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Trust in a time of pandemic:

The use and abuse of civilisations

INTRODUCTION

Our subject is pandemics and civilisations, and the problem of trust in the contemporary world. Our question is whether a country's civilisational heritage can be abused, in discussions around contemporary world affairs, and whether that same cultural heritage can usefully be deployed in exposing and dealing with abuse when and where we find it.

Our primary focus is on China and Australia, or more broadly, the West.

Looking about us today, how *are* arguments about civilisations featuring in global conversations, surrounding the outbreak, the spread, and the management of the Corona Virus (COVID 19) pandemic?

Are we *at liberty* to refer to civilisations and traditions, in explaining different national or continental responses to this major global challenge? Yes, certainly. Do we *need* to resort to civilisational arguments to make sense of what is going on? Probably not.

So to begin, how *are* arguments about 'civilisations' featuring in international conversations surrounding the outbreak, the spread, and the management of the Corona Virus pandemic (COVID 19)?

In the case of China, there is probably no better place to start than the prestigious Chinese Association for International Understanding, based in Beijing, and one of its prominent media personalities, Dr Ding Yifan.

Dr Ding runs a video blog called *Think Different* [非同凡想] targeting viewers in China, who have not had the opportunities Dr Ding has himself enjoyed travel, study and work abroad. He earned his PhD from the University of Bordeaux, in France, and worked for many years as a correspondent for *Guangming Daily* in Europe. He also spent time as a visiting fellow at the Johns Hopkins University campus in Washington DC.

At the start of each episode, Dr Ding appears, cup of tea in hand, and peers directly into the camera before explaining, in slow avuncular tones, how the world really works. In recent weeks, he has taken to explaining how the COVID19 pandemic has come about, exposing the flaws in Western civilisation as he sees them, and drawing attention to the strengths of China's civilisational heritage.

The pandemic teaches us, Dr Ding says, that human life has little value in the West. This is not the case in China. Central to China's civilisational heritage are two fundamental concepts, he tells us, one asserting the 'sanctity of human life' [人命关天] and the other commanding respect for elders [孝]. Both are anathema to Western civilisation.

Western civilisation is based on a different suite of fundamental principles, he informs us, laid down in classical Greek and Roman mythology. In this tradition, sons murder their fathers, and elders eat their young, for fear of being consumed themselves. At this point in his lecture, Dr Ding illustrates his argument with Renaissance paintings of the Titan Kronos killing his father Uranus, before devouring his own children, and his son Zeus mutilating his father Kronos in turn, a pantheon of deities either mutilating their elders or sinking their teeth into the bellies of infants.

This gruesome civilisational heritage, Dr Ding continues, explains a great deal about the West and the difficulty it has had responding to the Corona virus. It explains for example why clinics and hospitals in Italy – home of classical Western civilisation he reminds us – had particular difficulty. Just as the myths of Zeus and Kronos would predict, doctors and nurses snatched respirators from the mouths of the elderly to preserve the lives of the young. In People's China, this would be considered a gross infringement of human rights. Not in the West.

It comes naturally to Westerners, because disregard for life, and disrespect for age, are baked hard into Western Civilisation. For all its material resources, the West lacks the *cultural* resources for dealing successfully with global challenges such as the Corona virus pandemic. China, by contrast, has civilisational resources in abundance, which explains why it has done better than the West, despite its relative poverty. Success or failure in managing the pandemic comes down in the end to the strengths or weaknesses of a state's civilisational heritage.

We could probably agree with Dr Ding that classical mythology has a place in the tapestry of Western civilisation, along (we could add) with Judaeo-Christian religious traditions, Norse legends, Celtic faery tales, and much else beside. And there are good reasons for thinking these still matter in the contemporary world. But there are no compelling reasons for thinking the tragedy, which befell Northern Italy under the Corona Virus pandemic, had anything to do with latent collective memories of Zeus or Kronos. There are simpler, contingent, explanations for the arrival, spread, and impact of the pandemic that don't require us to fall back on vague civilisational claims.

Most of these contingencies involve People's China.

The virus entered northern Italy through the largely unregulated movement of several hundred thousands of residents from China, many from Wuhan, and it spread rapidly because the Government of China was slow in sharing information with its own people, and with the global community, for some weeks over Chinese New Year when hundreds of millions of people would normally be expected to take to the roads, rail and air, to visit families and friends in China and abroad.

