



The healthy competition between states or nations is a fertile ground for innovation and betterment of human life.

Patrick Mendis



East or West, a better life is dream for all

Editor's note:

Award-winning American diplomat and scholar Dr. Patrick Mendis has just completed visiting all the provinces of China as a Confucius Fellow and had recently interviewed with Shanghai Daily opinion editor Wang Yong about his most recent book, *Peaceful War* (also published in Mandarin Chinese in Beijing), and his views on Sino-American relations. A distinguished visiting professor of Asian-Pacific affairs at Shandong University in Jinan and a senior fellow at the Pangoal Institution in Beijing, Professor Mendis has lectured at over 25 universities in China. He is a former Rajawali senior fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and currently an associate-in-research at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University.

Q: Your book (English edition) came out in 2013, coinciding with Chinese President Xi Jinping's proposal to build One Belt One Road. How did you think ahead of most Western academics in predicting China's effort to revive the ancient silk road with a view to promote win-win trade?

A: Well, I am a student of history and I have been fascinated by Chinese culture and its civilizational history since I was a teenager growing up in Sri Lanka.

I learned that Chinese Buddhist-scholar monks visited Sri Lanka and popularized Buddhist teachings in China long before the Tang Dynasty. These spiritual connections were made possible by the evolving ancient Silk Road networks.

And, almost some 20 years ago, I came to Xi'an — an ancient capital of China — to teach at the Northwestern University. I have been a regular visitor to China and learned more about the evolving history and the policy-orientation of rejuvenation of Chinese culture and history.

Q: You mentioned Ming Dynasty general Zheng He's historic trips to Sri Lanka and other ancient silk road regions, and proved that those trips had largely promoted a culture of peaceful co-existence and orderly trade (in contrast to some later European colonists who imposed their own cultures upon local ones and practiced cut-throat trade). How important is this part of history to Western scholars today in understanding China's One Belt One Road initiative?

A: Almost one-hundred years before Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas, Muslim Admiral Zheng He embarked on seven highly successful Ming voyages to over 30 countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. In contrast to the three tiny ships of Columbus, the hundreds of massive Ming ships were a floating city in the ocean. More importantly, these voyages in general were peaceful in nature as the Ming envoy promoted the Chinese tributary

system and the exchange of gifts and treasures. That was in contrast to the often-violent Western colonial powers in Asia and elsewhere. Given all this, it is important to understand the cultural context to China's One Belt One Road initiative. The overall concept is to achieve a win-win situation for the countries involved for a shared future.

Q: You pointed out that Confucian values, such as integrity, harmony and achieving success step by step, had a positive impact on certain US founding fathers. How has Confucius actually influenced American way of life throughout US history?

A: I don't really know how much influence Confucian values per se have on American culture these days. But, the founding generation of the United States had evidently looked up to Chinese culture and Confucian values as a foundation for the American republic to succeed.

They despised the British and other colonial powers and turned to China for inspiration. And, I consider Benjamin Franklin to be the "American Confucius" who promoted Confucian-like values for American greatness. Not only Franklin but other literary giants like Thomas Paine and Charles Thomson, the secretary of the Continental Congress, wrote most admirably of the "industrious" Chinese people and their "civilized" Confucian culture. Thomas Jefferson and even George Washington were fond of Chinese architecture and plants for their gardens and estates. Confucius is depicted on the sun-rising east pediment of the US Supreme Court at the right-side of Moses, the ancient law-giver. The left-side is Solon. The symbolic message is that the United States is an amalgamation of the East and the West.

Q: As you noticed, Liang Qichao (1873-1929) visited the US and searched for a model of democracy. Why, unlike Alexis de Tocqueville, did he advise Chinese people not to follow the American way?

A: Yes, the French and the Chinese travelers observed the United States differently. Not only their observations but also their inherited cultural backgrounds seemingly influenced them to see the new republic in contrasting perspectives.

