The comparative sociology of India and China

The sociology of India, as conceptualised by Louis Dumont and David Pocock at the end of the 1950s, was meant to place the study of India in a comparative framework (Dumont and Pocock 1960). To an extent, that objective was implicit in all Western or modern studies of societies outside of European modernity. The study of India depended on modern European concepts like bourgeoisie, democracy, or religion. By contrast, the principle that guided Dumont and Pocock was that the sociology of India, like the sociology of any other society, is part of comparative sociology and thus can be developed as a form of knowledge that is not fatally determined by the national(ist) framework. Indian sociology, again like any other sociology, originates in a national space and is developed within it, but comparative sociology may transcend that framework.

However, there are serious problems in developing comparative sociology. To give an example, it seems clear that the study of caste is a crucial element of the comparative analysis of class. Nevertheless, there is a strong tendency in sociology to declare that caste, while an essential characteristic of Indian society, is merely a special case that does not shed much light on other societies and thus can more or less be ignored. To an extent, this tendency is produced by using caste or class as a metaphor for Indian society. A similarly unfortunate tendency comes across in discussions on secularisation and secularism, in which the secular is a metaphor for modern society. Even in the more recent critiques of Western models of modernisation and secularisation one finds too few examples that compare outside the West-Rest boundaries. The universal pretensions of Western sociology derive from assumptions that are implicit in the modernisation paradigm. Because India has been relatively marginal to post-Second World War developments in the West there has been very little interest in developing a comparative sociology that includes findings and theories from India. It is only in the current phase of globalisation that comparisons with India and China, as emerging markets and players on the global scene, become again interesting for those social scientists who are primarily interested in modern, industrial society.

Comparative sociology often is based on a Weberian framework in which civilisations are compared, predominantly in terms of economic growth. This kind of writing tends to essentialise civilisational characteristics and thereby rather hinders a proper development of comparative sociology that examines the ways in which societies,
states and social networks and groups interact. It makes little sense to me to compare the essential characteristics of Indian and Western civilisation, but it does make sense to compare the interactions between colonising Britain and colonised India, for example, with the interactions between colonising France and colonised Algeria, as well as to compare the postcolonial networks of interaction between Indian groups in the US and Britain with the postcolonial networks of people from the Maghreb in western Europe. Current forms of globalisation make it more important to study these different forms of interaction that cannot be confined to singular nation-states. Does globalisation make comparative sociology redundant? Some might argue it does, since global forces shape societies everywhere at the same time and it is these forces that have to be studied. But one may argue that they shape societies in very different ways, ways that need to be compared. Certainly, the IT revolution has changed societies worldwide, but this happened very differently in Europe and in India, and even very differently in, for instance, Bangalore and Lucknow. In an earlier period of globalisation imperialism shaped Britain and India simultaneously, but quite differently, and the differences and similarities call for comparative analysis.

One of the greatest flaws in the development of comparative sociology seems to be the almost universal comparison of any society with an ideal-typical Euro-American model of modernity. In my view it would be a step forward to compare developments in modern India and modern China with each other. That does not imply a straightforward ‘provincialisation’ of Europe, since Europe and America are crucial in the formation of Indian and Chinese modernity, but an understanding of the ways in which similar challenges and influences have produced very different societies in India and China. Within the universal pretensions of the modernization paradigm in comparative sociology, there nevertheless is considerable debate about the nature of modernity. While some of the literature would emphasise the Western origins of a singular modernity that is exported and responded to in the East, other literature would emphasise the indigenous development of capitalist modernity without much of a role for imperialism. In the last decade there are more voices arguing for multiple modernities, diversifying both the nature of Western modernity and its impact as well as diversifying the histories in which Western influences have been received. More and more the dynamic character of cultural encounters is also taken into account, as well as the ways in which these encounters are productive in creating new cultural formations. This variety is impossible to set in one guiding interpretive framework. The step forward is fully to acknowledge variety and multiplicity without losing sight of the need to compare.

The problems of comparative sociology are by no means limited to Western scholarship. One of the main obstacles in developing a comparative sociology of India and China is that both Indian and Chinese scholars look at the West, but neither looks at each other’s societies. Stereotypes about each other are amply available, but a deeper engagement with each other’s history and society can hardly be found. The relative neglect of each other’s society and history is explained by the enormous impact of Western modernity on Asia, including the dominance of Western academic institutions and scholarship. Western societies are taken to be the model of developmental change in Asia and modernisation theory, the dominant paradigm of social science, has lent its academic power to this common sense. Only recently has this thinking come under revision, mainly because of the enormous economic growth in China and to a lesser extent in India.
India and China share a number of remarkable similarities and differences. From the 16th century India was ruled by the Mughals, while China was ruled by the Qing. Both are dynasties that came from outside and remained distinct from the rest of society in a number of ways. Both dynasties were toppled under Western influence in the 19th century. India was colonised after the Mutiny of 1856, while the Qing dynasty was replaced by the Republic of China in 1912. The Republic never achieved full control over Chinese territory, but was subjected to constant fragmentation due to a series of wars and rebellions as well as a Japanese invasion. It is only the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 by the Communists after the defeat of the Nationalist Party and its escape to Taiwan that Mainland China came to be unified again under one regime. The current state of India is also a product of the Second World War and the collapse of the old colonial arrangements. It became the Republic of India in 1950, after the separation of Pakistan, a Homeland for Muslims. Colonial rule had brought a substantial unification of India and an institutional framework to build on, but Independence immediately occasioned an important division of territory and people for reasons of religious nationalism.