The mortality rate was especially high in Northern Italy because the speed and scale of infections overwhelmed the public health system, as they had earlier in Wuhan. Decisions had to be taken around the allocation of respirators, because there were insufficient to go around. And while we can't be certain about the criteria for their allocation, Australian ethicist Peter Singer has indicated that all decisions were taken, with [ethical considerations](#) in mind.

When resources are scarce choices are made, in every system. The *New York Times* reports that when personal protective equipment was scarce in Wuhan, available supplies were first distributed to party and government officials, ahead of health workers and infected citizensⁱ. Again, we don't need to resort to hoary civilisational claims to explain why communist cadres enjoy special privileges in Wuhan, or anywhere else China, any more than we need fall back on the cult of Zeus, to explain contemporary health priorities in Milan. Party apparatchiks enjoy special privileges in China, for the same reasons their counterparts in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe did, in their day.

Six decades ago, Milovan Djilas explained why, in his landmark study *The New Class* (1957). Here Djilas observed that communist parties in power, rather than doing away with privileged classes, as Marxism said they should, in fact make a privileged class of their own party functionaries, their apparatchiks. Everything else about communist systems, to quote Djilas, 'is a sham and an illusion.'ⁱⁱ

I would argue that any claim Beijing's handling of the corona virus reveals a civilisational revival in Xi Jinping's China is an illusion. In evidence, I submit Dr Ding and his program.

END SECTION 1

Producing his videoblog *Think Different* is just one of many roles Dr Ding Yifan performs in People's China. Dr Ding is deputy director of an institute under China's State Council, the highest executive arm of the People's State, and he's vice-chairman of a learned society based in the party's central think tank, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. He is also, we noted, a member of the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, an agency founded on the creation of People's China in 1949 'to enhance friendship between the Chinese people and the people of other nations'¹ specifically through cultivating relations with political and business elites of other countries. In years past, Dr Ding has served as Paris correspondent for a paper known to be a front, for agents of China's Ministry of State Security, an intelligence agency. On this evidence, I would submit that Dr Ding spins approved civilisational yarns on behalf of the communist party, and that he is obliged to do so, as an apparatchik who enjoys special privileges denied to ordinary citizens in China.

Dr Ding falls at the extreme end of a spectrum of people spinning civilisational yarns around the challenges of the Corona virus. Some marginally more plausible yarns are being spun in Europe, North America, and Australia. Let me cite one of them. Dr Ian Inkster, professor of international history at Nottingham Trent University, recently [published](#) an opinion piece stating that '*The coronavirus disease, Covid-19, is a tough test*

that has turned the world into a gigantic laboratory in which to compare societies and their cultures.’ He goes on to draw sweeping conclusions about the difference between civilisations, east and west, bearing on national responses to the pandemic. His conclusions are similar to Dr Ding’s. ‘Keeping the truly vulnerable alive, while ensuring larger numbers of people who catch the virus recover, is a sign of ... clear and humane priorities, and coherent reactions among millions of people,’ he writes. ‘And it seems the East Asian economies have been doing this far better than the Western nations that embrace the greatest democratic freedoms and enjoy the largest resources in the world.’

Dr Inkster’s claims have some merit in going beyond comparing one country, China, with the seventy or so countries that make up ‘the West,’ which is the standard reference point for commentators in China, who pick and choose among Western countries without regard to standard sampling techniques. Still, the findings of Dr Inkster’s thought experiment, although more plausible at first glance, hold up to scrutiny no better than the outlandish claims of Dr Ding. ⁱⁱⁱ

If civilisations *do* matter in an increasingly inter-active global society, then we need to be able to call out the shams and illusions among competing claims about them. Resorting to civilisational arguments whenever a serious challenge arises, across the east-west divide, risks overlooking some of the larger civilisational challenges that bridge this divide, including challenges to freedoms of religion, speech, and assembly. We also need to be careful in framing the histories of civilisations. Reducing current developments in our region to arguments about ancient civilisations, cultures and histories, risks obscuring developments in other times and places, potentially more illuminating than broad civilisational comparisons.

Comparative political scientist, Stein Ringen, argues that China operates as a totalitarian dictatorship under an expanding communist party state. In this case, would not the Soviet Union be a more fruitful point of comparison than China’s own civilisational heritage? ^{iv} And if China’s totalitarian impulses were to trend towards ethnic nationalism, which is not out of the question, would not the history of national socialism in mid-20th century Europe serve as a more appropriate point of reference than a point selected at random from Chinese legend, or imperial history?

