

What is this thing called the decline of the West?

Written by Stephen Chan

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

What is this thing called the decline of the West?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2008/08/18/what-is-this-thing-called-the-decline-of-the-west/>

STEPHEN CHAN, AUG 18 2008

An overweening pride, perhaps, to begin with. Take the case of China, which the West has been lecturing on the intrinsic merits of democracy – a democracy experienced by the West for only two centuries – whereas China has undergone 4500 years of continuous self-government, with written records, legislation and political philosophies. To be sure, China is emerging from a protracted period of political turmoil, reaching back to the decline of the Qing and the belated nature of modernisation. Its stupendous economic growth may yet be harbinger to a period of economic turmoil as well. This economic turmoil will have disastrous effects on the West and, if it doesn't come, China's economic growth will also have major effects on the West. Who lectures whom will be a question with different answers within ten years.

But the democracy of the West was also the product of turmoil. Beginning with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and the rights of states against terrible and arbitrary wars, the US and French revolutions of 1776 and 1789 enthusiastically, clumsily and violently established the rights of persons. Democracy in variable forms followed in their wake. The thing is that, although there were shared philosophical foundations to democracy, philosophy was itself a reflection upon turmoil and the ambition to think of something better. Kant wrote against the background of the Thirty Years War, 1618-1648, which devastated large parts of Europe, particularly what is now Germany. The young Hegel was an admirer of Napoleon, conquering Europe and leaving Constitutions in his wake. The assumption on the part of the West is that the same philosophical foundations for democracy should emerge from very different turmoil in other parts of today's world. There has been a normative antagonism to the Russian, Chinese and Iranian revolutions, with no sustained effort to understand the values that arose from them. And the West has simply failed to acknowledge the Atatürk revolution, when it should have seized upon its secularism.

This has resulted in two major failures. The first, operational over-reach of capacity – the belief that Western might could not be matched, I leave to others to criticise. The second, a failure to imagine others as they see themselves, is part of a conjoint failure of self-imagination. It is a failure to imagine oneself as becoming, or being able to become something different. This I see as something more serious, particularly as the preconditions to the imagination of oneself as another – empathy and solidarity – seem also threadbare in the Western enunciation of the political world. It is a (Western) universality or nothing, and the assertion of this universality finds mere commonality insufficient. If this overstates the case, the rhetoric of the 2008 US Presidential election doesn't. What both rhetoric and imagination of others share is not only the assumption that 'universal' values should arise from different conflicts and turmoil, but that the performativity of these values, their enactment, should derive from the Western template. The value of democracy demands the performance of an election (unless, curiously, it elects a government or president with non-Western values, e.g. Hamas in Palestine and Ahmedinejad in Iran). Where this insistence becomes troublesome for Western foreign policy (not only because, as in Kenya, it doesn't work) is in the contemporary emergence of what the French thinker, Bernard Henri-Levy, has called "super-ideological" issues – the perceived contest in the export of values, ultra-liberalism and 'fundamentalist' Islam, the 'end of history' and the 'first men' who wish to start history anew. At this particular crossroads of history there seem very different maps, and the modes of travel seem to reflect very different values.

It may be that there are simply some moments of history that are intrinsically, inescapably teleological. It may be that we are coming to the end of one hundred years of globally competitive teleologies and entering an era where there is in fact no competition at all, but where there is much deliberate talking past, and talking beyond, actors which would

What is this thing called the decline of the West?

Written by Stephen Chan

once have been described as rivals. Or it may be that the world is becoming a place of both. I now want to make some suggestions as to how Iran and China fit into separate categories and how the West has mistaken both. It has also mistaken something common to both, and that is the desire to perform stability in the wake of turmoil. And both countries, although with the surety of their own values, have imagined themselves as another. In some ways, Iran imagined the values and emblems of Western imagination before the West did.

There is still, for instance, a lot of Zoroastrian cultural influence in Iran. The predecessor religion to Islam can lay claim to an antiquity far greater than Christianity's, yet can claim the essential Christian totems as its own: the monotheism of a single creator god, and the virgin birth of the messiah teacher, Zoroaster. The descendant cult of Mithras, brought to Rome by soldiers returning from the Persian frontline, may well have inflected the development of Christianity. Nietzsche's Zarathustra is in some ways a caricature of Zoroaster and his teaching, but Zarathustra's patient search for truth in all quarters does reflect the essential cosmopolitan nature of Zoroastrianism. A more sedate version of Ahmedinejad might well lift his lines from the Shahnameh, Ferdowsi's 11th century epic of the kings of Persia. In Chapter 34, based upon the Persian defeat of the Roman Emperor Vespasian, an Iranian philosopher is lecturing the Roman Caesar on the world's religions. He comes finally to Christianity.