The post-1950s history of India and China shows remarkable similarities and differences. India has a democratic government chosen with free elections and a multi-party system. China has communist rule without free elections. Although their starting-point in 1950 was very similar, the economic development of both societies has also been quite different. While both are agrarian societies that went on a path of industrialisation China has been growing much faster over the last three decades after the enormous failures of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Cultural Revolution. The Chinese state under communism has launched a much more radical and successful attack on agrarian hierarchical society than India has been able to do. This is immediately clear when one looks at literacy rates, relative poverty, land cultivation rights and gender relations. Both states have had a policy of self-sufficiency and relative closure to the world market. In the 1980s both states liberalised their economies, opening them up to the world market.

There are a great many issues in the comparison of modern India and China that have to be addressed in a less Euro-America centred social science. Issues of democracy versus authoritarian rule and their impact on economic development; urbanisation and rural industrialisation; the rise of middle classes; these are all just instances of possible comparative sociological analysis. One may expect that such analysis will be forthcoming with the growing centrality of India and China in the global economy. It is to be expected that the main emphasis in such a future comparative sociology will be on political economy rather than on culture and religion, as happened with the recently developed field of world history. In my conversations with Stephan Feuchtwang the comparative issue of the introduction of the Western concept of ‘religion’ and its counterpart ‘the secular’ has loomed large. The extent to which religion became central to anti-colonial nationalism in 19th century India is striking. More recently, the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist party, and religious nationalism in general have made the question of religion and its relation to secularism and the secular state central in debates about the future of India. In contrast, in China anti-imperialist nationalism focused on the removal of religion as an obstacle to national progress. From the end of the 19th century till the 1970s China saw a number of campaigns against popular religion and its institutions. Many Chinese intellectuals in the past and today believe that religion is a backward phenomenon that has lost its importance in Chinese
society. I would argue that the relation between religion and secularism in India and China is a key to understanding both similarities and differences in the development of their respective nationalisms. Such a cultural understanding of national formations goes beyond the comparisons of economic growth and societal development that are prevalent in world history.

**Modern Religion in India and China**

As Talal Asad has convincingly argued, the concept of ‘religion’ in the European Enlightenment gradually becomes a ‘natural’ and ‘universal’ category that enables one to reflect systematically on traditions everywhere in the world (Asad 1993). All these traditions become ‘religion’, although dharma in the Indian case or jiao in the Chinese case are hard to fit into the European model of Christianity. Nevertheless, the nature of imperial power and its forms of knowledge in the second half of the 19th century meant that the concept of ‘religion’ also began to organise the reflection on Indian and Chinese traditions. This was not limited to Western scholars, like Max Muller and James Legge, but applied equally to Indian and Chinese intellectuals.

The novelty of the conceptualisation of Indian and Chinese traditions in terms of ‘religion’ might be well illustrated by looking at two presentations at the World Parliament of Religions, a conference of all major religions organised by the Unitarian Church in Chicago in 1893. Let me just cite the opening speech of Swami Vivekananda, the main representative of Hinduism at the World Parliament and an influential Bengali thinker.

Sisters and Brothers of America,
It fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the warm and cordial welcome which you have given us. I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions; I thank you in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects.

My thanks, also, to some of the speakers on this platform who, referring to the delegates from Orient, have told you that these men from far-off nations may well claim the honour of bearing to different lands the idea of toleration. I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and nations of the earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, who came to Southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation. I will quote to you, brethren, a few lines from a hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood, which is every day repeated by millions of human beings: ‘As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, sources in different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.’ The present convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in itself a vindication, a declaration to the world of wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita: ‘Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him;
all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me.’ Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilisation and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.1

Vivekananda was a great success at the World Parliament and in his lecture tour in the US after it. In this period he begins to conceptualise and systematise Indian traditions of yoga as ‘spirituality’ for a Western audience and to bring it back to India where it fundamentally changed traditional conceptions of ‘spirituality’ and ‘spiritual exercise’ to the extent that it is now seen as the heart of middle-class Hindu religiosity. This spirituality was at the same time conceived as universal tolerance (‘India’s contribution to universal wisdom’) and as the foundation of religious nationalism (van der Veer 2007). Vivekananda’s ideas were deeply influenced by a long Bengali tradition of religious reform inspired by Christian missions. He combined the rationalism of the Brahmo Samaj reform movement with long-standing Bengali traditions of devotionalism. His ideas were foundational to Mahatma Gandhi’s political philosophy and Rabindranath Tagore’s Pan-Asianism.

In the World Parliament of Religions Peng Guanyu, the First Secretary of the Chinese Legation in Washington, DC, was invited as representative of Confucianism. He gave the orthodox view of scholar-officials in the Qing dynasty that Confucianism is not a religion (zongjiao), a modern term that was adopted from Japan at the end of the 19th century, but the law and the teaching of proper human relations by the ruler and his officials. Another notion that existed in China for centuries was that there were three teachings (sanjiao, Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism) assumed a certain equality between these teachings that however was not accepted in orthodox circles of scholar-officials. True to this tradition, Peng Guangyu argued that the term religion should be translated in Chinese not as ‘teaching’ (jiao) but ‘shamanism’ (wu). Christianity was thus presented as a form of shamanism. It had to be controlled by the state, because it was a superstition, created a clergy and could foment millenarian rebellions.

Peng’s arguments reveal a similarity between modern secularism and Confucian thought that often is commented on. In his view religion was something dangerous and primitive that proper government should keep in check. It is imperial rule, based on Confucian principles that set the norms according to which religious believers in Buddhism, Daoism, or Christianity have to confirm (Chen 2005). All those religious teachings have fundamental flaws, but as long as they did not violate the political order they could be tolerated. There is some slippage in terminology since the term for teaching (jiao) that is also used for Confucian teaching is already translated as ‘religion’ during the Jesuit mission in the 16th and 17th century. In fact, a similar slippage can be found in Western terms like civil religion or political religion, and accordingly Confucianism has sometimes been called a secular religion. When in the famous ‘Chinese Rites Controversy’ in the 18th century the Vatican decided to prohibit the worship of ancestors by Chinese converts to Christianity, it threatened the Chinese political order

1 The recording of the original speech was accessed on YouTube on 30 August 2008.
and Christianity was banned as a teaching unsuitable to China. In the encounter with Western imperialism the Qing government was forced to accept Christian missionaries again. Added to the doctrine of three teachings, Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, were Islam and Christianity, which continue to be the five official religions in China. As Hsi-yuan Chen (2005) argues, instead of Confucianism framing teachings, Christianity came to frame religions. To be anti-Western came to imply that one was not merely anti-Christian but anti-religious.

