The creeps! They are lying; they are making all this up! Chinese aren't such barbaric, evil weaklings!”

I knew, because I was no weakling, at least not in spirit; I could stand up to any bully in our small town grades K through 12 school where we were the only Chinese family, though he might be years older and two to three times heavier—I had been taught to fight back against any bully, no matter how big or strong, because even if you “lost” physically you always won morally and strategically, and the frightened bully who had never expected any fighting back would never touch you again. After a fight or two no one cared to bully me. Anyone who dared to taunt me with “Chinky, Chinky Chinaman!” I would curse back with an English version of some Hong Kong street vitriol, “Die, boy! Die, boy! So many people die, why don’t you die!” Seeing the anger on my face, nobody wanted to fight me, and soon no one taunted me.

As for being barbaric and evil, hadn’t my Dad always taught me that true Chinese were honest and kind, and that China was the Land of Courtesy and Integrity?

So the part in me that said the screen was lying always won over the part in me that was ashamed of being Chinese, and I would finish the show absolutely furious, but unbowed.

The townspeople were, on the whole, absolutely wonderful to us, and my (white) friends and classmates I loved dearly, but because of the TV shows and how my friends all gushed about James Bond I always felt I was a bit different. By the time I was a teenager in search of my identity, I knew I couldn’t identify with white society; no, I had to search elsewhere for my true identity.

Finding my identity meant that I had to be true to myself, to be authentic, and that meant being authentically Chinese. Did being authentically Chinese, however, mean being authentically inferior? If Chinese weren’t inferior to whites, then why was China so poor, weak, and backward, in a word, so inferior?

Well, one response from some authors I had read back then was that China’s poverty, weakness, and backwardness weren’t bad things and didn’t mean that China was inferior; it just meant that we valued “non-materialistic” stuff while the “spiritually inferior, greedy” West valued “materialistic” stuff; we were “spiritually superior”. I couldn’t buy that; it sounded too much like the ostrich burying its head in the sand. I thought to myself, “Why, sirs, you

mean all that infant mortality, all that malnutrition, all that illiteracy, all that ignorance and deprivation, that's all OK?" No, I couldn't accept it; only callous members of a rich elite from a poor country could stand up and say that it was OK that their country was poor, to say that it was just that their country was not as "materialistic" as the West. "Sure, you rich gentlemen are fine; there are lots of servants to pamper your kids and protect them from child mortality and disease, and lots of expensive elite schools to teach your kids literacy, English even—I am talking about the ordinary folk! Yes, the ones who barely get 1,200 calories a day and yet have to toil while you rich gentlemen get 2,400 and yet live in leisure!" Thought I. No, for me the response that the material level of living was unimportant didn't hold water.

So I had to accept as fact that China had been and was still, poor, weak, backward, and inferior.

Then another response, from another set of authors, was that China wasn't poor and backward to begin with—no, it was rich; it became poor and backward only because of Western aggression and exploitation. Such authors pointed to the fact that China had to pay hundreds of millions of ounces of silver and gold as reparations for losing all the wars inflicted by Western powers during the nineteenth century. But, I asked, before those wars why hadn't China developed the guns, ships, and modern weaponry? Why hadn't China industrialized before the West? When I looked into and read about the matter, I had to accept that China was poor, weak, backward and inferior compared to the West even before the West invaded.

In fact, I came to realize, Chinese and people from the rest of the world should be grateful to the whites and the West for having developed all this technology, which had lifted all mankind to a much higher level of civilization, knowledge, and health. What was more, the West was still leading and pioneering the continuous advance in science and technology, and was still continuing to do most of the work of uplifting mankind more and more.

The young me had to swallow hard and accept that what China had was poor, backward and inferior, that is, Chinese tradition and culture had bad things that had made China poor, backward and inferior compared to the West. China had to change and Chinese tradition and culture had to change. If being authentically Chinese meant sticking to the entire established and overall inferior Chinese tradition and culture, then being authentically

Chinese would be a bad thing. Well, could being authentically Chinese mean something else; could it mean a good thing?

Well, yes. After I have gotten older, I have come to know what is in Chinese tradition and culture that is good and absolutely applicable today. The Chinese heritage has the theme of the supremacy of the Cardinal Obligations, and that is applicable today and good for living happily and successfully in the modern world. (Please see my blogs on this subject, at <http://www.tsoidug.org/blog/>.) So there is something good to being authentically Chinese after all: there is a good part to the Chinese heritage that is useful for today, that even the West should adopt. Thus half of our puzzle is solved: for being authentically Chinese to mean something good, one must be true to that good and superior part of the Chinese heritage, the culture and tradition of the supremacy of the Cardinal Obligations.

Furthermore, now that I have grown older, I have come to know what has kept China in such a backward state all these centuries. It is none other than excessive government: since the Qin Dynasty of 221 B.C.E., the Chinese government has always strictly controlled commerce, regulated agriculture¹, monopolized waterworks and irrigation, monopolized the metal mines, monopolized salt production and trade, and recruited pretty well all successful inquirers into natural science into the imperial academies to be watched and controlled. For a technologically backward society, the reach of traditional China's government has been amazingly pervasive. It is none other than this excessive government that has suffocated innovation and economic development over the ages.