Do you not see what Jesus son of Mary said when he was revealing the secrets which had been hidden? He said, if someone takes your shirt, do not contend too fiercely with him, and if he smites you on the cheek so that your vision darkens with the blow, do not put yourself into a rage nor let your face turn pale. Close your eyes to him and speak no harsh word. In your eating be content with the least morsel of food, and if you lack worldly possessions do not seek about after them. Overlook the evil things and pass meekly through this dark vale. But for you now lust has become dominant over wisdom and your hearts have gone astray from justice and honour. Your palaces soar up to Saturn and camels are needed to carry the keys to your treasure-houses. With the treasures you have arrayed many armies in resplendent proud armour. Everywhere you fight as aggressors, destroy the peace with your swords, and turn the fields into pools of blood. The messiah did not guide you along this path.

Of course, Ahmedinejad seems unable to phrase his critique of the West in such calm, almost kind, tutelary words; but substitute the US president for the Roman emperor and the thrust of the critique is the same. The irony of the passage from the Shahnameh is that the East knows the foundations of Western thought better than the West, and reminds the West how it has overstepped its own marks.

Not that Ahmedinejad seems to talk 'to' and of the West in anything other than strident or mocking tones. He seems almost to go out of his way to talk past the West, not even talk at it. He has some nice antithetical imagery with which to conduct this exercise. Fukuyama's rendition of Kojeve's rendition of Hegel's 'end of history' and Nietzsche's 'last men' is antithetically matched by the Shia doctrine of the return of the hidden Iman from his 'occultation' and bringing with him the renewal of history. In Shia terms this will be a new history of 'just men'; in Nietzschean terms they would be the 'first men' of a new history. Ahmedinejad has told believers at the mosque where the hidden Iman will reappear that he expects this to happen within two years. Whether this is his true belief or electioneering is uncertain. It is certainly good political imagery of the new supplanting the old – the old that, by its own use of Hegelian philosophical terms, has declared its history ended. In that sense he is talking to the West, but insultingly. In terms of belief, if he does indeed hold the return to be true, it is a talking past the West. The West, in effect, doesn't matter anymore or, within two years, won't matter.

But this is not all there is to Ahmedinejad – certainly not to the ruling elites in Iran. The clerical faction might have hijacked the revolution, but its intellectual animation lay with the philosopher, Ali Shari'ati. Sartre, a confirmed atheist, once commented that if he had to have a religion it would be the religion of Shari'ati – by which he meant Shari'ati's quite wonderful blend of Western philosophical knowledge, including Sartre's own existentialism, Persian and Zoroastrian mysticism, and a modernistic though reverential reading of the Qu'ran. Shari'ati's knowledge of Western philosophy came from his long stay in France, where he was a doctoral student at the height of existentialism, symbolism and surrealism. He followed those debates, was a small part of those circles, and sought a fusion of the best of the new from the Western old to help him fashion what he hoped would be the resurgence of the Islamic old in a new way. Although the clerics triumphed over Shari'ati's followers, many of those who are loosely labeled either liberal reformers or moderate conservatives are still influenced by his thought. Ahmedinejad is not hermetically

What is this thing called the decline of the West?

Written by Stephen Chan

sealed from this significant current of Iranian political thought. He knows it and, in knowing it, can both talk past the West but also talk, if he wishes, to the West in a way that is more Western than many Western politicians could understand. It is this ability that consistently wrong-foots Western politicians.

The case of China is somewhat different in many respects. Like the Persians in their era and region, and the US in the era now perhaps ending, the Chinese always thought of themselves as the centre of the world: all that was known and important. There was, however, neither a Persian cosmopolitanism nor a Western sense of individual equality and freedom. Instead, all persons stood within a strict hierarchy and, although all had equal responsibilities, those who governed had greater burdens, i.e. everyone bore obligations within the hierarchy, but heads of family and heads of nations had to care for greater numbers below them. Now, although individual freedom has never come to China, and official equality is not evident in actual Party practice, the West does not appreciate the astounding intellectual breakthrough of the contemporary Chinese regime in asserting, and investing in the idea that all states in the international arena are equal. It is a neat contradistinction, because it allows the West – in whose states all are meant to be equal – to be depicted as disallowing equality in its international power politics. In the international realm, democracy is made subservient to power which serves the interests of a single state, or small group of states; and it is the Chinese who assert and champion the values of the Treaty of Westphalia.