While Hinduism in Vivekananda’s presentation to the World Parliament of Religions came to present a universal message to mankind, Confucianism in Peng Guangyu’s presentation came to present a Chinese challenge to Christian conceptualisations of religion. Obviously these translations and conversions were not confined to the halls of academia or the Unitarian staging of world religions. Political reformers in China tried to create church-like religions that were respectable in modern eyes while attempting to destroy all non-respectable, non-modern forms of religious life, especially local cults that do not belong to the five official religions. In this they were inspired by the Meiji reformers in Japan who created state-Shinto. Part of this, therefore, is really modernisation through reform, as in India, but another part of it is much more radical.

**Secularism in India and China**

In a recent article Vincent Goossaert refers to a slogan ‘smash temples, build schools’ that was used in a campaign against temple cults and religious specialists during reforms in late Qing at the end of the 19th century (Goossaert 2006). According to the reformers led by Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and supported by the emperor, China had to modernise quickly and this had to be done by promoting education and by getting rid of religious superstition. Before the communist victory in 1949 a number of campaigns, first in late imperial China and afterwards in the Republic, destroyed or ‘secularised’, according to one estimate, half a million existing temples. What the Communists did after 1949 was, to a very great extent, a continuation of these campaigns. While one might have expected that the nationalists in Taiwan would have had a fundamentally different policy towards religion than the Communists, the opposite is in fact the case. Until the late 1960s the nationalists kept religious activities under very tight control. All these campaigns against religion should have produced a secular China, but quite the contrary is true. In Taiwan religious activities abound and with the loosening of the tight controls over religion in the PRC since 1978 likewise we see religious activity flourishing everywhere. This paradox can be understood by closely examining the nature of these secularist campaigns. Chinese secularism is not merely anticlerical, but also includes forms of scientism and rationalism. From a 19th century enlightened and evolutionary perspective it pitches scientific rationality against magical superstition. Secularism is thus a battle against the misconceptions of natural processes that keeps the illiterate masses in the dark and in the clutches of feudal rulers and clerics. The term for superstition comes from Japanese like many other terms employed in the discourse of modernity, including the term ‘religion’ itself. In using these neologisms modernist secularism makes a distinction between religion that contributes to the morality of the state and superstition that is detrimental to modern progress. These views are shared by
intellectuals of all persuasions, including not only the nationalists and communists, but also many reformist religious thinkers. This is both a discursive and an institutional shift as an aspect of the transition from the ancient regime of the Qing empire to the modern Republic. The traditional system of three teachings, Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist, in which Confucian state ritual defined the framework for the other two was transformed in the Republic by the notion that there were five acceptable world religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam. Confucianism was kept outside of this arrangement, because it was considered to be both national instead of global and in essence secular rather than religious. Confucian intellectuals did try to turn it into a secular civil religion, but this met with little success beyond the nationalist elite. These religions that are officially recognised until today are being organised along the models of Christianity in nation-wide associations that are ultimately controlled by the state. What remains outside of this is what is often called popular religion, namely all those cults that are in fact closely connected to Confucianist, Buddhist, and Taoist ideas and practices but are not part of these associations. Especially Taoism had been deeply intertwined with local cults, or, as is sometimes said, Taoism is ‘the written tradition of local cults’ (Schipper 1994). The opposition between officially approved religion and local forms of superstition gives authorities great latitude in controlling and repressing all kinds of religious expressions.

I do not want to detail the sordid history of state persecution of clerics and destruction of temples both before and during communist rule. I only want to draw attention to the fact that under communism the anti-superstition and anti-clerical campaigns were combined with anti-feudalism campaigns. The 1950s not only saw the brutal elimination of millenarian movements like Yiguandao, but also the destruction of ‘feudalism’ and thus the redistribution of temple land and temple property, secularisation in its original sense. Mao, as a good Marxist, predicted the decline of religion as part of the creation of a socialist China in the following words: ‘The gods were erected by peasants. When the right time comes, the peasants themselves will throw away these gods with their own hands.’ But, as matter of fact, Mao and the Party did everything to destroy the gods, while the peasants did everything to rescue them.

Secularism in India has a number of elements in common with Chinese secularism, but the nature of the caste system and of inter-ethnic and inter-communal relations decidedly alters the meaning of these elements. In Hinduism Brahmans are the most important clerics but anti-clericalism has deep roots in Brahmanical thought itself. Priests who perform a religious service to the community and are paid for that in gifts are looked down upon by Brahmans who devote themselves to studying the Vedas. This strand of anti-clericalism fuels many of the reforms of the large temples in South India, in which powerful middle-class laymen demand that ignorant priests are re-educated to learn Sanskrit and ritual performances. More generally the Brahman caste as a whole came under attack in the 19th and 20th century with the rise of explicitly secularist movements, especially in South and West-India. Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) began a movement in Maharashtra against the alleged exploitation of low castes by Brahmans. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (1879–1973), also known as Periyar, founded a social respect movement in Tamil Nadu that became the basis of anti-Brahman Tamil nationalism. He connected his anti-clericalism with a theatrical atheism that was expressed in publicly burning sacred books, such as the Sanskrit Ramayana. The sources of this anti-clericalism that in the case of Periyar evolved into atheism were
two-fold: Christian missionaries had for a long time vilified the rapacity and ignorance of Brahman priests in their project to convert especially tribals and low castes. Their rhetoric was adopted by the anti-Brahman movements. In combination with racial and linguistic theories, developed by among others Max Muller, this anti-Brahmanism distinguishes the Aryan invaders from the indigenous low castes. Presenting Brahmans as fundamentally different from, say, the Dravidians, the former are portrayed as exploiting the indigenous peoples. Indian anti-clericalism is thus decidedly different from Chinese anti-clericalism because of the connection between caste and religion. It is the Brahman caste that comes under attack and Brahman priests are taken to be the symbols of that caste. On the other hand, both in China and in India the main issue is the introduction of modern egalitarianism in a hierarchical society and thus the connection between feudalism and religion.

