

My journey to China

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6月16日，北京对话举办第36期“洞察（Insights from Insiders）”系列讲座。本期讲座以“超越西方中心主义：全球南方的知识创新与文明对话”为主题，邀请苏里南裔独立学者、社会活动家桑德·希拉（Sandew Hira）与中方学者深入交流。韩桦主持。



桑德·希拉（图源：北京对话）

The prelude

The spirit of Bandung

From June 10 to 30, 2025, Sitla and I visited China. I was born and raised in Suriname, a former Dutch colony in Latin Abya Yala (formerly Latin America). I live now in the Netherlands. The visit was long overdue. It had its roots in Venezuela and Iran. Since 2019 I have been visiting Venezuela and working with Guillermo Barreto, formerly from the Simon Bolivar Institute in Caracas. I gave courses on reparations and Decolonizing the Mind (DTM). Guillermo and I had many discussions on the question of how to move forward with the anti-imperialism movement in the world. In Latin Abya Yala, the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela is an inspiration for many progressive people from the continent. And decolonization is high on their agenda.

At one point, our discussion focused on the legacy of the 1955 Bandung conference in Indonesia. In 1955 leaders of newly independent nations and liberation movements in Asia and Africa came together in the Indonesian city of Bandung. Indonesian president [Sukarno](#) opened the conference with these words: "*This is the first intercontinental*

conference of coloured people... in the history of mankind... It is a new departure in the history of the world that leaders of Asian and African people can meet together ... to discuss and deliberate upon matters of common concern. In spite of diversity that exists among its participants, let this conference be a great success. Yes, there is diversity among us. Who denies it? ... What harm is there in diversity? ... This conference is not to oppose each other."

The conference focused on economic and political cooperation but it also dealt with the issue of culture. The final declaration says: *"Asia and Africa have been the cradle of great religions and civilizations which have enriched other cultures and civilizations while themselves being enriched in the process. Thus the cultures of Asia and Africa are based on spiritual and universal foundations. Unfortunately contacts among Asian and African countries were interrupted during the past centuries. The peoples of Asia and Africa are now animated by a keen and sincere desire to renew their old cultural contacts and develop new ones in the context of the modern world."*

The spirit of Bandung got lost in the decades following the intensification of the Cold War. But the idea of Bandung as a place where other narratives of liberation are developed, still remained intact.

Guillermo and I have been discussing the question of how to revive the spirit of Bandung. First we needed to have theoretical clarity about what the spirit of Bandung is. It was not just about a third way for humanity apart from capitalism and socialism. It was about civilization. The Bandung conference put this explicitly on the political agenda. The Simon Bolivar Institute has been involved in the organization of decolonial schools in Venezuela. When we talk about the goal of the decolonial movement, it is about building a new world civilization.

The foundation of a civilization is knowledge production. Based on a specific knowledge production, a society erects economic, political, cultural and social institutions that governs it. The colonial world civilization is based on the European Enlightenment, which claims to produce objective and universal knowledge. They produced the outline for the different disciplines (natural sciences, life sciences, humanities) that is taught in universities across the world.

Second we made a assessment of where we are now in the current phase of world history. There is much talk about moving from a unipolar to a multipolar world. Polarity refers to political, economic and military centers of power. China in East Asia, Iran in West Asia, Russia in Eurasia are the new centers of power. But these are also the countries where the discussion about civilization is taking place. [Xi Jinping](#) is regularly talking about a dialogue of civilization. [Putin](#) argues that there is no universal path of development and that different civilizations should follow their own distinct paths and not be forced to copy that of the West. [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#), regularly speaks about Islam and civilization.

Venezuela and Cuba are leading countries in Latin Abya Yala in the struggle against imperialism. Cuba is firmly grounded in Marxism. Venezuela talks about socialism of the 21st century. How does the question of civilization connect to Marxism and socialism? Polish revolutionary Marxist Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) used the phrase "Socialism or barbarism" to state that humanity faced a stark choice between two paths for the future: either the establishment of a socialist society or the descent into a state of barbarism, because of the inherent contradictions and crises of capitalism. But socialism was an ideal of the European Enlightenment and was based on the concept of mode of production, not on the concept of civilization.

Guillermo and I wanted to take the discussion about decolonization and a new world to a global level. We wanted to organize a series of Bandung Dialogues with television stations sponsoring the events. We did not manage to get it done, so we abandoned the idea.

The Iranian path

For the past fifteen years I have develop a close relationship with the Islamic Human Right Commission in London. Massoud Shadjareh is chairman of IHRC and board member

of the Decolonial International Network Foundation, of which I am the secretary. He is from Iran. I studied the Iranian revolution through literature, websites and conversations with Massoud. He introduced me to Saied Reza Ameli, head of the World Studies Department of the University of Tehran and professor of communications. Ameli is a highly respected intellectual in Iran, close to the Supreme Leader, and very knowledgeable about Islamic and Western philosophy. I met him in London and we talked about DTM. Ameli wrote a long introduction to the Farsi translation of my DTM book, that is going to be published by the University of Tehran. We discussed the connection between Islam and decolonial thinking. He invited me for a webinar on January 27, 2024 on the civilizational thoughts of Imam Reza. Born Ali ibn Musa al-Rida (766-818), in Medina, Saudi Arabia, Imam Reza is the eighth Imam in Twelver Shia Islam. Twelver Shias believe in twelve descendants of the Prophet Muhammad known as the Twelve Imams. He asked me if I wanted to give my view on the relationship between DTM and Imam Reza's life and work. An assistant sent me all the books and articles in English on the life and work of Imam Reza. I prepared a short introduction for the webinar.