For Alexis de Tocqueville, the United States was a breath of fresh air with individual freedoms as opposed to what he knew of his oppressive homeland and its given history. For Liang Qichao, he seemed to have had oversized expectations of the so-called "democracy" in America. And, he witnessed crowded prisons, failing educational systems, and poor people while traveling across the United States. He even met with President Theodore Roosevelt and J.P. Morgan, and then noticed the economic

disparity. For him, individual freedom was myopic for national development. Instead, he advocated the civic nationalism as an alternative to democracy. This had apparently given rise to the collective freedom of his people in modern China after 1911.

Q: China and the US form the most important bilateral relationship in the world today, as you quoted Hillary Clinton as saying. Former CIA acting director John McLaughlin shared her view in his comment on your book. Why is Sino-US relationship so important?

A: In international affairs, the future of human destiny depends largely on how major-power relationships are managed. The US as the established-power and China as the emerging-power, it is important for Beijing and Washington to avoid what Harvard Professor Graham Allison has called the "Thucydides' Trap."

However, I don't foresee the calculus for such eventuality given the interconnectedness of these two economies. It would be akin to my home-state of Minnesota going to war with Wisconsin because they recently had disagreements over economic paths and strategies even though they share a great quality of life. Sure, some Minnesotans and companies may move to Wisconsin to benefit from lower income and corporate taxes. But, not for war. The healthy competition between states or nations is a fertile ground for innovation and betterment of human life.

Q: Chinese leaders say the Pacific is wide enough to accommodate both China and the US. Does this message echo your view that China and the US share the dream of building a land of justice and equality?

A: We all have similar aspirations. Thomas Jefferson nicely put this in his famous saying, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." I meant the "spiritual happiness," not necessarily the material happiness that's commonly interpreted.

When the Founding Fathers looked to China for its Confucian culture for inspiration, there was wisdom for creating the new republic to succeed as a civilized American nation, as opposed to what they had seen in Europe. Yes, they were highly influenced by the European Enlightenment but they also tried to integrate Confucian values as universal for American development. President Xi Jinping's "China Dream" is a national dream for his people.

What matters most is: Are we as individuals and nations better off than the previous generations?

Q: You mentioned that Deng Xiaoping embraced commerce with the reform and opening policy, and that Hamilton also attached importance to trade. China's trade with the US has grown

substantially after China joined WTO in 2001. Will President Trump run against free trade? And if so, how will it affect Sino-US relationship?

A: The world is a better place because of the men of practical wisdom like Alexander Hamilton and Deng Xiaoping. Yes, since China gained WTO membership, China's economic advancement has been phenomenal in human history. I don't see President Trump as against free trade, but he is everything against Obama from the Trans-Pacific Partnership to the American Affordable Care Act to the Paris Climate Change Agreement.

Q: You said neither China in its long history nor the US in its founding fathers' time regarded territorial expansion as a must for the construction of a powerful and enlightened country (although imperialist thinking once got the upper hand in later US history). Will this shared belief help China and the US create a "Pacific dream" of peace and prosperity?

A: As children always say, it is not "fair" in quarrels between and among themselves, we are always mindful of what's fair and what's justice. We can't have peace and prosperity without addressing this fundamental question. The concept of Americanism is predicated on this expansive idea of "justice for all." I think this is also true in the Chinese tradition where we are "brothers and sisters under Heaven." The future of moral superiority in public policy and political leadership is what matters in creating a "Pacific dream" for a better world.

Q: You observed that Chinese President Xi Jinping visited an ordinary American family in Iowa, which showed his respect for friendship, fidelity and family values. How will Xi's people-first style help win over American hearts, thus reducing possible cultural bias between the two countries?

A: Frankly, I thought it was unprecedented for a Chinese leader or any world leader to send a powerful Confucian message of family values.

Friendship and fidelity matter — they are the heart of human spirit. When we don't have this, we turn to "In God We Trust" as the American motto suggests.

I think, however, President Trump seems to value "loyalty" and "family values" in a very different way than President Xi does. As our Founding Fathers admired Confucian values, it appears to me that we can hardly substitute the authenticity of the human heart for the transactional nature of President Trump. If past is prologue, we can't minimize the power of Confucian ethics and family values that the Chinese ancient culture has expounded on the civilizational-state, the only thriving socio-cultural ethos in the world.