As in China, scientism and rationalism are elements of Indian secularism. However, already in the 19th century Indian intellectuals did not emphasise the opposition between science and religion, but instead the scientific nature of indigenous traditions. Unlike in China, secularist attacks on traditional religion were rare, although reformers in a number of proto-nationalist and nationalist movements attempted to purify religion from so-called superstition and show the scientific foundations of religion. Rational religion, as a major current in these reform movements, offered a home to intellectuals who wanted to build on Hindu traditions to reflect on developments in science. A good example is J.C. Bose (1853–1937), a renowned physicist and plant physiologist, whose work on electrical waves and on plant consciousness was inspired by attempts to understand the unity of nature from the perspective of the Hindu philosophical school of Advaita Vedanta. The social network of scientists and Hindu reformers like Swami Vivekananda shows the interweaving of the development of scientific and religious thought. Philosophers like Henri Bergson and Aurobindo eagerly embraced Bose’s vitalistic science. While Chinese intellectuals also found rationality and science in some religious traditions, especially in the field of medicine, there is a much stronger sense than in India that progress can only be made by separating science from magic and by destroying the latter.

Secularism in India emerged in the context of a secular colonial state that was professedly neutral towards religious divisions in society. The British in India were deeply concerned with projecting an image of transcendent neutrality. After the Mutiny of 1857 they were afraid to be seen interfering with the religious activities and sensibilities of their Indian subjects. This implies that the state had to hide its modernizing and secularizing interventions in society under a rhetoric of neutrality because it derived its legitimacy not from India but from a democratic process in Britain. Indian nationalists, however, interpreted this neutrality as a form of divide-and-rule, especially when Hindu-Muslim relations were concerned. The state was thus condemned as pseudo-secular, an argument that later Hindu nationalists revived in their condemnation of the government of independent India. The post-colonial state derives its legitimacy from democratic elections in India and is thus even less able than its predecessor, the colonial state, to hide its interventions in society and religion, such as the Temple Entry Acts and the abolition of untouchability, under the cloak of neutrality.

Since the colonial state was secular in the sense of being neutral towards religion it gave wide scope to connecting religion with anti-colonial nationalism. Anti-colonial nationalism in India drew deeply from religious sources, both ideologically and organisationally. In earlier work I have made a distinction between a moderate, pluralist
vision of the Indian nation and a radical vision that wants to promote a singular religion as the core of national identity. The moderate vision has been always part of the secular ideology of the Congress party that ruled India for the larger part of post-independence history. Congress found itself confronted with two major problems. First of all, Hindu-Muslim antagonism was a major threat to the Indian nation. This problem became more and more crucial as the struggle for independence wore on and secularism was conceived as the answer to it. Secondly, Indian society was marked by one of the most pervasive systems of inequality in the world that was religiously sanctioned by Hindu traditions. Again, secularism was conceived as an answer to this. While state interventions were recognised as crucial to the transformation of Indian society into a modern nation, Congress leaders agreed that large-scale violence should be avoided. A major argument in developing Indian secularism was made by Gandhi when he made a plea for non-violence and tolerance. However, except for a brief period, Gandhi was not officially a member of Congress leadership, but a moral exemplar outside of party politics. After independence the modern state could not refrain from intervening in society.

Critics of Congress secularism today have understood the rise of communalism in India as a backlash against a long-term campaign of an interventionist state to impose secularism on a fundamentally religious society. While their emphasis on state power is correct, their criticism of Nehru’s Congress seems fundamentally mistaken. Nehru’s position was that the state should not attempt to make India a mono-cultural society in which minorities would feel alienated. Congress adopted the pragmatic role of neutral arbiter of religious difference, just as colonial administrators had done. Separate civil codes for Hindus and Muslims that had been developed in the colonial period were continued in secular India. Potential sources of violent conflict, such as the temple dispute in Ayodhya, were controlled and managed rather than fundamentally solved. It is this approach to which a Hindu nationalist party like the BJP today objects. The BJP does not claim that an anti-religious secularism has dominated Indian society, but rather that Congress policy has been pseudo-secular, giving religious minorities special benefits in return for votes. The BJP claims to be secular, saying that its campaigns to destroy mosques built on Hindu sites and rebuild Hindu temples are intended to show that the only traditions that the secular state dealt with were those of minorities.

The limitations of a secular Congress that tries to avoid violence in its interventions in society are clear from the failure to get rid of untouchability and caste hierarchies. Ambedkar, one of the great untouchable leaders of Congress and architect of India’s secular constitution, came to the conclusion that the secular, liberal state could not resolve the problem of untouchability, which was deeply embedded in codes of honour and respect. While early in his career he demonstrated his stance against Hinduism by burning Hindu law books in public, at the end of his life he decided to convert to Buddhism in order to escape from the Hindu caste system. In a very original manner he came to grips with the dualism of redistribution (class) and recognition (caste). His conversion shows that religion can address these issues perhaps better than conversion to secular ideologies like socialism or liberalism.