In May 2024, Astan Razavi collaborated with University of Tehran and Sharif University of Technology to host the Fifth Global Congress of Imam Reza (PBUH) in the holy city of Mashhad. Professor Ameli kindly [invited](#) me to speak on the [topic](#) of Imam Reza (PBUH) and its connection to DTM. I first went to Tehran where I had a discussion with his faculty on my work and then I travelled to Mashhad. The congress was attended by people from different faiths and secular guests like me. There I learned an important concept that Ameli introduced: the concept of social justice as a tool to connect people from different faiths and secular anti-imperialist fighters. It opened my eyes about how to build a new world civilization that draws from different civilizations from the Global South. Each of these civilizations had produced concepts about what a better world might look like in which people live in peace, harmony and prosperity. It is a challenge to produce a concept of social justice that connects these contributions and produced ideas about how the economic, political, social and cultural institutions might be built that encompasses these contributions.

In Tehran I had dinner with Mohammad Marandi. He is a professor of English Literature and Orientalism at University of Tehran. Marandi's composure and incisive interview style on mainstream media impressed me. He skilfully deconstructs their narratives about Iran, his interviews serving as real-world examples of decolonizing the mind. I had contacted Marandi to explore a potential book collaboration on DTM, Iran, and geopolitics. In Tehran we had discussions about the idea and decided to set up a trajectory for the book.

A few months later the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), the national radio and television broadcasting, had asked Marandi to organize an event with intellectuals from Iran, Russia and China about the deep going transformation in the world and the role of ideology. It would be funded and broadcasted by IRIB. Marandi asked me to get involved in the organization. I added a decolonial perspective and suggested to bring in the question of how to build a new world civilization, not just a new world order.

I contacted Fyodor Lukyanov from the Valdai Discussion Club in Russia to join us in Tehran. He was interested. Guillermo had been in Beijing last year and met Ms. Han Hua, founder and secretary general of the Beijing Club for International Dialogue. Established in Beijing in 2023, Beijing Club for International Dialogue is a new model of international think tank committed to promoting communication between Chinese and international politicians, media professionals, academics, and other key figures. Guillermo gave her a copy of my DTM book. She was interested in our conversations. I asked her to join us in Zoom meetings to discuss the idea of reviving the Bandung spirit in a meeting in Tehran. Ms Han is very energetic and creative. She put a simple question. If we want to revive the spirit of Bandung in 2025, 70 years after the initial conference, why are we choosing Tehran as the venue and not Bandung Indonesia? Hmm, none of us had thought about it, but she was right. So we decided to organize the event in Bandung. I would look into the organizational issues.

Massoud from IHRC/DIN has a wide network in the Islamic world. He contacted people in Indonesia to see if they could set up a team with me to do the logistical work in Bandung. It turns out that the hotel where the original event was organized in 1955 still exists and we could rent it for the 2025 event. We set up the project plan, the organization, the logistics, the media plan and everything that was needed to get going. However, there were several political problems. We wanted to get the Indonesians involved, but it turned out that the legacy of president Sukarno, who was a leading force in the 1955 conference with Nehru and Zhou En Lai, was somehow disputed in the new political circles in Indonesia. The enthusiasm for Bandung outside of Indonesia was bigger than in Indonesia. Russia had not participated in the conference. Iran had, but did not play a major role. The spirit of Bandung was not as strong as in China or the global left. A guide told us how Bandung was part of their education: *"What we Chinese learn when we are in school is that teachers tell us that people and countries should unite, be friendly, cooperate, coexist peacefully, and seek common ground while reserving differences. This year is the 70th anniversary of the Bandung Conference, the past 70 years in the global village have not been peaceful and the Bandung spirit seems difficult to achieve."*

It turned out that it was not wise to organize a conference in Bandung without an active participation of representatives of Indonesia. So we dropped the plan.

But the process led to fruitful engagement with the Beijing Club for International Dialogue. It encouraged me to plan a long trip (20 days) to China to get to know the country a bit and connect with Ms Han and her institute.

The preparation

During the year we normally save for our vacation budget to do one big travel of three to four weeks. This year we wanted to do China for the reasons mentioned above. How can you get a feel of a huge country like China in twenty days? You hire an expert travel agency to discuss your wishes and make a travel plan. Beijing Palace International Travel Service led by Ms. Bao Ruoran turned out to be a great choice. We wanted to travel to several cities by train. We wanted to visit historical sites of the Chinese civilization. We wanted to learn about the history of the struggle against oppression and especially the history of the Communist Party. We wanted to get a feel of the daily life of ordinary Chinese and visit a park or a market. We wanted to travel in a metro. Bao came up with a proposal, adjusted it after our comments and took care of the logistics (car with driver, English speaking guides in each city, hotels, tickets for museums and historical sites). She did a wonderful job.

We landed in Beijing on June 10. We visited three other cities by high speed train: Xi'an, Nanjing and Shanghai, in total 2300 km. We had one day off in Beijing to meet friends and have a conversation with the Beijing Club for International Dialogue.

The report of my journey begins with that conversation that took place on June 16th, because at the end of the day our visit was in the context of the work I am doing as secretary of the Decolonial International Network Foundation. The other part deals with our travel experiences in China.

