
China and the Clash of Civilizations—Is the 1993 Forecast by Samuel Huntington Still Valid?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Will the future relationship between China and the West, particularly the United States, be one of conflict or cooperation? Since Samuel Huntington's 1993 article, "The Clash of Civilizations," this question has been widely discussed, especially in the context of a debate between him and Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama argued in his famous 1989 essay, "The End of History?" that with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent break-up of the Soviet Union, countries throughout the world would eventually evolve into democracies with free market economies. Samuel Huntington strongly disagreed and forecast that one of the major future clashes would be between China and the West. Since the 1990s, China has had rapid economic growth, but very little democratic progress. What will happen in the future? Three factors, the huge expansion of higher education in China, the rapid increase in English language fluency with a potentially profound impact on Chinese intellectual consciousness, and steady progress in the improvement of Chinese rule of law may prevent a clash between China and the West and perhaps even lead to 21st century cooperation, even if Chinese progress towards a traditional democracy moves very slowly.

Keywords: China, Rule of Law, Chinese Democracy

INTRODUCTION

One of the most critical issues of the 21st Century is the future economic and social development of China. A question often asked, especially 25 years after the Tiananmen Square demonstrations is: How much and when will political rights improve in China? Related to this question is the argument put forth by Francis Fukuyama in the "The End of History?" (1989) that with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the entire world would eventually evolve into democracies encompassing freedom of speech and strong rule of law. Economic growth from free markets would fuel societal modernization and the broad based mass education which invariably follows. Historical evidence often cited to support these beliefs is the gradual transformation of former dictatorships to democracies in South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia and many countries throughout Latin America. Seymour Martin Lipset (1959), the only person who has been President of both the American Political Science Association and the American Sociological Association, argued that as economies and societies become more sophisticated, authoritarian regimes cannot easily control complicated decision-making which together with a growing middle class leads inevitably to greater democracy.

In contrast, Samuel Huntington (1993), in response to Fukuyama, his former doctoral student, argued that culture trumps economic development. In the second paragraph of his seminal article, he said, "The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural" (Huntington, 1993, p. 22). He argued that clashes are most likely when the eight great civilizations (Western, Orthodox, Islamic, Buddhist, Chinese, Hindu, Japonic, and Sub-Saharan Africa) are in close proximity. Evidence supporting this argument would be the conflicts in the Middle East, Kashmir, and the former

Yugoslavia. Huntington said the two greatest future clashes would ensue between the West and Islam and the West and China because deep cultural traditions conflict with the forces of western modernity. It is startling to read in his 1993 article the following words, “Buoyed by spectacular economic development, China is rapidly increasing its military spending and vigorously moving forward with the modernization of its armed forces...Its military buildup and assertion of sovereignty over the South China Sea are provoking a multilateral regional arms race in East Asia” (Huntington, 1993, p. 47). That statement was over twenty years ago when China was much poorer and still appears relevant, especially in the context of recent armed clashes in the South China Sea and the subsequent violence in Vietnam against Chinese businesses.

ECONOMIC GROWTH AND DEMOCRACY

This debate between the ideas of Huntington and Fukuyama revolves around the impact of economic growth and its possible influence on democratic evolution. This discussion is multifaceted as demonstrated in an extensive review of the empirical literature by Robinson (2006) which analyzed various explanations of economic effects on democratic progress. China is a powerful example of this problematic linkage because despite an eight-fold increase in its GDP since 1980, the communist party still leads an authoritarian government with severe limits on freedom of speech and press. How much progress has been made since 1980? One way to analyze this is to examine the definition of a democracy. In *Modern Government—Democracy and Authoritarianism*, Wesson (1990) identified the following criteria:

- 1) Individual freedom of expression
- 2) Free media
- 3) Regular elections
- 4) Universal right to vote
- 5) Limited terms of office
- 6) Independent judiciary
- 7) Non-political state bureaucracy
- 8) Non-political police and military
- 9) Access to state information

Based on those criteria, China has yet to achieve even a very limited democracy, but some progress has occurred during the last 35 years. Even though political freedom, especially organized action against the government has been strongly repressed, individual freedom of expression has been tolerated in terms of personal conversations evaluating the performance of the government as long as they do not lead to major public protests against communist party rule.