Legions of patriotic Chinese youth are looking on and applauding as the current administration in Beijing makes outcasts of national minorities. If we were to ask what this conjunction -- of ethnic cleansing and organised patriotic youth -- brings to mind, I doubt that images of Emperor Yu taming the waters would spring to mind, or historical parallels with the sages roaming the Warring States in the service of the Duke of Zhou. Other more recent historical comparisons would probably suffice.

And yet the idea that Confucian civilisation is thriving in Xi Jinping’s China is taking hold, in China and in the West. What is behind this illusion?

What is it that sustains the idea that China’s communist party is the institutional reincarnation of three thousand years of civilisational development on Chinese soil?

For the party, the incentive is clear enough. It needs to mask its historical origins in utopian socialism and Leninist political strategy, both grounded in European soil, and donning the garb of a great indigenous civilisation serves the purpose. But it’s a tough

ask persuading mature people in China, after the party eviscerated what little remained of Confucian China, in the 20th century, and installed Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought in its place.^v Still we can't blame the party for trying.

Compared with people in China, persuading political and business elites in the West that the party is an avatar of Confucius, is a relatively straightforward matter. Foreigners – particularly foreigners who know little better and conduct profitable business in China – are fair prey for the party's civilisational misinformation campaigns, conducted through Dr Ding's Chinese People's Institute and other agencies, specifically created to cultivate relations with opinion makers in foreign countries.

We could cite many instances in Australia, Europe and North America, illustrating the party's success in cultivating business elites and retired politicians to speak out about China's history and civilisation on the party's behalf. The most recent to attract international attention is former senior partner with McKinsey, Peter Walker, author of a new book that sets out to correct American misperceptions that he believes get in the way of the U.S. understanding China as it really is. It all boils down, Peter Walker tells us, to civilisational differences of culture and history. If only Americans understood China as well as he did all problems would be resolved.

Walker's book *on Overcoming the Misconceptions and Differences Between China and the US* has been promoted on Communist party [media](#) platforms in China and overseas. Mainstream American media remains skeptical. Asked on *Fox News* to explain how China's culture and history could account for the incarceration of one million Uighurs, in Xinjiang Autonomous region, Walker pointed out that while he personally disapproved of Beijing's actions, he understood that they were a reflection of the civilisational values that distinguish China from the United States and the West.^{vi} Americans might regard "every human life as sacred," he said, but people in China "are just not wired that way." [Wait, I hear you interject, did not Dr Ding say the sanctity of human life was a feature of China's civilisational heritage, that distinguished it from West? and its Westerners who are not wired to value human life? Mr Walker was not an attentive student]. And pressed by the interviewer, to explain mass incarcerations of a particular ethnic minority in Xinjiang, Walker went on to say that "it all goes back to Confucian values."^{vii}

Are we to believe that Confucianism has a lot to answer for in Xinjiang? Not at all. It's the communist party that has a lot to answer for. The notion that China's communists are legitimate heirs of an ancient civilisation is an illusion projected out, to gullible but well-connected foreigners, through an old-style Leninist propaganda campaign. This is Leninism 101.

END SECTION 2

The word 'propaganda' has an antiquated ring about it in English, but it's still highly current in China. True, few organisations outside the Vatican, and Leninist vanguard parties, have ever felt really comfortable using the term, the Vatican because it invented it with the creation of the Propaganda Fide – the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith – and the communists because a Propaganda Bureau is one of

the few bureaus Lenin laid down in his blueprint for communist party organisations. No vanguard party can be without one.

The Vatican and Chinese Communist Party have tried to keep up with the times, all the same. In 1982, Pope John II tweaked the Latin, to remove the word *propaganda* from the Vatican office of that name, which then changed in other languages, including English. China's communists took a different course. The party retained the Chinese term propaganda (*xuanchuan*) in Chinese, for domestic use, but in dealings with foreigners moved to translate this Chinese word for propaganda as 'publicity,' and called the party Propaganda Bureau the 'Publicity Office' and renamed the Director of the Party's Central Propaganda Bureau the 'Minister for Information,' in English. In Chinese nothing changed.