Beijing Club for International Dialogue

The seminar

Our journey took place in a period in which Israel and the US started a war on Iran on June 13 that lasted for twelve days (June 24) amidst the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Mid April I had finished my part of the manuscript of the book on understanding the Islamic Revolution of Iran and sent it to Marandi to add his part. The book is based on conversations we had for 10 months, his video's on the Internet and literature on the revolution. On June 11, he sent me his part and two days later the unprovoked attack started that shocked the world.

I was extremely worried about the fate of Marandi and his family. The IRIB building, that I visited when I was in Tehran and where I did an interview with the eight o'clock news,

was bombed and destroyed killing several journalists. Marandi decided to keep answering the request of international media for his comments, which entails risking his life every single time. He separated from his family during this time and used the studio of Press TV to do interviews.

Marandi and I had discussed my visit to China before I went. We talked about the idea of building the anti-imperialist network of intellectuals for a new world civilization. Before the meeting with Beijing Club for International Dialogue, I visited mutual friends in another part of Beijing. One of them, who is very much interested in DTM, is doing a dissertation on Iran. Now the war had started, Ms Han Hua suggested to bring Marandi via Zoom into our meeting of June 16, but he could not make it.

Beijing Club for International Dialogue organizes a series of seminars "Insight from Insiders". It is one of their flagship activities, inviting renowned experts and scholars from China and abroad to conduct in-depth discussions on major topics such as international relations, China and the world economy, global governance and sustainable development. These events are held as small, closed door meetings.

The 36th seminar was titled "Knowledge Production and Civilizational Dialogue: Building a New Type of World Civilization". I was invited as the keynote speaker. A list of distinguished scholars were invited to the seminar. I felt very honored and humbled by their attendance.

- Chen Xulong, Executive Vice Dean, Institute of National Security and Governance, University of International Business and Economics; Huiyuan Distinguished Professor
- Ding Yifan, Senior Fellow, Institute of World Development, China Development Research Center
- Duan Demin, Associate Professor, School of Government, Peking University; Deputy Dean, Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Peking University
- Han Hua, Founder and Secretary General, Beijing Club for International Dialogue
- Jin Di, Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Renmin University of China
- Meng Hong, Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Renmin University of China
- Tang Xiaoyang, Chair of the Department of International Relations, Tsinghua University
- Wang Hongyi, Associate Professor, Center for Central and Eastern European Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University
- Wang Jianhua, Dean of School of Chinese Studies and Cultural Exchange, Vice Dean of School of Global and Area Studies, Renmin University of China
- Wang Peng, Research Fellow, The Institute of State Governance, Huazhong University of Science and Technology

The following media representatives were also invited:

- Bai Bo, Beijing Daily
- Feng Lu, Global People Magazine, People's Daily
- Guilherme Paladino, Brazil 247

Here are some reports in the Chinese media about the event.

https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/GN2tAwIFZ_M-7rH3xGgsWw

<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/p8njvuIXx392hw6XvHxfMQ>

<https://xinwen.bjd.com.cn/content/s68523c61e4b0bd64e2dfc32b.html>

<https://xinwen.bjd.com.cn/content/s68524953e4b0aabe0a027dd3.html>

It was one of the most inspiring meetings that I have had for years. The discussion with top intellectuals from China taught me a lot about where we stand and what we need to do in our struggle for a better world. I will touch upon some issues.



Shocking views on Israel

After an introduction on DTM I gave an [analysis](#) of the Israeli/American attack on Iran and where Western Asia is heading in the coming years. I said that the aim of the Axis of Resistance is the destruction of the state of Israel. I said it in a casual way. It is a common stance of many anti-imperialist analysts in the Global South. I was taken back by the reaction of a scholar who said: *"I am really shocked to hear that the aim is the destruction of the state of Israel."* This made me realize that our casual way of speaking can cause some serious misunderstandings.

What does the destruction of the state of Israel mean? In our conversation in the solidarity movement with Palestine it is about the abolition of the apartheid institutions, about a democratic state in which Palestinians from all religions including Judaism can live together in peace and harmony. This is the one state solution, but the official policy of China and other governments is the two state solution.

I worked in Palestine as a consultant. Following the signing of the Oslo Accords (Oslo I in 1993 and Oslo II in 1995) between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the Palestinians needed a practical plan for the future of Jerusalem. In the 1980s and 1990s, Orient House in East Jerusalem, the PLO's headquarters led by Faisal Husseini, hired international consultants to develop a vision for the city. As an economist I was part of a team of international consultants who collaborate with Palestinian counterparts to produce a report on the future of Jerusalem. I made three visits to Palestine for this project: to Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. The report was published in 2003.

The Oslo Accords proved to be a disastrous failure for the Palestinian people. The hope for peace seems dashed. Having witnessed the daily harassment of Palestinians by the Israelis, I now hold the firm belief that the occupation cannot be indefinite and a two state solution will never realize.

Yet, when we say that a one state solution required the destruction of the apartheid state of Israel, we should be careful to explain that this does not mean killing Jews in Palestine. It is about the institutions of apartheid.

There is another reason for the shock of the scholar. Whenever I speak about Palestine during our trip in China, the general attitude is that people hope that the problem can be solved through dialogue. So somehow they hope the Israeli's are open for reasonable solutions.

What is the end game?

