No tradition, especially one which has endured as long as China's, can be free of contradictions, not only over time but at any one period. That they exist in no way suggests a flawed society; indeed their presence may perhaps be taken as a measure of sophistication, a readiness to explore varieties of attitudes and approaches and to cultivate a flexible multi-faceted view of the world along as wide a spectrum as possible.

Chinese civilization has often been admired for the richness and variety of its explorations of the human mind. The Chinese share of the human experience is indeed a rich catalogue, encompassing over some 4,000 years most of what people anywhere have conceived, pursuing successive avenues of inquiry, development, philosophy, and action. The distinctiveness of the Chinese experience, apart from its scale, is that it has to such a large extent been cumulative. Even now one may say that Chinese tradition has in most respects remained unbroken. China at almost any period is a composite of what was evolved or woven into the cultural fabric during preceding centuries.

This is not of course to say that change was absent; new elements were periodically added, new avenues explored, new solutions tried. But much of this experimentation and growth was preserved in each successive period, if not in action then in the Chinese mind as part of collective experience. Especially after the Qin, there were few sharp breaks with the past, few forgotten episodes, and few radical shifts into new directions which might have taken the society into a notably different world of values or of action. Even as changes did evolve or older patterns modified or discarded, the cumulative experience of the past remained very much a part of the Chinese consciousness and continued to shape values and action as it preserved antitheses. The contrast with the Western experience is a sharp one. Nearly all Chinese even now feel a deep sense of pride, as they have always done, in being the heirs of a Great Tradition stretching back to the mythical Yellow Emperor and the Great Yu (if not beyond), a tradition of which they feel a living part and which makes them members of a special, half-overtly superior lineage--a claim hard to gainsay in the perspective of the past two millennia.

The mention of change within an unbroken tradition may suggest the first of the antitheses I would like briefly to explore. There have of course been many periods of real or perceived decline in the long span of Chinese history, periods when unsolved problems seemed more prominent than accomplishments. It is not perhaps surprising but nonetheless interesting that at most such times there were antithetical responses: those which sought solutions in a return to ancient norms and virtues, and those which instead prescribed radical new remedies. Contending prescriptions were of course most prominent in the declining years of each dynasty, as in the familiar case of late Qing when "Back to the Western Han" vied as a sloganistic cure for China's ills with the opposing goals of the Hundred Days and their successor, Mr. S(science) and Mr. D(emocracy). But even the Zhou conquest of Shang was justified by the Zhou accusation that the Shang king neglected the tablets of his ancestors and by this implication suggesting that their own rule would more responsibly conform to Chinese tradition -- a cover under which they then presided over a period of radical and unprecedented change during which China entered the Iron Age, saw the rise of merchants, and the decline of the land-based aristocracy and its associated feudalistic system. Confucius, in a supposedly degenerate later Zhou spoke of a return to an earlier Golden Age and was surely in many ways a traditionalist, but has also been widely and plausibly seen as a reformer, even (by the modern reformer Kang Youwei and others) as a revolutionary in his effort to correct or forestall abuse of power through the doctrines of the Mandate of Heaven, the "right of rebellion," the responsibilities of power, and the code of the virtuous man.

The Qin tried to put down Confucianist scholars because of their irritating habit of questioning policy or pushing for change, yet in its brief life forced through a tidal wave of radical transformation, much
of which still stands. A renascent Confucianism under the Han nevertheless gave official sanction to the potentially revolutionary notion of man as perfectible, malleable through education, a doctrine that lies at the root of much of the Communist effort since 1949 to build a new China, still, firmly on the foundation of a Chinese tradition that also stresses repeatedly the call for “men of talent to serve the state,” the importance of meritocracy as the only acceptable basis for power, and the public duty of those in responsible positions. These are all hallowed traditional values, and yet they are almost as if designed to facilitate revolutionary change. The prescription for how to be a good cadre is virtually identical with that traditionally applied to the scholar-gentry: “First to worry about the world’s problems, last to enjoy the world’s pleasures.” To be both traditional and revolutionary is perhaps easier for Chinese, than for others. Marxism merely makes still easier the building of harmony (synthesis) out of conflict (antithesis), something with which Chinese have had uniquely long experience.