As for free media, the government-owned *China Business Press* in 2006 reported labor abuses at the Foxconn factory that makes Apple’s iPod. When the two journalists who wrote the article were sued by Foxconn for defamation and a local court froze their personal assets, their publisher strongly supported them and said their reporting “was not a violation of any rules, laws, or journalistic ethics” (Hill, 2012, p. 138). Professor Charles Hill, author of ten editions of the textbook, *International Business*, concluded his discussion of this case by saying it showed “the emergence of some journalistic freedoms in a nation that has historically seen news organizations as a mouthpiece for the state” (Hill, 2012, p. 138).

In terms of regular elections, they are not held in China and therefore also the universal right to vote does not exist. However, the rulers of China have served limited terms of office, and very importantly, since 1990, the Presidents of China have served ten years in office and then have retired.

As for an independent judiciary, the communist party controls the judicial machinery, but progress towards a more professional judiciary has been made and there has been a significant discussion in China about an improved practice of law.

The last three criteria of democracy (Wesson, 1990) encompassing non-political state bureaucracy, police, military and access to state information can be addressed in terms of progress towards more rule of law which has been analyzed in academic publications (Santoro, 2009; Upham, 2005).

Michael Santoro (2009), in *China 2020: How Western Business Can—and Should—Influence Social and Political Change in the Coming Decade*, argued that a significant event improving the rule of law was the international treaty signed by China when it joined the World Trade Organization in 2001. That agreement required the Chinese government to have clearly defined administrative processes to allow international companies to challenge government decisions. Santoro argued that western companies have a social responsibility to use those procedures to further the development of the rule of law in China. Santoro also emphasized the Labor Contract Law of 2008 which he said provides specific worker rights equivalent to Europe, at least on paper. Critical to this law is the degree of implementation, which in China has been problematic. But the existence of the law is crucially important and Chinese social activists have used this recent legislation to improve working conditions, thus also advancing the rule of law. In terms of business regulation, Santoro mentioned that since 1999, a wide array of new laws has been implemented by the Chinese government in anti-trust, intellectual property, insurance and financial regulation.

At the end of his book, Santoro discussed two future possibilities for China, “Pax China” and “Nox China.” Pax China would see continued modernization of China as its economy moves up the business value chain with improved rule of law. Its opposite, Nox China, would occur if the Chinese government felt threatened by political instability and tightened its authoritarian control. This debate about an optimistic or pessimistic Chinese future has been active since the recent installation of President Xi Jinping. Since his inauguration, his actions have been considered a victory for the hardliners and a defeat for reformers. One prominent Chinese expert, David Shambaugh, Director of the China Policy Program in the Elliott School of International Affairs at the George Washington University, has recently written in the *National Interest*:

[The] political system remains ossified and repressive. Meanwhile, the country is not undertaking the political and legal reforms needed to spur the next phase of growth because they would directly impinge on the monopoly power of the CCP [Chinese Communist Party]. . . . Several Sinologists now argue that the CCP itself is the principal impediment to future growth and development in China. The party is an increasingly insecure, sclerotic and fragile institution that has become paralyzed since 2008. (Shambaugh, 2014)

CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS—ROLE OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The relationship between China and the West is influenced by deep cultural differences. As Hofstede (1983) and others have argued, individualism protected by the American Bill of Rights is one of the defining cultural dimensions of the United States and western civilization. In contrast, Asian societies, particularly China, emphasize group obligations. The goal of a stronger, more powerful China taking precedence over the improvement of human rights is embedded in the cultural consciousness of China and is part of the communist party philosophy. Following the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, the Chinese government published an official white paper on human rights which articulated that:

- 1) Priority must be given to political stability and economic growth over political rights
- 2) Human rights are under the authority of the Chinese government, and other countries should not intervene in the sovereign affairs of China
- 3) Chinese culture gives priority to group needs over that of individuals

To drive this point home, the 1991 document, entitled, “Human Rights in China,” issued by the China State Council, concluded that “the right to subsistence is the most important of human rights, without which the other rights are now out of the question” (Santoro, 2009, p.8; Kent, 1993).