The same scholar put a very important question on the table: what is the end goal of the decolonial movement? And here I must acknowledge that this is the biggest weakness of the decolonial movement. It is a philosophy of critique, not a philosophy of change, of liberation. Ask any decolonial activist "what is the decolonial movement about?" and you

will get the answer: "It is about a critique of colonialism and its legacy". Seldom you will get an answer about how a new world will look like, what a new economic system should be, or what kind of political system should replace the current one. I call them philosophers of critique, not philosophers of change and liberation.

In 1845 Karl Marx wrote eleven theses on the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. The last thesis was: *"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."*

Marxism has an end goal: socialism, which means a planned economy (abolition of the private ownership of the means of production and markets), dictatorship of the proletariat (the rule of the working class and the abolition of parliamentary democracy), the abolition of social classes and science as the foundation for culture. With the demise of the socialist bloc and the economic reforms in China, Marxism became disputed. Naturally, new contenders would emerge.

In the West, the theory of intersectionality has gained much influence among activists and scholars in academia. This is a big step backward in the history of philosophy of liberation. Basically it introduced liberalism in activism as a philosophy of critique. The core category of liberalism is the individual. In Marxism it is class. Intersectionality reintroduced the notion of solidarity but deprived it from its ethical component and coated it with a quasi-scientific framework. Why are we in solidarity with Palestine? Because of an ethical principle about social justice. It is morally wrong to steal their land and oppress their people. Intersectionality presents itself as a scientific discovery.

The theory of intersectionality was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a civil rights advocate in the USA who defined the concept: *"Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group tries to navigate the main crossing in the city. The main highway is "racism road." One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street. She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression."* It takes the liberal concept of the individual as the core of the concept and then looks into how the individual is oppressed in different lanes of social life. If you ask them: what is the end goal of intersectionality? It is about representation of underrepresented groups in society. There is no economic theory of intersectionality that gives you an analysis of the current economic system and develops a new alternative. There is no political theory about what kind of political system would be best for humanity. There is no analysis of geopolitics or world history. Many activists who are passionate about intersectionality have no clue about how to change the world and thus end up spending a lot of energy in defending liberalism, although they don't acknowledge intersectionality as a theory of liberalism. They think it is something new.

Intersectionality is now part of policies of liberal parties, movements and even some governments in the West. It is even part of the [recruitment](#) policy of the America Central Intelligence Agency CIA. In a recruitment video a Latino woman invokes diversity and intersectionality to promote the CIA as a good employer for people of color: *"I am a woman of color. I am a mom. I am a cis-gender millennial who has been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. I am intersectional... I did not sneak into the CIA. My employment was not and is not the result of a fluke or a slip through the cracks. I earned my way in, and I earned my way up the ranks of this organization... I refuse to internalize misguided patriarchal ideas of what a woman can or should be... My parents left everything they knew and loved to expose me to opportunities they never had. Because of them I stand here today, a proud first generation, Latina and officer at CIA."*

The CIA is a notorious and criminal organization that is responsible for many American coups and is currently helping Israel to organize its wars in Western Asia. I don't see any role for intersectionality in a new world civilization.

Decoloniality is also a new philosophy that emerged as Marxism went into decline. Many decolonial scholars and activists are stuck in the philosophy of critique and are unable to move to the philosophy of liberation. Ask them how a decolonial economic system should look like, and they become silent.

In my DTM book I argue that our end goal should be the building of a new world civilization. What does this mean? It means that we build a new knowledge foundation

for a global civilization that enables us to develop the economic, social, political and educational institutes that ensures a world in which people live in peace, harmony and prosperity.

How do we build this knowledge foundation? First we have to understand what is wrong with the knowledge base of the current colonial world civilization. The European Enlightenment laid the foundation for Western civilization. I explain in my DTM book that there are two foundational defects in the knowledge base of Western civilization. The first is the separation of ethics from knowledge. In many civilizations ethics and knowledge were intertwined. Knowledge was about true or false and about right or wrong. In Chinese civilization, Confucian ethics was part of knowledge production. In Islamic civilizations the madrassas were schools of knowledge where social and natural sciences were integrated. Hinduism integrates ethics and science through the concept of Dharma. Dharma encompasses duty, right conduct, and morality, and is seen as essential for the well-being of individuals, the world, and nature. In the Egyptian civilization in Africa, the temples were the institutions for higher education. Many Greek philosophers and scientists went to the Egyptian temples to study sciences and ethics, including Phytagoras (572-500 BCE), Thales of Miletus (624-546 BCE) and Democritus (460-370 BCE).

Once you separate ethics from knowledge, you open the door for another defect: the colonization of the mind. Knowledge is not limited to seeking the truth, but can also become an instrument in manipulation the truth, and in general in manipulating the mind. The colonization of the mind does not only take place on the basis level of philosophy, but also in the separate disciplines, in the humanities, life sciences, natural sciences and mathematics.

Once we understand what is wrong with the current foundation of knowledge, we can move to the next step: the reconstruction of the disciplines. We do that by going back to the old civilizations of the global south to see what has been developed as useful concepts that we can use in a new world civilization. And we use our creativity to develop new ideas for the disciplines.

This is the discussion we had and was trigged by the scholar's intervention about the end goal of the decolonial movement. It was a very important exercise.