**Conclusion**

The cases of India and China show a remarkable difference. Both were large agrarian societies with significant social hierarchies that were transformed in the encounter
with Western imperial powers. Both Indian and Chinese leaders were determined to achieve liberation from imperial domination, but realised that their societies had to be significantly developed, especially economically, for this to happen. Continuing a secular Confucian tradition, the Chinese saw religion as a sign of backwardness that had to be removed or at least controlled as far as possible. By contrast, the Indians saw religion as an aspect of national culture, their essential difference from the colonizing British and thus a source of resistance and pride.

Secularism and religion in China and India in fact have very similar genealogies, but their modern development is almost opposite. Underlying the comparison of divergent modernities is the deeper comparison of the discursive traditions of India and China. This is the perennial question of continuity and change. To what extent do the modernities of India and China that are compared in this contribution constitute a fundamental rupture with pre-modern history? My view is that they do constitute a fundamental transformation of the problematic of pre-modern history. Whatever view one takes on this issue, however, one has to confront a fundamental methodological problem concerning the historicity (the valuation of history) in pre-modern traditions, a problem fundamental to the possibilities of historical research. It has been a long-standing orientalist opinion that Indian culture is inimical to history, while Chinese culture embraces history. Louis Dumont has expressed this most cogently when he contrasted the Indian classical concept of yuga (the four ages of the world) to the modern concept of history with its focus on individual people and individual events as well as causal explanations, In the Indian concept, Dumont argues, there is a conscious devaluation of time, just as in the concept of dharma there is a devaluation of the individual (Dumont 1967). China, on the other hand, is:

Imbued with profound historical consciousness, the Chinese people are Homo historiens in every sense of the term. To be human in China, to a very large extent, is to be historical, which means to live up to the paradigmatic past. Therefore, historical thinking in traditional China is moral thinking. The Chinese historico-moral thinking centres around the notion of Dao, a notion that connotes both Heavenly principle and human norm. (Huang 2007)

In my view, such arguments need to be historicised themselves. Central to a tradition is the debate about authenticity and transgression. Traditions project themselves as timeless, transcending history and their discursive authority lies precisely in that claim. Historians and anthropologists should make an attempt to reflect on these traditions, from the outside as it were, to be able to place them in a history of transformation. Such would make it more possible to assess the impact of modernity on concepts like li, qi, dharma, karma, and shakti as well as the peculiar resemblances between the anti-magical attitudes of Brahmans and Chinese literati.

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India and China as spiritual nations:  
A comparative anthropology of histories

I cannot make up my mind whether we should be more surprised about the similarities or about the differences between India and China as nations. If we admit that there are common features, shared by all modern states, then we can wonder at the way they have been repeated in such different histories as those of India and China: the appeal to a population as its people, the qualitatively increased size of the state’s armed and civil apparatuses in proportion to even such large populations as these, the sharpening and sanctifying of their borders and territorial sovereignty as if they were eternal when they had recently been changing expanses of empire. If we start from the contrast between one, long a British colony, the other never fully colonised, we can be surprised by the similarities of the consequences of being drawn into the world system’s new centres in Europe, both responding with spiritual and scientific Occidentalisn, admiration for and assertive rivalry with ‘the West’ – now characterised more by its US centre. Perhaps, then, similarities are not surprising, both having been connected into the same world system of industrial capitalism and its states.

So, using this basis of similarity I will focus on differences that I think arise from their longer histories, pre-dating the centring of the world system in Europe and the US: how these longer histories and the irreversible changes entailed by accommodation to the European shift have determined certain, selected differences between these two empire-nations. I shall select what Peter van der Veer selects, the spirituality by which each nation-empire attempts to define itself.

Peter van der Veer reminds us of the necessity and grandeur of comparative sociology, which of course I endorse. I hope that my necessarily bold-stroke sketches

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will be sufficiently convincing to persuade you of something in addition, namely that an anthropology of large-scale and long-term historical change is both possible and necessary for such a comparison. The anthropology of history to which I wish to draw attention is not so much a method as an address to issues of long-term historical change and continuity, addressing both continuity and discontinuity in the same historical instance. I am not advocating the methods of fieldwork as a substitute for the methods of close documentary and archaeological work in the formulation of concepts of change, of constancy and the checking of their plausibility. All three are necessary and variously effective. They are in the service of ‘anthropology’ simply when their results are used to address big questions about human history, civilisation, and general conditions of large-scale change, such as state-formation, the formations of human subjectivity, and the changing nature of different kinds of knowledge, temporality, spatial conceptions, and so forth. They are anthropological whoever asks them, whether they call themselves social or cultural anthropologists, or archaeologists, or ethnologists, or historians.

This is a shift of emphasis from comparative sociology, which focuses much more on the present – which may of course be a ‘present’ of quite long duration. But I am not opposing comparative sociology. This debate is not formalised around a motion, with statements for and against. Rather, I suggest a rather different approach to the comparison, mine being a comparison of histories and I take as my point of departure the study of China, for which long-term historical change and continuity might be deemed characteristic, even to be a Sinocentric view of the world and of anthropology, overlain and neglected by the sociology and anthropology of localities, minorities and recent (post-Mao) history.

Civilisation

The spiritual aspect of nationality is usually described as ‘civilisation’, dividable, as in China, into ‘spiritual’ and ‘material’ civilisation. In the People’s Republic of China, spiritual civilisation is an official description of desirable conduct, ranging from hygiene, to having good educational qualifications, to maintaining harmonious relations with others. It is something characterised as both ‘Chinese’ and ‘socialist’. Obviously, these characterisations are highly ideological, but like all ideology they are hegemonic, which is to say different people may claim to be civilised spiritually in ways that do not conform to standards composed by state ideologues, and people can perform being civilised according to those standards while conducting themselves in ways that do not conform, even while staking a claim to the same civilisation; for instance a Muslim idea of cleanliness is declared by Hui Chinese to be superior to what is stated by the government and to be no less a part of the civilisation of the Chinese people (Gillette 2000: 235).