But there is an antithesis also between the duty of the virtuous educated man to serve the state, and his filial duty. They are often in conflict. Which must take precedence? Tradition offers honorable precedent for either course. The legendary Great Yu is extolled for his devotion to the public good in passing his own doorstep many times in the course of his self appointed official duties without stopping during ten years even for a cup of tea. On the other hand, perhaps in recognition that few mortals can be expected to show such total dedication to extra-personal goals; there are far more numerous admiring stories of men who modified or abandoned public ambitions (and duties) to devote themselves to the welfare of their families. Even for those in high office, it was not only accepted but conventionally required that they leave their posts and retire in full mourning, usually to their home districts, for two or three years on the death of a parent, and for shorter periods on other important family occasions or crises.

Conflict between father and son was suppressed, sublimated, or ignored, in the name of a family harmony—a harmony that was rigidly dominated by the eldest male. Yet this dominance was only one of many latent or actual conflicts suppressed in the name of harmony throughout Chinese society, how successfully is really impossible to judge. While such things cannot be measured, some indication of how well the emphasis on harmony in all things worked is perhaps, provided by the longevity of the traditional society. But there was a further conflict between the importance attached to family considerations and the duty to serve a larger good, specifically the state. Totally honest, fearless, dedicated, and incorruptible officials were probably uncommon, hence perhaps the widespread admiration, almost cultism, of Hai Rui in the Ming period or the legendary poet Qu Yuan of the southern state of Chu in pre-Han times. Most men were—more fallible, putting their own careers and their families' needs (including monetary needs) first, and ruling within their families often tyrannically. No system, in any culture, is perfect. China’s has endured.

Getting ahead, both in the sense of personal ambition and in a context of national/cultural pride, is a goal that tends to be valued or pursued differently in different societies, from a stereotypical Polynesia or Tibet at one end of the spectrum to modern Japan at the other. One might well however substitute Hong Kong or Singapore, both Chinese cultures, for “workaholic” Japan. One is inclined to give at least certain parts of the Chinese model, including Hong Kong, still higher marks for what one may call the “run-run syndrome” which many others have remarked on before, about Hong Kong, about Cantonese or Chinese merchants in general, even about Chinese in general.

Again however there is an antithesis. Perhaps the most admirable part of the Chinese tradition is its humanism, its celebration of the good and enduring qualities of life, its professed disdain for material rewards or recognition (inconsistently of course like all shibboleths in all cultures), its admiration of the natural world, and its enjoyment of leisure and the fruits of leisure. Are Chinese really more hard working than the rest of us--factoring out as well as possible the overriding determinant of relative economic wellbeing? Who can say, but the stereotype, and perhaps some of the reality, persist, together with the antithetical stereotype of a notably human culture which values leisure and knows how to use it as well as understanding better than the rest of us what life is for.

Here one really must distinguish between peasant and elite, the 95 per cent or more and the few at the top. National stereotypes may be amusing to play with, but closer examination invariably, for any culture, they demand more discrimination. Fortunately or not, it is of course an elite image of China that we have inherited. The masses in every age have been largely voiceless, at least to us now. For them, there was
little choice between hard work and privation. Ambition beyond the level of elementary survival, while a
luxury for most, was widely latent; both folk and elite traditions are replete with admiring stories of poor
boys who rose, into official rank, even to the throne, or to wealth as merchants or landowners. Where
rewards are possible for ambition or hard work, that ethic will persist. One interesting aspect of the Chinese
experience is however the apparent tendency for people to slow down or even stop efforts at further
accumulation (at least in the traditional setting) at what seem by modern Western standards extremely
modest levels. Having followed (for argument’s sake) the Chinese penchant for hard work to the point
where enough land or other means of income were acquired to support the family adequately without further
excessive toil, it was common for many to stop working, rent out the land to tenants or hire others to
manage the more laborious parts of the business and live like a gentleman, on a modest plane necessarily but
free of manual labor and free also to devote time to enjoying life cultivating the arts, writing poetry,
contemplating Nature, and so on. Max Weber put it well when he characterized the Chinese as believing that
the opportunity of earning more was less attractive than that of working less. However accurate that may be,
it is one of the perceived qualities of Chinese culture which has attracted many Western admirers and even
Western scholars to the study of so humane a society. Yet who can deny that the Chinese, at least many
Chinese, have also been notably achievement-oriented, or that they have in fact achieved collectively an
enormous amount?

