

Can China provide a civil religion for tomorrow's global world?

Jacques Huynen

***Master Oriental History and Philology
Université de Louvain-la-Neuve***

***Advanced post-graduate degree (DEA) in History of Religions
Université de Liège***

Brussels, Belgium

2021-2023

A world in crisis

The aspects of the present global crisis are numerous. Some of them became more evident after 2008, but their causes reach back as far as the seventies, the first oil embargo, and even further back to the 1945 Quincey Pact. The 2020 covid-19 sanitary crisis, followed by recurring heat waves, only made them more unmistakable.

Limited resources against uncontrolled population growth might be the most worrying, followed by the effects of global warming, sea level rising, ocean pollution, the lack of prospects to a peaceful solution in the Middle East feud between endogamous nations born of the same ancestor, Abraham, and claiming the same heritage, growing global inequality as one sees some 1% of the world population controlling some 90 % of the global GDP. All these sum up as the failure of international institutions born from the 20th century World Wars.

Meanwhile the GDP of East Asia - ASEAN, Japan, South Korea – and Centra Asia continued being pulled upward by that of China's Belt and Road infrastructure building project. Although the covid virus probably originated in Wuhan, the region resumed its seemingly irresistible growth after a steep but short fall in 2020.

Obama's pivot to Asia, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA can be seen as the visible reaction of the Western World to their disappointment upon seeing that globalization did not mean westernization, and that the Orient might take the lead of it.

Voices were heard again calling for the withdrawal of the US from the United Nations. That was not new, of course. Already in the sixties and seventies signs or bumper stickers such as "get us out of the UN, and get the UN out of the US" could be seen in the US¹. Opposition to the very concept of an international organization even predated the foundation of the League of Nations in 1919.

The most recent reappearance of the motto only reminds us that most international organizations are creations of the West, for the West's purposes and the promotion of its agenda. That West that has in the meantime long been hijacked by a Middle East using it as mercenaries in its internecine feuds. As I am writing these lines Turkey is defying its NATO allies in Northern Syria, Lybia and the Aegean. Europe is caught between its security constraints and its economic interests, and held hostage by the Baltic States, Poland and Ukraine, all of which mistrust the EU's pursuit of resuming trade relations with Russia and "strategic autonomy".

One imaginary map flashes through the mind for the coming century. That of a world again divided in two: on one side a West, including Israel, Sunni Islam, and two or three Far eastern allies; on the other side China, Russia, Central and most of South-East Asia. That is what the world would look like if Biden's and his neocons "decoupling" paradigm succeeded: two different economic and cultural planets. But the non-alignment or multi-alignment of India and China's African and South-American clients might prevent that decoupling from happening. That is if the Anglo-sphere does not seek confrontation.

*

According to the traditional Chinese cosmology, time is cyclical. If it were linear, as in the Western one, it would end with the victory the West and its elite, the so called 1%. They would continue to hypnotize a more and more sub-human populace to fund their escape on an interstellar Noah's Arch

¹ A look on Wikipedia article *United States withdrawal from the United Nations* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_withdrawal_from_the_United_Nations) indicates that the theme has been recurrent since the foundation of the UN.

to Mars or elsewhere in the galaxy where they could sow the seed of their transhuman species in charge or pursuing a further “End of History”.

The election of President Biden and its neocons’ team will probably just slow down the process of East Asia’s entering more and more China’s orbit, not stop it, unless a nuclear conflict brings us back to the stone age.

A civil religion for tomorrow's global world

For the last 70 years, the Human Rights ideology, was held by many in the West as the civil religion of the End of History for the coming Global World. It was often used as a screen for the corruption by Western powers of the elites of the global South, continuing exploitation of Sub-Saharan Africa and South America, monopolizing of mineral and financial resources by the 1 %, the unstoppable growth of the GAFAMs/FANGs, the hypnotizing of the middle classes by AI to ransack Western workforces and reduce them to unemployment or becoming preys to the gig economy vultures, while the Catholic Church continued supporting global high birthrate. The UNHRC, at times composed of representatives from several Muslim countries that are guilty of some of the worst Human Rights records, continued harassing non-Muslim countries – such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka - which have equally patchy Human Rights records, but lesser financial means.

Until recently, the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the West and its liberal democratic ideology – human-rights-ist, for lack of being plainly humane (“ren” in Chinese) – remained assured of representing the final model for a globalized world. The Rest let the West believe that it was remaining unchallenged in that assurance. Even borrowings such as yoga, Zen meditation, acupuncture, and martial arts had to go through the Western filter before being universally accepted. For instance, China, although a neighbor and ancient partner of India, discovered hatha yoga only after its secular success in Europe and the US. India rediscovered Buddhism when looking at it through western lenses. The first Indian Zen master, a Jesuit, was initiated in Japan 50 years after Zen started being adopted by Westerners, becoming eventually MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction).

But for those, more numerous by the day, who find the balance sheet of the western leadership – a West in which I include Saudi Arabia and Israel - less convincing – uncontrolled demographic growth and migrations, persisting impoverishment of former western colonies - the question of the Far East, and China, being able to provide models for a new global civil religion might become relevant sooner than we think.

The emergence of China as the main economic growth engine and probable power center of the coming world makes headlines in the most serious media - not least of which is Bloomberg for instance – and makes nervous some western leaders – many of them straight from the entertainment industry.

Problems resulting from the exhaustion of non-renewable resources, the demographic explosion, the ecological and sanitary crisis seem to trigger in the western public a turn to forms of neo Animism or to a post-modern Nature worship, of which the main ethical value is that of nature-conservation and thriftiness.

The value of moderation is central to all three traditional Chinese philosophies, Taoism – a form of animism - Confucianism, and Buddhism.

It still inspires cultural attitudes and policies in all East Asian countries and, despite appearances, even in Communist China. Signs abound of them, from high levels of saving in all the countries of that world-region, to Japan's easy acceptance of stagflation and Xi Jin Ping's statement that China should only pursue the status of a "moderately developed country". A recent sign of that cultural disposition was the communist party's preventing Jack Ma's Alibaba and Ant 's IPO in the NYSE, which probably announces that China is getting ready to submit all the BAXTs to strong anti-monopoly measures. It seems that in China, the horseman is still controlling the horse.

Denying that important feature of China's ethos under the argument that China is the bigger producer of CO₂, or that it still uses coal as its main energy resource, ignores that it is also the country that invests the most in renewable energy producing infrastructure.

The imperial ritual of ancient China was mainly intended to nurture the relation between State and Nature, between the Emperor, the Son of Heaven, and Earth, Moon, and Sun. Matsu, the goddess of the Sea was the main object of worship in the maritime provinces of the South East.

Could one way for the PRC to restore the relation between Man and Nature on new grounds, and to assert the moral centrality of moderation and thriftiness be the building a new International Temple of Heaven on one of the Pacific islands that are threatened by the rising of sea levels?