

Speech to Beijing International Friends Seminar, November 5

It is a privilege to be here today, and to have the opportunity to express some thoughts. At the time of writing this I am not certain of who is present today, but the invitation to speak is very open.

That you are all present in Beijing attending an 'International Friends Seminar' indicates a strong interest in China, and interest in and understanding of what is the real China.

The PRC China has just celebrated its 70th anniversary, and there has been a lot of coverage in the Chinese media about the profound achievements over this brief period, and where China is placed to further this progress for her people. It has also been an occasion to promote the position that China holds in the global community, in the past, now, and in the future.

Especially in the last four decades, the world has observed a major transformation of Chinese society, economy, and position on the world stage. China has become an indispensable global player. Yet in the west, the dominant narrative has failed to understand that this does not mean that China has become westernised. China is creating an alternative to the west.

The west has not made a serious effort to understand, let alone present, a Chinese perspective, and to a great extent has not appreciated that an alternative understanding exists. Confucius said "real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance." The west, with its western-centric approach, and through its ignorance and failure to understand China, has placed itself in peril of being left behind in a newly emerging world order.

We see this ignorance in headlines in the western media, in which the western perspective is dominant. There is selective reporting to portray negative impressions, and fact is often misrepresented. Too often western reporting lacks critical evaluation, leading to a very low credibility within the media to further the dialogue and promote a valid understanding of China.. Fake News does exist!

My own journey in China has been in two key areas. First, I have been involved in rural community development in poor areas, with a focus on promoting cooperatives as a means by which smallholder farmers can engage in broader markets. Secondly in organising educational tours and delegations to China to experience real China. Over the last 25 years I have personally witnessed significant improvements in the livelihoods of the poorest families, and development of broad opportunities for all. This is reflected in the satisfaction and openness of Chinese people from all walks of life. And the slow but steady advancement of women in society. My understanding of China has come largely from the people I know.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend the National Day parade in Tiananmen on October 1. President Xi Jinping delivered a wide ranging speech, which covered the advances made by China over the last 70 years. He spoke of the progress made in the lives of the people, rapid infrastructural development and the incredible advances of China to become a nation at the forefront of technological development. He spoke of the position that China now holds in the world, and his vision for the shared future for mankind.

This was followed by a military parade displaying strength, which President Xi assured was a defensive force. The need for China to develop this can be appreciated from the historic period of shame in which a weak China was humiliated by western imperialism. Society was devastated by the opium trade in the 19th century, and the forced concessions to control by western powers that came out of the opium war and included cessation of Hong Kong and Macao 155 and 112 years ago respectively. This was then followed by invasion from Japan in the 20th century.

The military parade was followed by a civilian parade displaying everything from diverse ethnic groups and farming to urban life through to advanced technology. All of this was broadcast to the world!

It was very disappointing, although not unexpected, to see the western media reports on the celebration of China's progress over 70 years headlining with such phrases as "doomsday weapon can reach USA in 30 minutes", and "China's National Day Parade involved lots of scary looking weapons". This is to focus on threat, and to overlook the celebration of achievement of 25% of the world's population and to ignore optimism for a harmonious global community.

To fully appreciate China we need to look back at least 2500 years to the foundation of Chinese society and culture. The philosophies of Lao Zi, and Daoism, and Confucius are still very important and apparent today.

To me, Daoism provides us with many aspects of the special nature of Chinese culture and philosophy. The concept of yin and yang is well known in the west, but not fully understood or practiced by many, either individuals or leaders. Yin and Yang brings us harmony and balance through the integration of opposites.

China has a cultural heritage of opposites creating balance. For example, crisis in Chinese, 危机 consists of two characters, wei(1) and ji (1), to represent peril AND opportunity.

Chinese food is a Chinese culture that most of us feel we are familiar with. Underlying the creation of dishes is the philosophy of creating balance, through a simple combination of a range of different elements. Sweet and Sour is a well-known example of apparently opposing tastes, but also different textures and colour combinations are valued.

In Chinese medicine, there is a holistic approach that treats the whole body - in which imbalance between yin and yang, hot and cold, are the cause of dis - ease. The solution is to restore balance rather than targeting the specific symptom or problem area in isolation. The solutions offered tend to take a longer time to take effect, with a focus to work in harmony with the body. This is not to say that western medicine is imperfect, I merely use this as an example of a Chinese approach to seeking solutions to problems.

Confucianism also brings the concept of Da Ai 大爱, a 'big love' in which relationships and a focus on community are important.

Confucius contribution to Chinese society also provides a difference to western society. Eastern and western philosophical aspects of society have a similar time span from Confucian and ancient Greek times forward, but the confluence is minimal. Put very basically, eastern society places the community, or a concept of Da Ai 大爱, a 'big love', and a 'big family', as the most important component of society. This can place all considerations of societal issues in a subjective framework. Western society emphasises the individual in a more objective framework.

These elements, presented in an overly simplistic form just now, remain significant in modern Chinese thought and social structure, and are evident in Xi Jinping's vision for her people, and a shared future for the world. "Unity with diversity" and a "harmonious global community" are attractive alternatives available to us all.

Looking at my region, New Zealand is in the Pacific. Recently two more Pacific Island nations switched their allegiance to China. The pressure from the Anglophonic world that they should be wary of this new allegiance can be seen as a new form of colonialism. That is, the west knows what is best for these small and vulnerable states, they should stay with their traditional allies. In reality however, the Pacific Island connections to China go back thousands of years with migration starting out of China. The culture of the Pacifica people shares closer affinity with the community based culture of China than it does to western individualism. Independent Pacific Island nations are capable of making their own decisions.

I will restate: The western expectation that China, as she transforms into a developed nation, will adopt a western approach is to fail to understand and recognise 'What is China'. Those western countries and leaders who retain this mentality will be slow to participate in the new era. The current attempts to undermine China can only act to the detriment of those who fail to participate in this vision. The only losers are those who do not yet understand.

We as friends of China need to promote the Chinese perspective, and encourage an appreciation of the contribution China is now able to make. We need to stand up and challenge our media to present balanced reports, and move away from their anti- China rhetoric. Slowly people are beginning to understand China.

Napolean Bonaparte said "Let China sleep, for when she awakes she will shake the world". Seventy years ago, Mao Zedong declared that "the Chinese people have stood up". Now we can look forward to balance through new development opportunities for poorer countries, and a unified world of diverse cultures, through cooperation rather than confrontation.

We here today in Beijing are part of spreading the message!

Thank you.