‘Civilisation’ is a claim made by every nation and state for its historical contribution to the world. However small, every state and its peoples stake a claim to a special place and history in a regional civilisation or to be in itself a civilisation with claims upon the ‘modern’ world. You can test this assertion on whichever states you know best. The teleologies – the progressive histories – of all peoples are never just of an ‘us’ among others. They are also universalising claims to civilisation. In these tendentious conceptualisations of ‘civilisation’ the term is always also ideological, a justification for
a way of life with claims upon the world as well as upon the government of a people. Civilisation, as a verb-noun invented in 18th century France, Scotland and England, has since been relativised against its notoriously ethnocentric and imperial organisation of knowledge and privilege. But it still performs these ideological tasks locally: Chinese civilisation; Indian civilisation; each is a bone of contention just because each is so seriously a part of the discourse of nationality and universality and of the political discourse of aspiration and hierarchy.

Because ‘civilisation’ as a usage is always ideological, hegemonic and contentious does not mean we should not, as anthropologists, use this word and develop a concept of its usage. It is precisely its ideological usage that is a major, but not the only, matter of interest. Such a concept would of course have to go further and become a description of habitual and transmitted aspirations for self-realisation during a life course or over several generations of self-cultivation and hierarchical mobility, aspirations shared if also disputed with others professing to share the same or similarly formulated and identified standards. Such a concept would be descriptive and not ideological, though it is about ideology, in that it would not endorse or validate the standards it describes in each case. ‘Civilisation’ is hierarchical, ideological, continuous and at the same time transformable; civilisations have histories. Further, the concept of civilisation can be used critically, exposing the ideological usage that justifies continuation of privilege and denies the civilisational aspirations of others in the justified hierarchy.

So, unlike Peter van der Veer’s warning us against comparing civilizations because of the danger of essentialisation and a Weberian teleological search for the conditionality of capitalism, I recommend we take up the concept of civilization as a viable, anthropological concept. Use of ‘civilization’ because of its inherent characterisation of spread, extension and absorption has the added advantage of avoiding the holistic analogies that have limited ‘society’ and ‘culture’. We can and should avoid essentialisation, of course, as much as we would in using a concept of culture, and we must do so by facing up to the historical problem of simultaneously addressing discontinuity while detecting continuity.

**Historical human types**

When Louis Dumont formulated caste as a human historical type – hierarchical as distinct from egalitarian and individualist – he described it as ideological. But he could as well have described it as civilisational. *Individualist and egalitarian is no less aspirational than homo hierarchicus*, according to commonly accepted ideals, achieved by some and not by others – it is the ideal of hierarchy with opportunity to rise as an individual. The criticisms of his schemata include his tendentious endorsement, or lack of critique of what these ideologies justified, and of neglecting the fact that ideology was not simply accepted, it had constantly to be enforced, often with brute force. They also include the apparent dualism of the scheme, as if the pair could classify all human historical types, all civilisations.

There are anthropological historians who do seek to apply Dumont’s conception of hierarchical encompassment to Chinese interpersonal relationships, ritual and cosmology. But they cannot help noting differences. For instance Romeyn Taylor (1989) proposes this difference: in India there is a separation between the cosmological and the political: the cosmological has some right to existence on its own, which it never had
in China. In China the cosmological and the political have not been separated since the
invention of the cosmological concept of the emperor as Son of Heaven (*Tianzi*).

Leading on from there, we can break away from Dumont’s dichotomy and think
about further particularities of Chinese hierarchy. Chinese hierarchy is differential,
posed in terms of asymmetrical interpersonal relations. It is not constituted by
endogamous groups but by individuals and their families, for whom there is more
possibility for mobility through and within interpersonal relations and through
individual and intergenerational acquisition of civilisational achievements, military
and civil. It is a civilisation that places most emphasis on the conduct of relations,
*li*, always hierarchical, between tributary guest and emperor, between emperor and
Heaven, between generations, female and male, junior and elder, living and dead. It is
a civilisation of the government of conduct, its correction, exemplary performance and
enforcement. The spirituality of proper conduct is the subject of self-cultivation, one
accomplished in the official arts of literacy and military prowess. But this can be either
participation in rule within the imperial bureaucracy or in support of it as one of the
ruling elite, or it can be in retreat from rule, in the accomplishments of ritual method,
Daoist or Buddhist, or the lesser religions of China: Muslim, Manichaean, Christian.
Since the compilation of the classic *Zhuangzi* and creation of the legend and the writings
of Qu Yuan, both in the 4th century BCE, there has been within Chinese civilisation
a tradition of the superiority of the renouncer over the upholder of convention and
official literacy.

Teachings of ritual practice and different kinds of knowledge for astronomical
observation, the creation of calendars, for divination, healing, burial, building and other
crafts, and for life-course occasions are also understood to be within the category of
conduct, *li* from the top down, as ways of ruling and doing. Or else, seen from the lower
echelons of the hierarchy, it is the ritual conduct of honouring ancestors and protector
gods. I prefer to think of there being a number of Chinese hierarchies, sharing some
but not all of the same cosmological elements: in particular the command hierarchy of
demonic power of protector deities complements that of ancestral patrons and lines, but
both are multi-centred from the bottom up, even if they always also include obeisance
to the highest, single-centred pure ones of Daoism, of Buddhism and of Heaven (*Tian*)
and its principles (Feuchtwang 2001).

So what has happened to this civilisation by the time of the World Parliament of
Religions in Chicago in 1893, organised by the Unitarian Church? What has happened
when, like Vivekananda and the Unitarians themselves, each claims for their own
religion a spiritual and scientific civilisation for the world, but the Chinese representative
of the Qing dynasty in Washington says his civilisation is above all religions? To answer
these questions I must use bold strokes to sketch a history that is both one of continuity
and of transformation.