Much of that achievement has, by the way, taken place at the expense of the natural world which the
Chinese tradition is supposed so much to admire -- another conflict. Here the word if not the idea of
harmony is perhaps most widely of all applied in the principle of harmony between man and nature, which
we are told Chinese civilization regarded as its basic goal. Confucius indeed uses the harmony of the natural
order, which makes the universe so grand and impressive, as an explicit model, sanctioned in effect by
heaven, for the regulation of human affairs, in order to ensure that Great Harmony which his philosophy
aimed to preserve and on which both state and society rested. Human attitudes and behavior toward nature
were supposed to be. reverential, admiring but respectful, designed to preserve or to enhance rather than
weaken or destroy the natural order and its fruitfulness. But this was, like so many stereotypes, an elite view,
celebrated by poets, painters, and philosophers who indeed make it still enormously attractive, especially to
jaded or disillusioned modernists alarmed at the ravages of industrialization, the despoliation of the earth,
and the deadening of the human spirit.

In practice, the overwhelmingly peasant majority in China have probably altered or destroyed the
natural environment of their country on a greater scale than in. any other part of the world, if only because
there have been so many more of them at it for so much longer. The Yangtze floods and the chronic
struggles with the Yellow River are perhaps the most dramatic clues to the destructive warfare waged
against nature in China since Shang times and before, including the almost wholesale progressive removal
of the forests wherever they hampered the spread of agriculture or where trees could be got to market. Nor
was this done in ignorance of the consequences; they were obvious to nearly everyone, well within a given
lifetime, and there are warnings as early as the Mencius: “Mountains empty, rivers gorged.” More recently,
nineteenth century accounts report a peasant saying “When the streams run clear” as a way of saying
“never.”

One may say the peasant had little choice; his short-run survival (especially as population increased)
had to prevail over long run public good, or even the good of his own coming generation. But peasant
behavior toward the natural world in general, of which deforestation is merely the most dramatic example,
was in sharp conflict with elite prescriptions and with too easily supposed norms. We can all be enthusiastic
with Su Dongbo or Li Bo in their love affairs with nature, and we can sigh for such a world. There were
many who followed their pattern, but, unfortunately for China, many more whose circumstances made such
a course impossible. Both gentry and officials also often aided and abetted peasant efforts to clear more
land, work all land harder, increase irrigation, and press nature to the limit in pursuit of greater farm output.
What saved China from total ruin long ago was perhaps an echo, a thread, of the elite’s worship of nature,
which could be accommodated within the demanding parameters of the peasant struggle for survival.
Whatever they may have thought philosophically about such matters -- perhaps much more than we in our
literate smugness might allow .them -- Chinese farmers have consistently tried, with outstanding success, to
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make the earth they cleared more fruitful and to preserve its productive powers. Chinese agricultural husbandry is universally admired and served as the model for all of East Asia. It developed at a price, still being paid, and one may also say the Chinese peasant was forced by his circumstances to make the agriculture he substituted for tree cover into a perpetually and increasingly productive system, through the recycling of organic wastes and so on, or face starvation. But some credit must be given, and perhaps some effectiveness allowed for the doctrine of man-nature harmony despite the contradictions which have rent it. The Communist attitude toward nature has unfortunately, tended to follow the same pattern as the modern industrializing West: where nature is seen as antagonist and as the object for human conquest. One may hope that the extreme version of this view and its consequences in the first fifty years of Communist rule will soften or even be reversed, if only to protect national self-interest, as the revolution matures and re-examines its strategies.¹

For peasant and elite alike, however, the Chinese world view was and remains more consistently earth-centered and this-worldly. This is not to deny other-worldly strands in the Chinese fabric: the supernatural strand in folk religion, the really quite long ascendancy of Buddhism, the persistent appeal of magical or semi magical Daoism even to many of the elite, albeit often sub-rosa and out-of-office -- more contradictions. But the stereotype of Chinese as pragmatic, here-and-now, human-centered beings less concerned than most others with evidence of things unseen or unknowable is perhaps on the whole a supportable one, despite the contradictions or antitheses. There is little difficulty in accepting the Chinese peasant as of the earth, earthy, and Pearl Buck’s fictional image of his world still reads true, including Wang Lung’s impatience and finally anger with the village gods, their ingratitude and powerlessness when he needed their help to break the drought, and his grudging willingness to refurbish their tiny wayside shrine when at last he reaped a good harvest. For the elite, whatever their more private indulgences in Daoism, including perhaps their crypto- Daoist nature-loving poetry and painting, one cannot deny the practical, pragmatic, empirical emphasis of most of their writing, as of their actions.