Coming to know that has been very liberating: now I know for sure that Chinese, including Chinese like me, aren't inherently inferior to the whites. I also know that China must, China can, and China will catch up to and maybe surpass the most advanced countries of the world. In doing so, the Chinese must purge that which has kept China backward from Chinese tradition and culture, i.e. excessive government, and to adopt or invent new, good things to replace the purged. Such new, good things will be things

¹ An example is that there has been a law under Imperial China prohibiting the slaughter of cattle for meat, because the government has "wisely decided" that cattle should be reserved for use as draught animals on farms. Beef then, is only available from cattle that have died from old age or disease.

that can propel Chinese to a higher level of wealth and progress, a level that is on a par with or surpasses the advanced countries today.

Now what is it that the West has had that has enabled it to advance so far ahead of the rest of the world as early as the 1500's, the time when famine becomes unknown in England and Holland, though still recurring in China? It is none other than the free market. And the free market is the exact opposite of China's excessive government. Now many who don't understand what the free market really is will protest at this point that the free market is barbaric and a free-for-all where the law of the jungle rules, so how can civilized China stoop so low as to adopt this barbarism? No, that's all wrong; the free market is not barbaric or where the law of the jungle rules; the free market is one of the highest attainments of human civilization and is where mutual help, not mutual harm, rules. Indeed the market is nothing but a vast arena for people to help each other. Honesty, integrity, and the highest moral and ethical standards, all things that traditional Chinese culture has emphasized and traditional Chinese aspire to, are the inevitable outcomes of a proper, truly free, free market. How so? Please see my blogs on this subject, at <http://www.tsoidug.org/blog/>. Of course, the free market as it exists in the West is not perfect, and is not even very free, and China can make it even better, freer, and more conducive to innovation and economic development, in a word, more conducive to humans helping each other.

Another thing that the West has possessed that other cultures haven't is the highest esteem for investigation and the natural sciences. Many traditional cultures think of all truth, including truth about the natural world, as being either handed down by authority or discoverable by "geniuses" thinking hard and debating among themselves. The West, however, has practiced in a grand way the concept that the truth about the natural world is discoverable by anyone who conducts scientific investigation. And in the West there has been a tradition of fanatic and brutal adherence to scientific principles: for example, Kepler abandoned years and years of theoretical work on planetary motion to embark on a new direction after discovering that his original work led to a minute but detectable discrepancy of half a second of arc between his predicted and the observed trajectory of Mars. The culture of investigation and the right of anyone, not just the ordained or the exalted, to investigate the world for truth has been a Western one.

Besides the free market and the natural sciences, there must be other very important things that will propel a society to the head of human progress, that need to be discovered and invented. Hopefully, Chinese will discover and invent them. It's high time, isn't it, that Chinese do a bigger share of the work of uplifting mankind?

So Chinese culture needs to keep the good, that is, the culture of the supremacy of the Cardinal Obligations, discard the bad, that is, the culture of excessive government, adopt good things from other cultures, that is, the culture of the free market and the natural sciences, improve on them, and invent new, good things that are not yet in existence. That is what we'll have to take as authentic Chinese culture. What is authentically Chinese now becomes a question of what should be, not what is.

Of course, even the best tradition in Chinese culture needs to be modified and re-stated in light of the modern world. For example, the doctrine of the five Cardinal Relationships (五倫) should be modified to include a sixth Cardinal Relationship (六倫) of the buyer and the seller (買賣). Some of the Cardinal Obligations binding the Cardinal Relationships need to be restated in light of modern conditions. For example, the relationship between the ruler and the subject (君臣) needs to be restated as the relationship between the government and the citizens. All that is good in tradition and thought need to be modified and restated (updated); nothing should stay as is.

So the question, "What kind of culture should be Chinese?" should become the question, "First, what is good from the past that should be updated and kept, second, what is good that Chinese culture doesn't have yet that should be adopted, and third, what is good that no culture in the world has yet that need to be discovered or invented?" Being authentically Chinese then just means being true to the good things in the Chinese heritage, which helps one live a good and happy life in today's world, and taking part in the adoption and invention of the new, good things, which the rest of the world either now has or ought to have. So it means that the culture that should be Chinese really should be a new, hybrid culture that includes something of what has been Chinese previously and is still good and great (the Cardinal Obligations), plus something good and great that hasn't been Chinese but has been present elsewhere in the world (the free market and the natural

sciences), plus perhaps something new that hasn't yet appeared anywhere in the world thus far but needs to be discovered or invented.

Well then, I've come full circle: it's not necessary to be "authentically Chinese"; it's only necessary to embrace what is good, and embracing what is good automatically includes embracing some things that are Chinese, some things that have not been Chinese, and in the future, some things that do not yet exist but will hopefully be Chinese.