Autonomous knowledge

I was surprised to learn from an intervention of a scholar who spoke about the governments policy on knowledge production, that in China there is a discussion going on about autonomous knowledge, that is knowledge that has been produced by the Chinese civilization in the course of thousands of years. I am familiar with the academic discussion in Africa about Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). I am not in favor of this term, because the concept of IKS is Eurocentric. All knowledge is indigenous: they are located geographically and culturally. Western knowledge system is indigenous to Europe. Colonialism has made it universal because of power, not because of the quality of its knowledge. It would be Eurocentric to make the distinction between Western knowledge as non-indigenous and universal knowledge and non-Western knowledge systems as indigenous. That is why I liked the term autonomous knowledge. You have Chinese autonomous knowledge, African autonomous knowledge and European autonomous knowledge. You can make an assessment of these knowledge systems to see what its value is for a new world civilization.

In think that in Africa many scholars might be happy to use the Chinese term of autonomous knowledge in naming their system of knowledge production.

Theoretizing the economic reforms

Another surprise was the contribution of a scholar on the economic reforms of China. In my DTM book I give a detailed description of the economic reforms and its success. I deal with the arguments that Deng Xiaoping used to argue in favor of the reforms based on the English translation of his selected works. I thought that there must be a lot of more theoretical discussion about the nature of the reforms in Chinese. And then this

scholars argues that we need to theorize the reforms more in-depth. I thought it was already done and finished.

In popular culture theorists are seen as people who are engaged in abstract reasoning that has nothing to do with reality. A telling example is the anecdote about German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831). A student came to him and said: "*Master, your theory does not match reality?*" Hegel replies: "*That is too bad for reality.*" This gives theorists a bad name.

In our framework, theory can answer questions that empirical description cannot. Take this example. You have a open bottle of water, hold it in the air and turn it upside down. The water falls to the ground. You do it ten times, and every time the water falls on the ground. Based on empirical observations you can now conclude that when you hold an open bottle of water in the air and turn it upside down, the water will fall to the ground. In European philosophy empiricists like John Locke (1632-1704) and David Hume (1711-1776) made this argument that knowledge is derived from empirical observation. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) objected and argued that the observation does not tell you why the water falls to the ground. In order to address that question you need a theory, in this case the theory of gravity that explains this phenomenon. Hegel went even a step further and argued that the theory should be falsified, which means that it should be able to predict a situation in which the water does not fall to the ground when you turn it upside down, like in space. The falsification theory was further developed in the 20st century by Karl Popper. Hegel did not use the term falsification.

In the case of the economic reforms of China, we would like to answer the question "why did it work" and "can the model be repeated in other countries?" "Is the Chinese model a return to capitalism?"

The scholar was quick to reply that in China they don't talk about the Chinese economic model, but about the Chinese practice and experience. So I had to rephrase my question: "Can the experience be repeated elsewhere?" This discussion is a major discussion in the socialist movement in Latin Abya Yala, especially in Venezuela and Cuba.

In the early 20th century the Socialist Calculation Debate took place, which was a theoretical debate concerning the feasibility and efficiency of a socialist planned economy. It revolved around the central question of how economic calculation—the rational allocation of resources—could occur in a system that lacked private ownership of the means of production, money, and financial prices for capital goods. Austrian economists Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek argued that without private ownership of the means of production, there could be no genuine markets for capital goods (e.g., machinery, raw materials, factories). Without a market, there would be no real prices reflecting scarcity and demand for these goods. And without these market prices, a central planning authority would be groping in the dark. They would lack the necessary information to compare the costs and benefits of different production methods, allocate resources efficiently, or even determine what to produce in a rational manner. They contended that such a system would inevitably lead to misallocation, waste, and economic chaos.

Polish socialist economist Oscar Lange replied that a planned economy, by consciously directing resources, could achieve greater efficiency and more equitable outcomes than capitalism, addressing issues like unemployment and income inequality. The early practice of planned economies contradicted the prediction of the liberal economists. János Kornai, a critic of central planning admits that "*particularly in the early decades, the countries under the classical socialist system managed to grow faster than a long list of capitalist countries. Classical socialism certainly took many countries from a state of severe backwardness at least to a medium level of development.*"

So why did the planned economy eventually collapse in the Soviet bloc? And why did China abandoned central planning? This requires theoretical thinking.

Another Austria economist, Joseph Schumpeter, introduced the concept of creative destruction, the idea that economic progress occurs through cycles of innovation that dismantle the old and build the new in capitalism. Entrepreneurs are the key agents in this process. China used the entrepreneurial capabilities of its population work force to inject new energy in the economy and by doing so it opened the door for unprecedented

economic growth. The Soviet Union lacked the ability to use that potential because of an ossified political system.

This brings other complex theoretical issues. One is about the validity of the Marxist labor theory of value. In this theory there is only one source of value: labor. The value of a commodity is determined by the amount of socially necessary labor time required for its production. Entrepreneurship does not add value to society. It is an instrument of exploitation. But if empirical observation shows that creativity, ingenuity and managerial capabilities can create value in society, how do you assess that theoretically? Do you admit that entrepreneurship can be a source of value creation in a society, or do you say, like Hegel: if that is what reality shows, then that's too bad for reality.

Another theoretical problem is the relationship between politics and economics in Marxist theory, between base and superstructure. Article 1 of the Chinese constitutions says that the People's Republic of China is a socialist state governed by a people's democratic dictatorship that is led by the working class and based on an alliance of workers and peasants. Now 60% of China's GDP is generated by the private sector. It accounts for 80% of urban employment and 90% of new jobs. It is responsible for 70% of China's innovative capacity. Who is leading the economy: the working class or the capitalist class? The constitution gives the answer: *"In our country the exploiting class, as a class, has been eliminated."* What does this mean? It means that the individual entrepreneurs cannot come together as a class to control the state as is the case in capitalism. They have influence, but they don't have a political party and all economic, social, political and cultural institutions to exert their influence. They don't determine government policies. That is determined by the Communist Party and other organs of the state, who operate in the interest of the working classes. If, for whatever reason, the party decides to scale down the share of private enterprises in the economy, it can do so and mobilize the working class to support its policies. In classical Marxism this is heresy.