The importance of natural portents as a moral/political gauge is perhaps a further contradiction here, for both elite and peasants, but such supposed manifestations of nature’s or Heaven’s pleasure or displeasure seldom determined policy; one suspects they were more often used as convenient supporting evidence for criticism or for rebellion. Most rebellions of course drew heavily on this and other supernatural support, including Buddhist, Daoist, and folk-magic traditions, in a purposeful antithetic gesture against the Confucianism of the establishment as well as in an effort to strengthen their own power. But while such counter currents surely did flow and at nearly every period, the mainstream of this-worldliness far out measured them during the greater part of Chinese history, peopled from time to time one must remember also by rebels who had succeeded and who consequently supported, as Confucianists, a new status quo.

The Great Harmony from which all were thought to benefit depended in the end on the resolution (or suppression) of conflicts and contradictions according to the Confucian mode and its doctrine of the primacy of right relationships, “the mean in action,” and the avoidance of extremes (as undue attention, to the supernatural was, inter alia thought to be, ignoring or at best overlooking alternative world views. Dissent was potential disorder’ —luan — to most Chinese at all periods the catastrophe most to be feared and to be avoided at all costs, as the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution has reminded us yet again.

The relatively weak and often aborted or abandoned Chinese interest in scientific theory and abstraction after the Han, especially by comparison with the enormous Chinese accomplishments in technology and applied science, may stem at least in part from the same pragmatic, this-worldly bent of the Chinese mind set. Indeed it may, as it has always done for me, make Chinese civilization more appealing to modern Western non-scientists who find the abstract and theoretical (or the supernatural), areas which the West has made the center of its interest and its rewards, less comprehensible, less attractive, and less personally rewarding than the human-centered richness of Chinese civilization, a summum bonum of the humanist’s quest. The contradictions within the civilization, including its ventures into the worlds of theory, speculation, gods and demons, merely make it more interesting still.

Mention of rebellion, order, and dissent suggests a further contradiction: between the doctrines of redemption (re-education) and retribution. Li and fa (principle and practice) offer one of the sharpest
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apparent conflicts within Chinese civilization. One may for example contrast the seemingly harsh principles of the penal code of the Tang and Qing legal codes with the far more humane, flexible, and sensitive resolutions' of conflict and correction of dissidence worked out ultra vires in practice within the society through the medium of the family and clan system. As we now know, the great majority of disputes even of criminal acts, because they were settled in this way, did not reach the courts, and probably still do not. Short of the fearsome apparatus of courts and law (fa), between it and the family, were also village headmen, local gentry, and on occasion the Imperial magistrate ex officio, acting as mediators, paternalistic advisers, or dispensers of a less ruthless justice aimed at a nicer blend of redemption and punishment than the full majesty of the law could indulge; only when all else failed did the law (fa) intervene. The consistent Chinese faith in the redemptability of fallible mankind and in the molding and ennobling power of education helped to preserve their society from legal tyranny and from the harshness of a system where most dissidence is dealt with punitively. China offered instead a wide spectrum of controls desired at least in theory less to punish than to reform and to ensure that dissident behavior was minimized by attempting to humanize/socialize the dissidents, actual and potential. The absence or weakness of a Judeo-Christian-like concept of sin and the Confucian belief in the innate goodness of humankind underlay the emphasis on re-education as opposed to retribution, as it also strengthened -the Chinese belief in the possibility of a Great Harmony based on right relationships which theoretically should constitute a self-regulating society without the need for legal intervention. Of course it never worked perfectly. What system does? Li and fa are still in uneasy opposition or even conflict, perhaps one should rather say uneasy partnership, as China edges its way into a more Western-style system of law. The contradiction remains--and the persistence of the Chinese faith in redemption; how else revolution, to change China?

