

SPEECH BY FOREIGN AFFAIRS MINISTER GEORGE YEO AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF CHC'S NEW EXHIBITION



Using the language of information technology, the culture of a race is its operating system, enabling its members to interact with one another in a deep way. The culture of a race is its deepest programming, which is why any attempt to change it radically will lead to resentment and revolt. Cultures are different as computer operating systems are different. Chinese culture is particularly complex because of its historical legacy. Thus, on the one hand, Chinese culture is very hard to change and, on the other, it is unusually persistent compared to other cultures.

Without meaning disrespect to any religion, religious programming can either be tribal or universal. Judaism, for example, is a tribal religion which belongs to the Jews. There is no burning desire to proselytise. If you are not born a Jew, there is no need for you to become one. Even those who try to be are not fully accepted. In contrast, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism are universal religions which are not confined to particular racial groups. In the case of Christianity and Islam, there is a missionary zeal to convert non-believers. Universal religions are like network software which enables different cultural operating systems to plug in. It is programming at a higher level. However, religious programming is a weaker form of programming than cultural programming. Hence, individuals can change religions. Children, when they grow up, may adopt different religions from their parents. A Chinese cannot cease being a Chinese but he can convert from Christianity to Buddhism ! or vice versa. In Singapore, many Taoists have children who are Buddhists or Christians.

In contrast to Chineseness, American-ness has the characteristics of a universal religion. There is a strong desire by Americans to want others to be like them. Like the universal religions, American-ness is a higher but weaker form of programming than cultural programming. In this regard, Singaporean-ness is similar to American-ness.

Unlike the universal character of American-ness, Chineseness and Japaneseness are tribal. But because the number of Chinese has always been much larger, the Chinese have never been as tribal as the Japanese. As it were, among the Chinese, there have been many sub-tribes from way back. As a Singapore Chinese, I naturally feel a certain tribal affinity with Chinese in China and elsewhere. I feel particularly close to Malaysian Chinese because we were the same people under the British. As a Teochew, I feel a particular warmth when I visit Shantou, as my wife, who is a Cantonese, would when she visits Guangzhou or Hong Kong. When we visit Beijing, the sense of kinship is less. Oftentimes, we feel closer to American Chinese than we do to mainland or Taiwanese Chinese because our English is much better than our Chinese.

The theme of this exhibition, 'Chinese, More or Less', expresses the complexity of what it means to be Chinese. Han settlers in Xinjiang living side by side with Central Asian minorities have very different mentalities from Wenzhou businessmen operating restaurants in France or Italy. Third-generation American-born Chinese and Peranakan Chinese in Malaysia or Singapore are also very different from them, as they are from each other. Yet we are all self-consciously Chinese, sharing many common lines of programming deep in our core.

What are these common lines of programming which make us Chinese? They are certainly not religious. When Buddhism arrived in China from India, Chinese culture was already formed and quite able to sinicise the Buddhism that then took root. The Chinese Guan Yin is quite different from the Indian Avalokitesvara. In the case of Christianity, which arrived many centuries later, whether or not it takes deep roots in China depends on the degree to which it is sinicised. With stupendous effort, the great Jesuit Matteo Ricci used Confucianist concepts to explain Christianity to the Chinese elite. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, the furious debate in the Catholic Church which went all the way to the Vatican on the acceptability of Confucianist rituals bore on this. The sinicisation of Christianity is a process still ongoing in 21st century China.

Islam is different. Because Islam rewrites many lines of programming deep in the core, Chinese who convert to Islam lose their Chineseness after one or two generations. In China, they become members of minority groups even though they may be linguistically and genetically Han. The Muslim Hui, for example, speak the same language and have many similar customs but are still classified as a minority.

I would think that the important lines of Chinese programming are those which have to do with the values of Confucianism and the folkloric history of the Chinese people. I use the word 'folkloric' to distinguish it from the serious history. Many Chinese can relate to the stories of Qin Shihuang, San Guo, Shui Hu Zhuan or Hong Lou Meng without knowing the actual historical periods in which the events were supposed to have taken place. And whether the events and characters in street opera were real or exaggerated or fictitious is not so important. The important thing is that the values and the stories which capture these values are passed on from generation to generation along with mother's milk. In this transmission, rituals are important because they ensure that the transmission is done not consciously but by habit and tradition.

However, this transmission would long have broken down if it were not sustained by a high culture which depended on the written word and a tradition of scholarship. Interestingly, the digital nature of the Chinese ideograms played a helpful role in maintaining the accuracy of that transmission. Whereas a phonetic language would have to adjust constantly to changing pronunciations, the Chinese ideographic language stayed constant in its written form. Wise sayings from thousands of years ago can still be read in the original. For those from phonetic traditions, these sayings can only be understood in translation.