**Chinese nation-building**

Most elements of this civilisation had existed before, but the full complement as I have
described it, in particular the inclusion of grassroots territorial temples, was spread
throughout the bordered empire of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). It is arguable
that the first Ming emperor had a nation-building mission. He not only sharpened
and garrisoned imperial borders. He also set out to homogenise the civilisation

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of the population within them. This included establishing official temples to focus territorial communities \( \text{she} \) on virtuous elders, the reading of community compacts, and maintenance of altars for the care of orphan souls \( \text{li} \), well below the level of the county magistrate, in addition to the state cults replicating those of the capital at every administrative level. Midway through the dynasty the costs of maintaining the \( \text{she} \) and \( \text{li} \) had become a severe drain on the imperial treasury and local gentry were expected to raise the funds for their maintenance. In the course of this devolution, local appropriation turned them into territorial cults whose deities and ghosts were addressed for their demonic power to respond to local pleas and pledges, and which formed their own hierarchies on centres of devotion and aspiration, not those of state ideology and its rites. The same appropriation turned garrison command territories \( \text{pu} \) into territorial cults and organisation points of local militia (Wang forthcoming). This was a civilisation of \( \text{fa} \), to add to the civilisation of conduct \( \text{li} \) and of renunciation. The civilisation of \( \text{fa} \) made concrete the visualisations of imperial power to respond. Entertained and elaborated by the subjects of the emperor, it was their own version of an imperial and socially just rule. \( \text{Fa} \) is a wonderfully multivalent word: it refers to the capacity of ritual performed by experts to be magically effective – these ritual experts are lumped together now as ‘Daoists’ but they are very various: \( \text{fashi}, \text{daoshi}, \text{yinyang}, \) and other local designations; it also refers to the Buddhist dharma (rules of conduct and renunciation); and finally it refers on the one hand to law in general \( \text{falu} \), and on the other hand to method or capacity to get things done.

Simultaneously from the bottom, the second commercial revolution – as Valerie Hansen (2000: 405) has it – increased the hierarchy of central places into regions and their cities of specialised production for exchange and of mercantile accumulation. They created a hierarchy of goods, amplified at their peak by the tribute trade sponsored by the imperial capital, the exotic and luxurious from overland and maritime trade routes and the fine goods of Chinese production for court and for external trade. But where previous Chinese empires were open, including semi-autonomous kingdoms and principalities within their regions and particularly at the broad peripheral regions of the southeast, southwest and northwest, the first Ming emperor set standards of civilisation and rule that sought to create homogeneity within clearly marked boundaries. After the reopening of the empire by the Yongle emperor (1403–1424), subsequent emperors followed the aim of defensive closure and homogenisation. Despite this, there were several city centres and routes of trade, some of it foreign, for luxuries, exotic scents, including incense, and the manufacture of regionally and imperially traded goods of material civilisation, such as paper, printed stories, and new-year prints.

By the end of the Ming dynasty and continuing through the next, Qing dynasty, the imperial population had two spiritual standards: of \( \text{li} \) and of \( \text{fa} \). Both were subject to expertise. The proper conduct of rituals in the state cults, for public events or for domestic rites of passage and mortuary rites were and still are known and led by local literate and respected transmitters of protocol and tradition, called \( \text{lisheng} \). They are above and beyond any particular religious doctrine or method. The effective conduct of rites known as \( \text{fa} \), on the other hand, are conducted by experts who are respected and feared because their skills are thought capable of making things happen through their mediation between the worlds of the living and the dead – be they gods, demons, souls or bodhisattvas. Confined to neither and going beyond both are the knowledges of crafts, healing, self-cultivation through the exercise and concentration of breathing and circuits of energy \( \text{qi} \) – similar to yoga – the military disciplines or arts, the common
arts of theatre, story-telling, appreciation of landscape and the finer arts of calligraphy, landscape painting and poetry.

Whether seen from the top down, as a correction of li, or from the bottom up as an aspiration to li and a reimagined empire of fa, this is a spirituality linked to a cosmology that is at once spiritual and political, unlike the Indian in which the spiritual can be defined territorially and in other ways distinct from the territory and centres of political rule. Ruling efforts of homogenisation and correction are never successful, any more than are the even more forceful and organised efforts of nation-building in more recent times. My point is not to measure their success but rather to say that in China the idea of a shared, centred and bounded civilisation was spread, even though the nature of its content was never agreed upon by all.

The shift of world-system: humiliation and self-strengthening

I am sure that here a history of Indian cities in the Mughal Empire could be added and compared. They too were centres of world trade, which could be described as a world system whose centres of gravity were in East and South Asia as well as in Italian and other European cities in the 15th century. One outcome of such a comparison might be the relative openness of the Mughal Empire in comparison with the Ming. Another would contrast the Chinese imperial expansion under the Qing dynasty combined with ever-sharper border controls in the face of increasing trade in products of European industrial capitalism with its equivalent in the British Indian Empire. British Indian secular rule divides the empire into races and communities, defined by ‘religion’ among other categorisations that would eventually be called ‘ethnic’. Qing imperial rule is secular in another sense: it gives increasing emphasis to the study of the classics associated with the sage figure of Confucius as the standard for a government of conduct, above all other ways (dao) and teachings (jiao). These distinctions set the scene for contrasting histories of nationalism.

Peter van der Veer, in a number of publications, has shown how the examples of Victorian Christian social movements in England on one hand and orientalist scholarship and fascination with the mystery and wisdom of the east on the other hand were appropriated and transformed in Indian anti-imperial movements. The result: Hinduism and the semi-secular, non-communal spirituality of Ghandi and the entirely secular democracy of the Indian Congress Party. A further result, as noted by van der Veer in this issue, is the claim by critics of Congress secularism that it caused religious communalism by imposing secularity on ‘a fundamentally religious society’. Along the way is the speech of Vivekananda to the World Parliament of Religions, on his version of Hinduism: a spirituality and science superior to all other civilisations for the modern world.