If we ask the question "can you repeat the success of the Chinese experience in Venezuela", you cannot just look at the empirical data of China and base decisions on those results. You have to tackle the theoretical issues to address the factors behind its success.

Classical Marxism

While we were discussing theoretical issues of DTM, I became aware of the fact that top Chinese intellectuals are very flexible in their thinking. One scholar said that if classical Marxism holds on to its old theories, it will become marginalized. That struck me as very appealing. If the only tool you have to deal with reality is a hammer, then all problems should look like a nail, otherwise you can not use your tool. And that is the problem with classical Marxism. Their tool to deal with reality is class analysis. If you use that tool to analyse China, the only possible conclusion is that China is a capitalist country, because entrepreneurs control large parts of the economy. In classical Marxism it is impossible for capitalists to exist as individual entities. They must exist as a class, otherwise there is no need for class theory. In the Marxist concept of base and super structure it is impossible that a social group controls the means of production, but does not control the political structure. So classical Marxism cannot accept the notion of socialism with Chinese characteristics. It must be capitalism with Chinese characteristics. If the theory does not match reality, then there is something wrong with reality.

I see the same problem with the Marxist analysis of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Since 2005, Iran has privatized \$120 billion in state assets, reducing direct state ownership from 80% to 40% of GDP. It has been supported by successive governments of reformist and principalists. Iran's constitution says that *"the governing principle is the satisfaction of mankind's needs in the course of its growth and development. It is not of other economic objectives, such as centralization and the accumulation of wealth and the search for profit. In materialistic schools of thought, economic activity is its own end."* In this framework private entrepreneurship and market can play an important role in the economy provided that they contribute to the goal of the satisfaction of mankind's needs. This resonates with the idea of prof. Ameli that Islam has a valid concept of social justice.

If you judge the economic policies of politicians in Iran you will use Islamic concept of social justice to determine whether they abide to its principles.

But if you take the classical Marxist position, you discard the validity of an Islamic concept of social justice, because it is not scientific, but religious. The only valid concept of social justice is the scientific concept of surplus value.

Classical Marxists have a problem today. Iran and China are in the forefront of the struggle against imperialism. Where do they stand in that struggle? They have fundamental critique of the system. But if they voice that critique and act upon it, they end up in the camp of the imperialists. They might choose to talk about socialism without discussing China or Iran. They might choose to discuss policies (inequality, corruption etc) but don't link at the system. That is a bit dishonest. If they are honest, they clearly state whether your critique is a critique of policies or of the system. If it is about policies, then they can work with people who defend the system to change policies. If it is about the system, then the defenders become their enemies. And often it is unclear what they want.

If classical Marxism is honest and true to its core beliefs, it would argue for a socialist revolution. If China is not a socialist society, then it would argue for a return to planned economy, the nationalization of the means of production and the abolition of markets. It would view the Communist Party as the party of the capitalist class, despite its name. But then it would have to discard the decades long struggle of the Chinese people to elevate hundreds of millions of people from absolute poverty. Effectively, it would mobilize against the Communist Party and for a socialist revolution. That would be disastrous for China and yet that is the logical conclusion from the analysis of classical Marxism, if it is honest and true to its core beliefs.

The same goes for Iran. If you reject the Islamic concept of social justice as valid and use the tool of class analysis then the only way to analyze Iranian politics is in terms of class analysis. What is the implication for a political strategy for Iran from a classical Marxist point of view? The logical conclusion would be to oppose the Islamic system as a capitalist system and argue for a socialist revolution, which is a secular revolution. It follows logically from the class analysis. That would be a tragic blow for the people of Iran, who for decades have been in the vanguard in the struggle against imperialism. If reality does not match theory and you stick to theory, the policy implications will be disastrous.

The Asian century

I mentioned Russia, China and Iran as the vanguard of the anti-imperialist movement in the world. That is the focus of attack by the US and its allies. If we limit our conversation about a new world civilization to these countries, we are going to make big mistakes. We discussed the idea of the Asian century in Beijing. This idea posits that the 21st century will be dominated by Asian politics, culture, and especially economics, much as the 19th century was characterized by British influence and the 20th by American dominance. India will play an increasingly important role in shaping world politics. We should include India in our work and conversation, but that is not so easy. The scholars were surprised when I told them that the BJP, the party of president Modi, is much larger than the Chinese Communist party, which has 100 million members. The BJP has 170 million members. The Islamophobic policies of the BJP and its support for Israel that puts them at the wrong side of history may discard them to include them in a conversation about a new world civilization. I don't agree with that approach. I acknowledge the problems, but there is a discourse in India about the contribution of the Hindu civilization to the human civilization. It has an anticolonial current, which we cannot ignore. The problematic elements should not be a deterrent to search for ways to get anti-colonial Hindus involved in the discourse about shaping a new world civilization.