Two decades later, this duality of the goal of a stronger China versus human rights still exists. In late 2013, *The New York Review of Books* had two essays. One was entitled, “Dreams of a Different China” (Johnson, 2013) and described the campaign of the new President of China, Xi Jinping, to achieve a “Chinese Dream” of national rejuvenation, based on the Chinese term, “fuqiang,” which translates into wealth and power. Similar to Huntington’s thesis of different civilizations,

Schell and Delury (2014) argued that the western ideal is embodied in the French phrase, “liberte, egalite, and fraternite,” whereas China’s history, especially in the last two hundred years, has emphasized the struggle for “wealth, strength, and honor.” The pursuit of Chinese greatness contrasts with the second essay, just one month later, that was entitled, “China: ‘Capitulate or Things Will Get Worse’ ” (Link, 2013), which discussed how the Chinese government has continued to use a wide array of repressive techniques, some brutal, to stifle political dissent.

Since 1991, economic growth has changed the consciousness of many Chinese citizens, even if democratic progress has been very limited. The *New Yorker* correspondent, Evan Osnos, after living in China from 2005 to 2012, has written a book with the intriguing title, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*. (2014). Osnos says his “book is an account of the collision of two forces: aspiration and authoritarianism. Forty years ago the Chinese people had virtually no access to fortune, truth, or faith—three things denied them by politics and poverty....The longer I lived in China, the more I sensed that the Chinese people have outpaced the political system that nurtured their rise. The Party has unleashed the greatest expansion of human potential in world history—and spawned, perhaps, the greatest threat to its survival” (Osnos, p. 7). The word ambition in the title of the book is particularly pertinent. Osnos says the closest equivalent in the Chinese language for ambition is the phrase “ye xin,” which translates as wild heart. In the context of Chinese culture, wild heart has been associated with savage abandon and absurd expectations, especially among young people. Osnos quotes a phrase from a Chinese collection of political advice called the *Huaninanzi* that warned rulers to “keep powerful positions out of the hands of the ambitious, just as one keeps sharp tools out of the hands of the foolish” (Osnos, p. 27). As is commonly said in Asia, the nail that sticks up is quickly hammered down. Culturally and historically, China has long emphasized collective goals and group allegiances. Recent economic growth has led to the recent tension between group consciousness and individual ambition.

IMPACT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE FLUENCY

Osnos also emphasized the importance of the English language, because being fluent in English opens the mind to the world outside the Chinese language. He described the rapid growth in private English language schools and featured in his writings young Chinese citizens who are ambitious to explore the world opened by the knowledge of the English language. Over 200 million Chinese now have some fluency in English (Qu, 2007), and instruction in the language starts at age ten in all Chinese schools.

The increased fluency in English has been fueled by the rapid expansion of higher education. Since 1998, college enrollment has grown from 3.4 million students to over 31 million in 2011 representing 27% of the college-age population (People Daily Online, 2011). Perhaps of more significance in terms of the freedom to pursue truth, 400,000 Chinese students enrolled outside China in 2011 with half of them in the USA. Of particular significance, 95% of these students are self-funded, meaning their parents are financing their education (China Daily, 2013; Institute of International Education, 2012). Their parents represent the economic and political elite of China (the daughter of President Xi Jinping is enrolled at Harvard), and these overseas children are getting an education in an atmosphere of academic freedom in contrast to the government censorship pervading Chinese society.

How strong will the forces of individualism grow in China and how will the Chinese government respond to its evolution? It is difficult to get research data on this subject, especially since the Chinese government discourages and sometimes forbids polling that involves democracy, especially in the aftermath of Tiananmen Square. Economic growth is promoted by the Chinese government, but written discussions of democracy are frequently prohibited. It is worth noting that the huge statue widely televised in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989 was explicitly called, “The Goddess of Democracy,” and that this specific phrase is forbidden in Chinese internet searches.

THE FUTURE OF CHINESE RULE OF LAW

The future of democracy and human rights in China has been widely discussed, and very little progress in the near future is anticipated, especially under the current political leadership. But significant progress might be made in the rule of law, which is especially important for business. Not only could progress in rule of law help Chinese citizens exercise more legal rights, but its improvement would move China in a positive direction, especially in the context of the democratic criterion of non-political state bureaucracy.