The Chinese Ambassador of the Qing court repeated his imperial rule of Confucian supremacy over religions of any description. But this would soon be transformed, in the face of the humiliations wrought by the arms of the imperialist powers and their insistence on opening China to opium, plantation crops and their industrial products. The reform movement, which escalated into a nationalist and anti-dynastic movement, turning the dynasty into an occupying power and therefore turning the transformation or renewal of dynasty into an anti-Manchu movement, started with new training of
military forces, new state arsenals, and a movement for self-strengthening (ziqiang) not just self-cultivation (zixiu). The late Qing reformers, led by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, whatever their differences, sought a spiritual and unifying renewal in their own readings of the classics associated with Confucius. They conceived of them as distillations of an essence of the country (guocui), thus placing a national self where there had formerly been the centre and height of civilisation. They were responding to such ecumenical Christian efforts as the World Parliament of Religions itself, but, within China, particularly to the efforts of Timothy Richard, a Protestant translator from and into Chinese claiming – as had Christians such as Matteo Ricci before him – that other religions and civilisations were compatible as heralds or as partners of a religion of one god to be seen as he put it ‘in the light of Christianity’. This applied to Confucianism in particular, but in Richard’s case also to Chinese Mahayana Buddhism in the version of Buddhist reformers inspired and threatened by Christianity.

The new, Euro-American social sciences also infiltrated government and law when the revolutionary Republic of China was established in 1911, using the new term zongjiao to recognise ‘religions’ as governable and ‘superstition’ (mixin) as backward and to be suppressed – including most local temples in the traditions of fa. Furthermore, the combination of prophetic and singular Confucianism with modern science favoured by Kang Youwei did not prevail. A sharp distinction of science from religion, including Christianity, began also to exclude Confucianism. Confucianism continued to be considered a moral philosophy, an encapsulation of moral practices at the heart of China. But more radical reformers, following Liang Qichao’s gradual abandonment of Kang’s Confucianism in favour of social Darwinism and European enlightenment, considered the House of Confucius to be a burden to be rejected in favour of a new morality, partly drawn from Chinese and partly from European history and its temporality, made so influential by Richard and others, of a progressive, teleological break with the past.

This teleology is the political project of reforming or revolutionary modernisation, a project of industrialisation and the restructuring of social relations by government through a self-strengthening and much enlarged state. Its homogenising project, even with the strength of the Chinese Communist Party’s state power, has not been successful in its own terms. The ‘superstition’ of fa and various kinds of divination have revived with economic prosperity, as the aspirations of social mobility and their frustration prompt in new conditions the reconstruction and use of older ways of imagining and making concrete a powerful, responsive, and more rewarding authority. The sharing and contention over what constitutes a civilisation of ‘us’, which is now that of a nation and of a disputed patriotism, does have a continuity with that of the Ming dynasty, in particular the governmental adoption of ‘Confucianism’ as the spiritual characteristic of Chineseness. There is further continuity in a governmentality that still assumes powers of correcting moral conduct. The discontinuity is its identification with a people in its relation to a state defined materially as a single history of a race and its project of modernisation and centrality in a world system. The difference from India is that there is no religious communalism in the internal differentiation of the ‘people’; rather in China the ‘people’ is divided by nationality defined as that of ethnic-cum-racial descent, contentiously shared and merged into one people and by a scale of being advanced and of good quality and their obverse, backward and low quality, civilisational qualities that are enforced by considerable, and potentially coercive, state power.

Let me conclude with an example of something that seems to be common to both India and China.
The arts of healing and self-cultivation through bodily exercises in China seem to be similar to the bodily exercises of yoga in India. Peter van der Veer has convincingly pointed to similarities in their 20th century histories (2007). But I would point out two differences. In China, standards of governmental authorisation are applied by officials in recognising them as ‘Chinese’ and ‘scientific’. The authorisation may be disputed, but not the standard. The state is still expected to act as the recognising authority and when it does not, then there is a grievance against the state. Second, the exercises are conducted as a grassroots, working-class (not just a middle-class) method of self-strengthening as well as self-cultivation. Further, they are set in a conception of the world as an environment of circuits of qi in or out of balance with each other, and so is the conduct of government and its history. In India yoga exercises are associated much more with a tradition of asceticism, a demonstration of spiritual accomplishment, which is in turn one strand of the spirituality of the nation, among the other strands detectable in India’s telos of the Veda, in which they became, through Vivekananda, part of a middle-class scientific religiosity. Furthermore, though both yoga and qi exercises are a basis for judgements of the state and the world, yoga was a religiosity that did not require state recognition. Qi exercisers conduct their disciplines as an implicit historical commentary in which there is a potential removal, but also an expectation of recognition from, a state expected to be a virtuous exemplar of conduct (li).

This comparison, or any other version of it, depends on a long-term historical perspective. In that perspective, both the continuity and the transformation of civilisations are at issue. There are differences between two spiritual civilisations, their hierarchies and the aspirations that prevail in the nation-empires of India and of China. Both have been transformed by similar processes of nation-formation. But I hope that I have shown that those processes of transformation are themselves of long duration. And I hope I have been able to show that it is possible to describe a civilisation as different from either homo hierarchicus or the Christian-based one of equal opportunity and self-regulation that heavily influenced, but did not replace, either the Indian or the Chinese. You may dispute the stress and contents of these civilisations as I have described them. But I hope I have introduced the possibility of an anthropological history, in which a ‘civilisation’ is a long-lasting historical human type. It is a possibility that puts enquiry into people’s aspirations, for themselves individually, familially and more collectively and over generations, at the centre of ethnography, even if those aspirations of self-realisation are frustrated by others’ or filled at their expense, often with the aid of state power, and therefore cause the conflicts that produce changes in those very aspirations.

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