English happens to be *our* national language, not China's, and we have an obligation to correct it when we see an error. If Beijing insists we avoid using the word 'propaganda' when translating the Chinese word 'propaganda,' then *disinformation* would be a closer fit. And the Ministry for Disinformation would be a better English translation for the relevant party office. The offices of Propaganda Fide, in Rome, were after all originally known as the Office of the Inquisition; the connection between propaganda, disinformation and terror in *China* is historically closer still.

China's vast state disinformation system is tasked with managing and controlling all flows of information, all forms of content, across every cultural, media, and educational institution in China, along with all of their branches and sub-agencies overseas. Everything we could possibly want to learn from China, about that country's civilisation, history, and culture, now comes bearing a stamp of approval from the Ministry of Disinformation.

This was not always the case. But under General Secretary Xi Jinping there is no avoiding it. The stamp of approval extends to Confucius Institutes, and to manuals on Confucianism and business practice published in China, and to much else besides -- all of it, as Djilas would say, a sham and an illusion.

Let's take a look at cross-cultural training manuals for business people published in China. These generally begin with gentle lessons on etiquette but end up with heavier lessons on China's culture and history. At some point they offer advice on the critical importance of *guanxi* (connections/relationships) for doing business in China, and they attribute this to ancient culture and history.

Reading the manuals, it's easy to come away with the impression that without the right connections you cannot do anything in China, but with the right connections, there's nothing you can't do.

That's pretty close to the truth. These manuals are right to highlight the importance of *guanxi* connections for getting anything done in China. What they don't explain is *why* connections matter.

Most manuals attribute the practice of *guanxi* to the value placed on personal feeling and friendship, in China's civilisational tradition. But it's simpler than that. People rely on *guanxi*/personal relations because they don't trust one another.

As a rule, people don't consent to deal with someone they don't know, unless they are reassured about them by someone they do, and can hold the one they do know, accountable for the conduct of the one they don't. At the end of the day, this is what *guanxi* is about, trust. It's less about culture and history, or fellow-feeling and friendship, and more about building inter-personal trust in an otherwise lawless social landscape where trust and accountability are in short supply.

In a society with high public trust, such as Australia, people depend on others to do the right thing, friends and strangers alike. Australians may not trust government or big business but, on the whole, they trust one another. Public trust is strong.

In China people trust the central government (or so they tell interviewers) but they don't trust local officials, and they certainly don't trust one another. In the absence of public trust, people build trust among themselves, through personal networking. That is, they build and use *guanxi* as personal trust networks to advance their family and business interests in competition with other personal trust networks and cover one another's backs in the event of trouble.

Personal networks are especially useful in dealing with the law. The law counts for little in People's China, but the country's police, procurators and courts, can come down heavily on offenders if officials choose to do so, or when people with powerful contacts in government call on the law and justice systems to take down their rivals or competitors. The law does not matter until it does, and when it does, it matters a great deal. At that point, good personal networks are essential for arguing, buying, or burrowing your way out of trouble.

Those who draw on their personal networks, in this way, often point to China's culture and history to explain their behaviour, as if China's rich history and culture were complicit in their misconduct. So too cross-cultural training manuals tell foreigners they must learn about the country's history and culture if they want to relationships and do business in China.

Let me quote one: "*Foreign business people should make judgments based on a good understanding of the history and culture of China,*" says Tony Qian Lu in one of these manual published in Beijing.^{viii} And yet it is far from clear that the prevailing business style has much to do with China's history, culture, or civilisation.^{ix} The way people do business is largely shaped by the way the party owns and runs the country. Its apparatchiks control access to markets and resources, and they show little regard for property rights or rule of law. This is the way communist governments have always worked, and it is why trust is in short supply in the world of business and politics in China.

Under Ministry of Disinformation guidelines, the party rates little mention in cross-cultural business manuals. Instead we are offered lessons in pop ethnography, contrasting China's so called 'collective spirit' against Western individualism, its selflessness in contrast to Western selfishness, its formal hierarchies in contrast to flattened or equal relationships in the west, Chinese personal loyalty in contrast to the impersonal rule-based systems of the West, and a Chinese emphasis on personal trustworthiness in contrast to contractual obligations said to typify the West. This list of

Chinese characteristics makes up the standard repertoire of culture and civilisation to be found in cross-cultural manuals coming out of China. It is replicated in Confucius Institutes in Australia and reproduced *ad infinitum* in professional intercultural consultancies around the country^x – and needless to say reproduced in former McKinsey consultant Peter Walker's book on *Overcoming Misconceptions and Differences between China and the US*.