In a similar way we should not limit the Islamic contribution to Iran and the Shia. We should reach out to Sunnis and other schools of Islam. Western intellectuals who still value the European Enlightenment but want to get rid of its racist element can be useful partners in this discussion. We cannot be against the West and limit ourselves to be

philosophers of critique. We should become philosophers of liberation and include people from all ideological schools that promotes a world of peace, harmony and prosperity.

The great divergence

Angus Maddison, a British economic historian who collected extensive quantitative research on long-term economic growth and development across various countries and regions, argues that around the 18th century Western Europe surpassed other world civilizations, particularly those in Asia, in terms of wealth and power. Major Asian economies like China and India were broadly comparable to, or even surpassed, leading European economies in terms of per capita income, innovation, and technological sophistication. That changed in the 18th century when the two continents diverged dramatically in their economic development.

In 2000 Kenneth Pomeranz published a highly influential book titled "*The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*", in which he argued that Britain's access to vast supplies of coal (a concentrated energy source) and the resources from its colonies in the Americas (e.g., cotton, timber, food) enable her effectively expanded her resource base, freeing up land and labor for industrial development. This enable the great divergence between Asia and Europe. There are some problematic elements in his analysis, especially the valuation of enslaved labor in generating European wealth, but the fact is there that three hundred years ago there has been a great divergence in world history.

Now there is a new great divergence developing on a global scale. BRICS has become the alliance of the global south with ten countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE. They have 55% of the world population, 44% of global GDP (PPP), 36% of the total global land area, 45% of the global oil production and 72% of the globe's reserves of rare earth minerals.

BRICS is about economic development and the multipolar world. Article 132 of the BRICS declaration of 2024 in Kazan Russia indicates that there is also an intellectual dimension to the bloc: "*We encourage strengthening ties between experts communities and civil society of BRICS countries. In this regard, we welcome the successful holding of the BRICS Academic Forum and BRICS Civil Forum, activities of the BRICS Think Tank Council enhancing cooperation in research and capacity building among the academic communities of BRICS countries and the launching of the BRICS Think Tank Network for Finance that will support the discussions of the BRICS Financial Track. We endorse the establishment of the Civil BRICS Council.*"

On June 18, 2025, in the midst of the Israel/US war against Iran, president Xi [Jinping](#) declared that "*the world can move on without the United States*". He gives historical examples. 100 years ago, the British Empire dominated global commerce, commanding more than 20% of the world's wealth, and many believed its sun would never set. 200 years ago, France entered the Europe's stage, with its armies feared and its culture envied, as Napoleon declared himself immortal. 400 years, the Spanish crown reigned from Manila to Mexico, with treasure fleets laden with silver and silk, and kings who believed their glory would last eternal. Xi emphasized that each empire proclaimed itself indispensable but was ultimately eclipsed. He said: "*Power wanes, influence migrates, and legitimacy dies the moment it's assumed rather than earned. Should America forfeit the world's respect, it will discover what every fallen empire learned too late: the world moves on. Always.*"

The next steps

I was really inspired by the conversation with the Beijing Club for International Dialogue. It encouraged me to delve deeper into the issues we discussed and include them in this essay.

How do we move forward in building a new world civilization and just a new world order? I am not sure. Many institutions, intellectuals and activists are involved in this trajectory. The government of China actively promotes dialogue among civilizations through various initiatives, including the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) and the establishment of the International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations.

I try to make a small contribution by focusing on the problem of reconstructing the disciplines and knowledge production and building a global network of intellectuals and activists for this end. In September 2025 Amrit Publishers will launch the book by Marandi and me on understanding the Islamic Revolution of Iran. After that I will start working on a book on decolonial economic theory. On a regular basis I get invitations to attend conferences and seminars and give lectures. I use them to build our network and engage in reconstructing knowledge.

Travelling in China

The digital economy

The first thing we had to do in preparation of our journey was to download WeChat on our mobile phone and link it to our VISA account. WeChat is a mobile app that is key to everything you do in China, especially payments. There is also AliPay, but WeChat is more widely used. It is your gateway to the digital economy of China.

When we arrived in China, it did not go so well. Somehow, WeChat payment did not work on my Iphone, so we rushed to a bank to draw cash with our VISA card. In China every seller is required to accept cash, but not every seller has change for cash. As everybody is paying with their mobile, they don't keep small changes. Once we had lunch and gave 200 Yuan for a 120 Yuan bill (1 Yuan = US \$ 0,14). The waiter did not have small cash, so he went out for ten minutes looking for shops who could change the 100 Yuan bill. You can leave a big tip, but we often encountered that they refused the tip and instead settled for less if they did not have change.

In a cashless economy, old thieves are out of jobs. Nobody keeps cash at home or in their pocket, so there is no use trying to steal cash. I have not seen beggars in the streets. A guide told us that there are no organized beggars, but she once met someone at the entrance of a hospital begging for a donation to cover medical bills. He had a paper with a QR code, so you can scan the code with WeChat to give a donation. But that happens very rarely.

WeChat is used for everything that you can imagine. Your doctor's appointment? Use WeChat. Your medical records? You access them with WeChat. Your tax records? Idem. During COVID 19 WeChat was used to indicate if you are in the vicinity of people who have been infected with the virus. It saved millions of lives in China.

What happens when you lose your mobile or when it got stolen? A guide told us: "Then heaven comes down!" Total panic and stress. But calm down. All the data are stored on cloud servers, so you can access all the data. And then much depends on how you have set up your security settings on your mobile. Do you have a simple login or require biometric recognition to open the phone? Suppose you have simple login and you manage to access WeChat. WeChat uses QR code or a bar code to authorize small payments, but for payment above 200-500 Yuan (US\$ 28-70), you need to fill in your password.