After the Korean war of the 1950s, and in the face of Soviet might in 1979, moving without warning out of a 'clear blue sky', into Afghanistan, China would not risk a confrontation of military power with either the US or the old USSR. It went to elaborate and expensive lengths to demonstrate it could, but wouldn't. Instead, biding time while slowly discharging its large burden of responsibility to bring its people up to a certain level of care and economic capacity, it inscrutably studied the ways and means of global Western capitalism. The result, as depicted within the global outreach of the current Chinese economic 'miracle', is that the Chinese have discovered and exploited the single greatest strength and weakness of the Western model – that of private capital. Precisely because the great corporations are not state corporations, the capacities of the state cannot be thrown behind corporate expansionism into new markets. The corporations fend for themselves and have done so extraordinarily well. They have, in any case, larger revenues and turnovers than some of their state clients. But they cannot field the automaticity that the Chinese have developed, linking Chinese corporate business interests with state developmental assistance and financial stabilization packages for client states. Instead of rejecting Western practice, the Chinese have simply married the Western model to their own and shown, in an array of developing markets and suppliers at least, that it is better – or perceived to be better. But this means that Sinopec, for instance, studied the activities and business habits of e.g. Chevron Texaco to a much more expert extent than either the US Government or Chevron Texaco studied Sinopec's. The Chinese of course are pursuing their own interests, but their business model simultaneously allows them internationally to depict themselves as fostering relations among equals, and nationally as discharging Confucian responsibilities to weaker brethren. It is this conjoint knowledge of the West and responsibility to their own heritage that confuses observers in the US and Europe. As for their clients or 'equal partners' in the Third World, the Chinese are seen not to have attempted to export their own governmental model, values and philosophies. Their clients have to perform nothing Chinese. It is simultaneously a neat dispensation and critique, by contrast, of the West.

It may simply be a neat performance of tactics, but it is probably a combination of that with a certain cunning cosmopolitanism. Neither Iran nor China shirk their own power interests – the two, together with the US, have commonalities, being the world's three biggest practitioners of capital punishment for instance – and can be as bloody-minded and ruthless as the West, if not more so. But, usually, there is a greater knowingness on their part than on ours.

What this means in terms of the US performance of intellectual reflection is that we have a sorry state of affairs. The Huntington thesis of a 'clash of civilizations' is simply not true. There are clashes to be sure, but they know more about our 'civilization' than we know about what we assume to be theirs, and often they practise our own better. The dire Robert Kagan warning against 'fundamentalist' Islamic hordes who need to be repelled by the laws of the jungle is predicated on a fundamental misreading. There is nothing fundamentalist about what should rightly be read as a complex and meaningful challenge. You can't blow thought out of the sky.

What is this thing called the decline of the West?

Written by Stephen Chan

It is thought that both talks past, so that it seems there is nothing with which one can engage, while talking beyond. It is beyond our knowledge of their knowledge of us. It is also beyond our knowledge of their knowledge, upon which their knowledge of us is built. We have nothing of theirs upon which to fasten because we have not bothered to learn anything of theirs. We have been too busy lecturing others. We have been, like our own critiques of Chinese ossification over the centuries, buried in our own conceit that we are the middle kingdom, the centre of the earth. The danger is that, one day, some other person will read us our funeral rites in our own language, and with better grammar and diction than we ourselves managed, while reshaping the world of which we thought we were the centre. In answer to my question, this thing called the decline of the West is ignorance.

Stephen Chan is Professor of International Relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), UK.

About the author:

Stephen Chan OBE was Foundation Dean of Law and Social Sciences at SOAS University of London, where he remains as Professor of World Politics. He has occupied many named chairs around the world, most recently the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Chair of Academic Excellence at Bir Zeit University in 2015, and the George Soros Chair of Public Policy at the Central European University in 2016. He was the 2010 International Studies Association Eminent Scholar in Global Development. As an international civil servant he helped pioneer modern electoral observation in Zimbabwe in 1980, worked in many post-conflict zones – where ‘post’ was a largely fictional if politic appellation – and continues to be seconded to many diplomatic initiatives around the world today. He is the author of *Meditations on Diplomacy: Comparative Cases in Diplomatic Practice and Foreign Policy* (2017).