Although there are cultural differences between China and the West, significant positive interaction between American and Chinese legal scholars have occurred during the last three decades. Frank Upham, the Co-Director of the U.S.-Asia Law Institute at the New York University School of Law, is fluent in Chinese and has travelled extensively in China since the 1980s, including several teaching assignments in China. His 2005 Yale Law Journal essay (Upham, 2005) describes both the recent evolution of Chinese law and the cultural differences between Chinese and American law. The 44-page article reviews the book, *Sending Law to the Countryside: Research on China's Basic-Level Judicial System*, written by Zhu Suli, Dean of the prestigious Beijing University Law School. Although Zhu's book was supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation to study rule of law in China, he emphasized the cultural characteristics of China. One of the interesting features of Chinese law is the role of Adjudication Committees, which usually consists of ten judges. If a local court decision is controversial or significant, it frequently is appealed to an Adjudication Committee. The dynamics of the ten judge panel leads to pressure for group consensus, with a strong preference for a unanimous decision. Many of the judges on the Adjudication Committees have very little judicial training and frequently are former military officers. In the United States, most federal cases are decided by a single judge based on independent judicial analysis. An appeal would go to a three judge panel, and beyond that, only a very small percentage of federal law suits are heard by the nine justice Supreme Court.

One of Zhu's prominent colleagues at the Beijing University Law School, He Weifang, has strongly advocated for the increased professionalization of China's judiciary with the goal of creating a system that aims to achieve legal justice rather than social harmony. Kaplan also notes that among top law schools in Asia including China, there is an academic consensus in eventually moving towards a "formalist rule-of-law model with its calls for clear property rights and strict contract enforcement [which] sets the ideological tone for law reform efforts whether undertaken by international financial institutions, the American government, or Chinese academics." Kaplan also notes that "the creation of a rule-of-law country is an official goal of the state and the Communist Party" (Kaplan, 2005, p. 1702-3).

Although within China, there is an extensive discussion about how to improve the judicial system and move towards more rule of law, Kaplan says there is very little discussion of the role of the Chinese Communist Party in the judicial system. This is particularly important, because judicial independence from politics is a major criterion in determining the democratic quality of a government. And there appears to be little movement towards that in China, especially under the new Communist Party leadership.

At a 2014 book signing in New York, Osnos was asked about his opinion of the future of rule of law in China. He replied that it would take a huge change in the culture of China for it to significantly improve. Implied in his response is that the cultural differences between the West and China are very wide. The reality is that American business is used to a high quality, independent federal judiciary whereas the Chinese Communist Party still controls the court system in China.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to predict the future of China. When asked to make a forecast, experts on China are frequently reluctant to do so. In particular, Evan Osnos said the more he studies China, the more he realizes how very complex its future is. As China becomes more educated and as its economy becomes more sophisticated, perhaps a gradual movement towards meeting the criteria of democracy will ensue, even if very slowly.

How should the American government conduct itself in its interaction with China? This of course, raises the Huntington issue of the “Clash of Civilizations.” Discussing public opinion in China, the Pew Research Center reported in a survey conducted in 2012 by the Peking University’s Research Center for Contemporary China, that 41% viewed the U.S. military presence in East Asia to be a significant concern, and 63% considered the United States to be the nation that was its greatest threat (Wike, 2013). In 2013, the Pew Research Center reported that American attitudes towards China had shifted in just two years from only 37% of the public having a positive view of China compared to 51% just two years prior. Xie Tao, professor of political science at Beijing Foreign Studies Universities, said this negative shift could be explained by China’s actions in the South China Sea (Voice of America, 2013). This sensitive relationship between the United States and China is highlighted by the title of a recent article in the prominent American international journal, *Foreign Affairs*, “How to Prevent U.S. Chinese Relations from Blowing Up.” This article recommended careful restraint by the American government (Steinberg & O’Hanlon, 2014). However, the Appropriations Committee of the American House of Representatives voted on June 24, 2014 to rename the street address of the Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C. to No 1, Liu Xiaobo Plaza in honor of the jailed Chinese Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. The Chinese government has lodged a strong protest (Laris, 2014) and such a law cannot be viewed as constructive in terms of positive Chinese American relationships.

Despite the somber tone of his landmark article, Huntington’s final two sentences represent an intriguing recommendation: “It will require an effort to identify elements of commonality between Western and other civilizations. For the relevant future, there will be no universal civilization, but instead a world of different civilizations, each of which will have to learn to coexist with the others” (Huntington, 1993, p. 49).

Americans should minimize negative approaches to China and instead be patient, while waiting for positive changes in the intellectual consciousness of China. The recent expansion of higher education and English fluency may lead its youth to explore modern views of society and seek their implementation in China. Even if the Chinese government remains communist, steady improvement in the rule of law, both domestically and in terms of international business, may minimize dangerous conflicts between the West and China and perhaps could even lead to cooperation between the two civilizations in meeting the global challenges of the 21st century.

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