The idea and the ideal of One China are also deeply embedded in the Chinese mind. If the Chinese empire had not reconstituted itself again and again after decades or centuries of breakdown, that high culture would have been lost. In Europe, the continuity of the high culture was preserved through the Catholic Church after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. Once the high culture is lost in China, the common culture would have degenerated into minor traditions both on the mainland and in the diaspora.

Take Peranakan Chinese culture as an example. It has gone through cycles in South-east Asia. Every time China was in decline, the culture became more distinctive. Every time China was ascendant, the culture became more reabsorbed. With the re-emergence of China today, traditional Peranakan culture is in decline, although it will never disappear because it is rooted in the soil here.

We see the same phenomenon among Chinese in the US, Latin America, Australia and Europe. The younger members are scurrying to learn or relearn their Chinese and to rediscover their roots because of the opportunities brought about by a rapidly developing China. There is also a renewed sense of pride in their Chinese identity. But for as long as they live outside China, they will never be wholly reabsorbed into the mainland culture. Although tenacious, Chinese diaspora culture still needs reinvigoration from the high culture every few centuries.

The development of the high culture on the Chinese mainland was dependent on a tradition of scholarship which had a strong sense of the continuity of Chinese civilisation. It was maintained by a scholar elite which today we see reappearing in communist China. Since Sima

Qian wrote Shiji, 24 official histories had been compiled with each dynasty recording the ups and downs of the previous one. The last was the Ming Shi.

Although many historical accounts of the Qing dynasty have been written, there has to date been no official history recognised as such. This historical task began in 2002, almost a hundred years after the end of the Qing dynasty. It is expected to take another six years to complete. Perhaps it will be another two, three or more centuries before the official history of the ROC and PRC is written by the next dynasty. Rendering the essence of the Chinese classics and Chinese history into simple ditties for children to remember is the San Zi Jing, first composed during the Song dynasty and updated during each succeeding dynasty.

There is therefore an organic relationship between the high culture and the popular culture, and between the political and cultural developments on the Chinese mainland and the cultural development of the Chinese overseas. For the Chinese overseas, their cultural connection to China is easy to understand and accept. Their political links to China are, however, fraught with complications.

Imperial China had always claimed the loyalty of Chinese everywhere even though that was often more myth than reality. When Chinese migrants were persecuted in Spanish Manila in the 17th and 18th centuries, massacred in Dutch Batavia in 1740 and chased out of the gold fields of San California in the second half of the 19th century, the Chinese emperor did or could do nothing. There were a few occasions when China did intervene. In the era of the great voyages of the Grand Eunuch Zhenghe 600 years ago, the Chinese in South-east Asia enjoyed great prestige. In more recent times, Maoist China supported indigenous Communist movements in South-east Asia, sometimes with tragic consequences for the local Chinese population. At the Bandung Conference in 1955, Zhou Enlai clarified the PRC's position when it encouraged overseas Chinese to take up local citizenships and be loyal to their adopted countries.

Singapore has a population which is three-quarters Chinese. It is located in the heart of a South-east Asia which often has strong suspicions of the overseas Chinese and their divided loyalties. A large part of our effort to build an independent nation in Singapore was the struggle to separate our cultural links to China from our political loyalty to Singapore. This tension defined much of our domestic politics for a generation. Here at the grounds of the old Nanyang University, established 50 years ago as the only Chinese language university outside China, the tension was acutely expressed. It is fitting that we should now be discussing what it means, more or less, to be Chinese in the 21st century right here at the heart of the old campus, in the old administration building.

However, the debate over what Chineseness means is far from over. Indeed, with the re-emergence of China and the resurgence of Chinese pride worldwide among mainland Chinese and Chinese overseas, the debate will become more intense again. It is not an academic debate with no practical effect. Important choices have to be made by the Chinese overseas and these will have far-reaching consequences. In Singapore, we have made our choices and hold fast to our position that while we are culturally Chinese, we are politically Singaporean. In many countries where the Chinese are in a minority and sometimes discriminated against, that choice can be harder to make. For the Chinese in America, should one day there be a serious conflict between the US and China, they will be put in a very difficult position. The Lee Wen-ho case was a reminder of an underlying tension which, under conditions of wartime fear, can become a hundred times worse.

The re-emergence of China in the 21st century is an epochal event. Put starkly, it can lead to peace and prosperity or to war. The peaceful re-emergence of a new China is a challenge which Singapore, in our own enlightened self-interest, supports wholeheartedly. It requires great wisdom on the part of China, on the part of the Chinese people worldwide and on the part of all the existing major powers, which have to adjust to a China which is becoming stronger and more prosperous. Going back to the language of information technology, we need to write new software so that the 21st century Chinese operating system can integrate smoothly into the global operating system.