City and countryside in traditional China were seen far less as separate and antagonistic worlds than in the West, probably at any period but certainly since the fall of Rome. I have dealt with this topic also at greater length elsewhere and need only to suggest here that until the Western intrusion, the rise of the treaty ports, and the Communist revolution there was probably a more harmonious and acknowledged urban rural symbiosis in China than elsewhere. The countryside was seen as the chief reservoir of moral virtue, its people more honest, admirable, and even wiser than those of the city, blinded and corrupted by an intrinsically a-moral urban environment of dog-eat-dog which was also thought to suffer through its greater apartness from the world of nature. New recruits into the elite came as much from rural as from urban areas, and it was universally recognized that agriculture was the basic source of all wealth, state and private, the essential foundation of whatever the city sophisticates might achieve. The city’s role was to serve, protect, and enhance the productivity of the country side, as servant rather than master but in a close and mutually beneficial partnership.

This normative prescription was however, like so many others, in practice often forgotten. Most personal wealth was urban-based, most of the elite lived there during the bulk of their careers, and traditional Chinese cities were like cities elsewhere in monopolizing sophisticated culture, excitement, amusement, the appeals of politics, and the rewards of wealth and power. In that sense, there was a contradiction between the society’s supposed values and its behavior, and chronic or periodic conflict between city and countryside, which disrupted the norm of symbiotic harmony. Nearly all rebellions began as rural distress aimed against the city as the obvious antagonist, the center of the wealth and power which distressed peasants lacked and resented and which came, they well knew, from exploitation of the countryside, in defiance of the city’s prescribed role. Leveling and anti-urban ideology led to assaults on the cities and to urban-based suppression of rebellion, or to the ultimate conquest of the city and, with luck, the downfall of the dynasty in the name of a better deal for the common folk. Urban-rural differences were however greatly increased with the introduction of Western-style cities in the form of the treaty ports and the spread of industry and commerce, in an urban form alien to Chinese tradition and, as in the West, greatly widening the split between urban and rural worlds. It was in this context and in the biggest treaty port of all—Shanghai—that the Chinese Communist Party was founded and evolved its revolutionary strategies. These were explicitly and powerfully anti-urban, especially after the Communist failure to base revolution in the city in 1927, aimed both at the treaty ports as alien intrusions which were parasitic and exploitative, and at the traditional peasant/rural image of the city as corrupt and tyrannical, battenng callously on the fruits of
peasant labor. It was a supposedly peasant (Communist) revolution which prevailed in 1949, and anti-urban convictions continued to shape the policies of the new government. By the death of Mao in 1976, if not before, however, and especially clearly in the post-Mao climate, contradictions of a mammoth order had emerged. Despite policies to restrict the growth of large cities and to focus development in rural areas, nearly all of China’s big cities have continued to grow rapidly throughout the post-1949 years. Small scale rural industrial development, including that on the communes, the Maoist alternative to Western-style industrialization, proved to be substantially more expensive than the large scale urban-based model and, except for a brief period in the early 1970s, has not been able to provide more than a very small part of China’s rapidly growing industrial output. The gap between urban and rural worlds, incomes, and life styles has continued to widen fast despite Mao’s early goal, almost a capsulated core of his revolutionary aims, to eliminate the differences between city and countryside, workers and peasants, mental and manual laborers -- a new version of the Great Harmony.

The shang shan xia xiang (up to the mountains-down to the countryside) movement whereby most urban school graduates were permanently assigned to work in rural areas, to lend their help where it was most needed, and at the same time to undergo reeducation (removing them from overcrowded cities where there were in any case no jobs or housing for them) ran into increasingly violent opposition as China’s youths made it plain that such sacrifice of urban-centered ambition was not for them. Average urban incomes are already more than twice the rural average, not to mention the other varied attractions and rewards of urban life. Current discussion in China, almost as if one were listening to Karl Marx, is beginning to associate “peasant” with “feudal,” “backward,” ”'hide-bound,” and so on. “Peasant mentality” and its “feudal origins” is mentioned as one of the chief stumbling blocks on the road to modernization. Such attitudes conflict especially sharply with earlier views of peasants as the makers of the revolution, the model for a new China, and the repository of all virtue. But this is only one of the many conflicts, contradictions with earlier modes and values, which the drive for modernization seems certain to evoke, as one sees the fading of original visionary prescriptions for a new harmony. China is finding that the problems and the growing pains of economic development are much the same for her as for the rest of the world and that there are no new or easy answers.