These east-west contrasts are not entirely wrong, but they are overstated and selective. They are overstated in the sense that ideals of community service, loyalty, honour, selflessness, collective good, persistence, obedience to superiors and so on are hardly alien to Australia or the West more generally. It's a matter of context and emphasis. And they are selective, in the sense that the austere rules-based behaviours, said to typify *Western* societies in these business manuals, have clear parallels in classical *Chinese* thought every bit as ancient as Confucianism.^{xi}

They are especially selective where they implicitly support communist party claims to rule while not mentioning the party. The claim that people in China have a collective spirit is amplified in party tracts, that maintain people in China are culturally predisposed to be governed by a Leninist party, because collective action comes naturally to them. It follows that any criticism of the party's authoritarian rule is a smear on the civilisational heritage of China's people.

Nothing could be further from the truth. No foreign business person should underestimate the drive of individuals to get ahead in China. Foreigners who imagine they are working with partners operating in a collective spirit will be taken to the cleaners.

References to China's 'collective spirit' are also misleading in implying that people in China are happy and willing to cooperate with one another. As a rule, they don't unless they must, either because they are dealing with friends and family, and face reciprocal obligations, or because they are compelled to co-operate by authorities. Absent these two conditions, few strangers will cooperate willingly on anything in China. Again, it's not a matter of culture and history but a question of whom to trust.

This is the communist party's doing. The party works to ensure there is little sign of collective behaviour of the kind Australians would normally associate with voluntary cooperation, for example running a rural fire service, or a netball club, or a local charity. All organisations such as clubs and societies, that could be expected to sit between personal networks and the party-state, are outlawed as 'civil society organisations.' The Party considers them so dangerous it has banned use of the term 'civil society' from the classroom and the media.

People's China presents itself as collective society that bans collectives – that outlaws everything we would regard as indicating collective action and organisation. Forbidden.

END SECTION 3

In probing the use and abuse of civilisation in global conversations around the pandemic, I don't mean to diminish the importance of cultures and civilisations or their role in building trust among peoples.

In some ways, the claims made for Chinese civilisation today echo the Asian values proclaimed by successive Malaysian and Singaporean governments in the 1990s. Then, too, we were taught that deference to authority, submission to hierarchy, subordination of individual interests to the solidary group, and so on, accounted for the Asian economic miracle of the 1980s and 1990s.

In the abstract, these values have merit. In the case of People's China, they are neither abstract, nor merit-worthy, because the authority that must be obeyed is a party that professes values extracted from the *extreme end* of the Western authoritarian spectrum. The party is not the contemporary avatar of an ancient civilisation. It's a Leninist vanguard party that deploys civilisational cover to maintain its monopoly on power, disarm its critics, and aspire to regional and in time global dominance.

The dissonance between the party's commitment to Marxism-Leninism on the one hand, and its abuse of civilisational cover on the other, can be heard in the party leadership's current focus on political 'struggle.'

The idea of 'struggle' has little place in the Confucian canon. But it was never far from the lips of Mao Zedong at his most fanatical, and the word 'struggle' is one of Xi Jinping's favourite expressions. In a [published](#) version of one brief speech he gave in September 2019, the word 'struggle' appears 54 times, along with the more ominous term '[great struggle](#)', which in Mao's day, signaled major conflict within the party, and with the United States of America. It sends the same signals today.

To be clear, as far as the party is concerned, this great struggle is not a clash of civilisations. It's a struggle for dominance between two political ideologies and their rival social and political systems - - both, incidentally, originating in the West. General Secretary Xi Jinping made this clear in his first speech to the politburo, in 2013, when he spoke of a '*long-term struggle between the two social systems,*' socialism and capitalism, and said:

Most importantly, we must concentrate our efforts on . . . building a socialism that is superior to capitalism, and laying the foundation for a future where we will win the initiative and have the dominant position.

In the words of Secretary-General Xi, we are engaged in a struggle for dominance. It is not one of our own devising and it is not a clash of civilisations. It a struggle of a more familiar kind, between tyranny and liberty, and involving propaganda and disinformation of an old and familiar kind as well. The party's weapon of choice in this struggle is disinformation, designed to place a heavily armed authoritarian party state in the 'dominant position' in our region, in this generation, and in a dominant position in the world in our children and grandchildren's times.