Consideration for the reader’s patience constrains me from pursuing other samples of conflict and contradiction within the greater harmony of Chinese society. I think inter alia of:

- The stress on hierarchical status vs. a comparatively high vertical mobility and a "career open to talent"; racial tolerance vs. cultural intolerance;
- The Confucian stress on equality of birth and potential versus the subjugation and exploitation of women; and, as a corollary, the contradiction between images of women as models of virtue (including chaste widows) and as models of licentious pleasure: concubines, flower boats, and the “bright world.”
- The official and Confucian normative downgrading of merchants and the image of the bureaucratic society vs. the realities of merchant wealth and power: developments in Southern Song (or in the late-Zhou state of Chu), when merchants were especially prominent, versus the rest of Chinese history.
- Continuities and discontinuities with Chinese tradition since 1949.

Other and perhaps more appropriate variations on this theme will doubtless occur to many readers, but let me conclude this essay, never intended as more than a few brief sample reflections, with some thoughts on Chinese views of the rest of the world.

Here one may also pick out counter currents: an' inquiring and tolerant cosmopolitanism, eclecticism, even ecumenicalism, generally characteristic of perhaps the first two millennia from Shang times and reaching its peak in the Tang, followed after the Mongol interlude by a gradual hardening of ethnocentric pride, with xenophobia clearly dominant by late Qing. China has perhaps more consistently seen itself as the center and zenith of the civilized world, but around this unwobbling pivot have developed conflicting consequent attitudes. One example of this attitude is China’s magnanimity toward and even curiosity about other (lesser) cultures and states along a spectrum from open-minded to patronizing to
narcissistic seeking of the admiration of others. But at the same time, China has often evinced overbearing attitudes and behavior based on convictions of moral as well as material superiority, toward all other cultures. There has also been a tendency to see gradations of “foreignness” or “inferiority” in this connection as between those (Koreans, pre-Tokugawa Japanese) who were the aptest of flatterers by adopting Chinese civilization wholesale and who thereby earned a special and semi-familial relationship with the Celestial Kingdom, and those whose insistence on separate cultural identity and even on cultural pride (Vietnamese, later Europeans) marked them as willful barbarians. And further gradations appear later in Chinese history between those near enough to have caught some of China’s reflected glory and those weird looking sea barbarians whose lairs were so distant that they could not be expected to and indeed did not understand the first thing about civilization and were little better than beasts. One might find some remote parallel here with the old half-forgotten controversy between the Moist doctrine of universal love and the later dominant Confucian formula of graded love. Then of course, China was guilty of brute conquest and forced Sinification of a long series of originally separate cultures and peoples, from the edges of the north China plain progressively over the whole of central and south China, abortively but for a thousand years into northern Vietnarn, and more recently in Tibet, Sinkiang, Inner Mongolia and the original home of the Manchus.

Early ideas of all men as brothers within the four seas gradually yielded to increasing conviction that China’s civilized superiority made all Chinese special, and no other culture worth learning from. It was of course poor preparation for the ultimate confrontation with the realities of the modern world, and China suffered a long agony as a result. Xenophobia, a closing of ranks, a frantically renewed sense of exclusiveness, and a determination to protect Chinese culture by whatever means from both foreign encroachment and foreign poison were understandable if self-destructive responses.

China is still influenced by such emotionally based attitudes, and indeed it would be strange if this were not so given the history of the last century and a half in the context of the preceding four millennia. One may hope however that China’s bitter years in the wilderness are over. China is at last reaching out again to the rest of the world, eager for much of what the rest of the world can offer--but buttressed still by the old unshakeable conviction that to be Chinese is still what counts. Another strengthening factor is the country’s vigorous economic growth rate, at least in its eastern third We may all hope that China’s sense of pride can sustain her through the years ahead as she re-enters the world and tries, after a long period of conflict and rejection, to build a new harmony in which China can play a fully appropriate part.