Once we recognise that the differences which divide Australia from People's China are not differences of culture or civilisation, but differences of ideology, political values, and systems of government, we can draw confidence knowing that we have encountered this kind of historical struggle before.

Yes, we need to master history and culture – the history of Chinese and international communism, and the culture of Leninism. And while we should avoid spinning ourselves a Western version of Dr Ding's civilisational yarns, we can draw on the civilisational resources of an inclusive liberal democracy – western *and* eastern resources, classical and religious, historical and modern – to expose this abuse of history and civilisation.

We have the conceptual frameworks and cultural resources to respond to the challenges that a Marxist-Leninist state presents to an inclusive liberal democracy like Australia. We have the institutional resilience and legislative tools to do it as well. We just need to do it.

How? I can think of three ways forward and am sure there are many others. One is to build independent sources of knowledge of China's history, culture and contemporary government and society, within Australia, to help us make independent judgements on our own account. A second is to double down on our commitment to openness and transparency, as a condition for placing trust in others. The third is to acknowledge and embrace the innocence that comes with leaving yourself open and transparent to others on this naive model of trust. In concluding, I'll touch on each in turn.

Our first challenge is to build knowledge resources among our political and business communities, and in our wider educational systems, to understand People's China. The differences that divide us are not differences of culture or civilisation, which we can explore and respect, but differences of ideology, political values, and systems of government, which we can understand and reject.

This means, at a minimum, that Australian universities should sever all formal ties with China's disinformation network, including the global Confucius Institute network, and at the same time build independent system capacity in China-studies in the humanities and social sciences, with flow on programs into our local schools systems. There is little about contemporary China that cannot be explained using standard tools of languages and cultural studies, histories of communism and fascism, social analysis of networks, economic studies of institutions, mainstream studies in political science, and so on. We are not talking about esoteric knowledge here.

The second way forward is to press for greater transparency, in all aspects of relations with China. The comments on trust, by Foreign Minister Marise Payne on the ABC's *Insiders* program on Sunday 19 April, are worth recalling here: 'my trust in China is predicated on the long-term relationship... My concern is around transparency.'

Long-term relations depend on trust and transparency. Australians associate trust *with* transparency, because the two go together in public life. Australians trust one another to do the right thing, whether they know one another or not, and they consider openness essential for maintaining public trust. In Australia trust is a public good.

This is not how trust works in all countries. In China, trust is basically a personal thing embedded, not in public life, but in relationships among people, families, communities and networks. Inter-personal trust of this kind is predicated not on openness, but on secrecy.

It is this style of secretive inter-personal trust that China's party leaders are seeking from Australia when they talk of enhancing mutual trust between the two countries. They are unlikely to find it, because the kind of trust Australians hope to find in China, involves even greater openness and transparency.

My third point is this. There is a certain innocence, or naivety, about Australians that needs to be acknowledged and embraced. In my experience, people in China admire the way Australians trust strangers on sight and wish they could say the same for China. True, they may take us for suckers, for being open and trusting, or 'country bumpkins' as one Chinese friend told me decades ago, but comparisons of this kind are not meant unkindly. A reputation for naivety is not a bad thing among people, long accustomed to watching their backs and cynically searching for ulterior motives in the conduct of others. That *can* get tiring.

Of course, naivety can also be a handicap in business deal-making. Chinese firms like doing business with Australians, another friend informed me, because they are trusting. I think he meant pushovers. I can't vouch for the truth of this claim, but the experience of iconic Australian firms in the China market, from Carlton United Breweries in the 1980s to Crown Casinos in our own time, would appear to confirm this judgement. We could also point to the experience of hundreds of small Australian businesses and entrepreneurs, lured into losing their IP and their shirts in China, over the decades in between.

And yet, at the same time, Australia's reputation for innocence and naivety underpins the country's reputation for quality and reliability in the provision of food and beverages and in education and services. Honesty and transparency may not equip Australians for serious deal-making, but these same qualities are essential for earning consumer trust, in the quest for safe, clean, quality food and services, especially for children and young people. China's producers and service providers cannot compete in their home markets, because they cannot compete on honesty, transparency and trust.

A national reputation for naivety offers a sound foundation from which to press for greater openness and transparency, as a condition for building trust with China. It could serve Australia and the global community well, if it helped to get to the bottom of the current pandemic, and limit further outbreaks, through an open and independent inquiry. Human health and safety depend on it.

Finally, mindful of the differences in ideology and values that divide us, we need to remember that Australia's relationship with China cannot be reduced to ideology and politics alone. Trade, investment, migration and in this time of pandemic, human health and safety, all play a part in our bilateral relations.^{xiii}

Possibly our greatest challenge is to ensure that these other aspects of the relationship are not dominated by a communist party that has taken the initiative from us, as Xi Jinping would have it, to secure dominance. We need to take initiatives on our own account, on each of these fronts – on trade, investment, migration, and health and

security – where there is still ample room for naivety and good will and for the kind of openness essential for building public trust, between countries and people.

END 4

ⁱ The Wuhan Red Cross, according to *New York Times* reports, favoured local government agencies rather than hospitals when distributing top-quality medical masks in Wuhan. City officials took 19,000 of the N95 masks for themselves and allocated only 450 masks to the frontline Union Hospital. Li Yuan, 'In Coronavirus Fight, China Sidelines an Ally: Its Own People,' *New York Times*, 18 February 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/18/business/china-coronavirus-charity-supplies.html>

ⁱⁱ Milo van Djilas, *The New Class* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1957), p.36.

ⁱⁱⁱ On the Asian side, all countries in his sample apart from China enjoy democratic freedoms and economic resources similar to countries in his Western sample, so it makes little sense to say they are doing 'far better than the Western nations that embrace the greatest democratic freedoms and enjoy the largest resources in the world.' Further, he omits from his western sample countries that have managed the outbreak better than some in Asia (including Australia and New Zealand). These have few civilisational connections but several other points in common with Asian countries in the sample – for example being islands (like Japan Taiwan Singapore and Hong Kong) and being closely attuned China and alert to the misinformation and prevarication that come with dealings with that country. If the corona virus has turned the world into a gigantic laboratory then the most compelling experiments on the lab bench would be those testing geographies and relative exposures to China, not civilisations.

^{iv} Stein Ringen, *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century* (Hong Kong: HKU Press, 2016).

^v As official ideology Confucianism did not survive the abolition of the imperial examination system in 1905, and it was not embraced as official ideology by the Republic of China 1912-1949.

^{vi} Walker massively understated the relative scale of Uighur forced internment which has ensnared roughly one in every two adult males. He says the incarcerations cover roughly one percent of the Xinjiang population.

^{vii} Kong Wenzheng, 'US needs to take a realistic view of China, its history', *China Daily* 27 November 2019,

<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201911/27/WS5ddd4c13a310cf3e3557a2e5.html> Peter Walker, *Powerful, Different, Equal: Overcoming the Misconceptions and Differences Between China and the US* (London: LID Publishing 2019); Peter Walker, interview with Tucker Carlson, Fox News 23 April 2020: <https://youtu.be/qei0aY2vww8>

^{viii} Tony Qian Liu, *Confucianism and Business Practice in China* (Beijing: China Financial and Economic Publishing House, 2010), p.25.

^{ix} On smart business advice see for example Greg Bissky, *Wearing Chinese Glasses: How (not) to Go Broke in Chinese Asia* (London: Trafford Publishing 2007). The **comparative literature on guanxi and relational governance is covered in** Lu Hualiang, *The role of Guanxi in buyer-seller relationships in China: A survey of vegetable supply chains in Jiangsu Province* (The Netherlands: Wageningen Academic Publishers 2007).

^x *Australian Business Consulting and Solutions* for example, a private consulting firm, advises that the reason Chinese business people often prefer to conduct business over meals in restaurants or over a bar is that 'it is imperative in Chinese business culture to establish mutual and long-term trust.' Trust is not something to be taken for granted. And people in China choose to do business in this way because they are humble not boastful (like Westerners); because they 'have more focus on the community's value and needs' (unlike individualistic Westerners with their obsessions about rights); and they suffer from the trauma of the Cultural Revolution which 'destroyed openness and trust of others' <http://www.australianbusiness.com.au/international-trade/export-markets/china/cultural-tips-for-doing-business-in-china>

^{xi} Cite on legalism and mohism and legal thought in China.

^{xii} Jocelyn Chey, 'Corona Politics and China Relations.' 29 April 2020. https://johnmenadue.com/relations-between-australia-and-china/?mc_cid=b68fad0ef1&mc_eid=0e92407250