What about privacy? China has established a comprehensive legal framework to safeguard privacy and prevent the misuse of data by the government. You can find information about the laws in China that safeguards privacy: Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL, 2021), Data Security Law (DSL, 2021), and Cybersecurity Law (CSL, 2017). At the end of the day it is about your trust in the government to abide by these laws. In Western countries the trust in government is very low. In China surveys upon surveys show that the leadership enjoys broad popular support in China. The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government has been conducting surveys in China since 2003. In its 2020 report the Center states: *"We find that first, since the start of the survey in 2003, Chinese citizen satisfaction with government has increased virtually across the board. From the impact of broad national policies to the conduct of local town officials, Chinese citizens rate the government as more capable and effective than ever before."*

When we spoke with a guide about WeChat and privacy, she immediately pointed out the benefits and did not worry about privacy. Her life improved because of digitization.

The level of digitization in China is sometimes insane. In different hotels we saw robots who acted as a servant. It takes an errand at the reception (an object or food that has been order outside the hotel), goes to the elevator, enters the elevator and sends a message to the button for the right floor, exits the elevator and goes to the room.

In one restaurants such a robot brought food around.

In one hotel the toilet had a remote controller to adjust the seat, clean it and have a small or big flush.

In one museum we were received by a robot which whom you could enter in a conversation, ask questions and get answers in English.

We wanted to get some groceries from a supermarket. The driver brought us to a large supermarket. All the products were there, but there were hardly any customers and most of them were old people. The guide told us that a lot of supermarket had to close, because especially young people don't go out to get groceries. They order it online and it is delivered at their home. That is the impact of digitization of the economy of the level of daily groceries.

Names

One of the most confusing things I found when I got to know Chinese people was the questions of names. Many Chinese use a Western first name to introduce themselves. For people like me, coming from an anti-colonial background, the question of names is linked to colonial domination. In Suriname, using Western names has been part of the colonization of the mind. I come from an Indian background. My grandfather came from India to Suriname as an indentured labourer. My official name is Reneé Baboeram. My pen name is Sandew Hira. My parents gave me a Western first name, because by doing so they hoped that I would be able to fit better in a Western culture. Many Indians in Suriname did this, sometimes out of shame because Western culture was seen as a superior culture compared to Indian culture.

The impact of naming was most intense in the African communities with a legacy of slavery. The enslaved human being were treated like cattle. They were registered in the bookkeeping of the enslavers as "slaves", alongside pigs, cows and other cattle. They could be flogged, sold and bought like cattle. They were stripped of their African names and got names that their enslaver gave, which were Western names. The anti-colonial leader of the black struggle in the USA, Malcolm X, got his last name "Little" from the enslaver of his ancestor. Refusing the Western name was a act of resistance. So he use X as his last name, because he did not know the original last name of his ancestors. After his pilgrimage to Mecca and conversion to Islam, he adopted the Muslim name el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz. This is all part of a cultural resistance against cultural domination of colonialism.

So when a Chinese introduce him or herself with a Western name, my first reaction is to NOT use the Western name and address them with their Chinese name out of courtesy and respect for the Chinese culture. Now pronouncing a Chinese name is not easy. For example, the H is pronounced differently, sometimes like "ch" or like "loch". You can easily make mistakes. And I often did. If you repeatedly pronounce the name wrongly, then it turns from respect to an insult. I can imagine that when a Chinese hears you pronouncing his of her name three times in a wrong way, they just say: "You know, just call me Ed or Sandra". And so I did.

Another thing is the use of first name and last name. In the West people use their first name first and their last name last. When I introduce myself with Sandew Hira, then Sandew is my first name and Hira my last. In Chinese culture it is the other way around. The last name comes first and the first name comes last. When a Chinese says my name is Mao Zedong, it is like me saying my name is Hira Sandew. It can be a bit confusing.

Size and scale

Time and again we were remembered that China is a massive country of an enormous size and scale. China has a land area of 9.3 million km², the US has 9.2 million km², India 3.0 million km², Iran 1.5 million km², Venezuela 0.9 million km² and the

Netherlands 0.04 million km². Russia has the biggest land area in the world with 16.6 million km².

Everything in China is huge. China has 1.4 billion inhabitants. Their biggest cities has populations of tens of millions. The biggest is Chongqing in central China with 32 million, followed by Shanghai (25 million) and Beijing (22 million). How do you provide for housing for these huge populations? The answer is: high story flats. Our first city was Beijing. Our hotel was in one of the centres of the city (there are more) with many high buildings. Initially, we thought that the high flats were only office buildings, but it turned out that many flat were residential buildings. When you are in Manhattan New York, you are surrounded by high flats. This is an exception, because the rest of the city is not crowded with flats. In China, high story flats are everywhere.



I am not talking about a group of dozen of flats like in Manhattan, Paris or London. I am talking about thousands of flats in a city, with groups of hundreds in one area. They have 20 to 30 or more floors. There are standard 1-2 bedrooms apartment with 50-70 m², 3 bedrooms with 80-100 m² and large apartment 3-4 bedrooms 100-150 m². This is more or less like in the Netherlands.

In 1950 12% of the population in China lived in urban areas. In 2025 it is 68%. The alternative for the high story flats are urban slums and ghetto's. I have not seen them in the four cities that we visited and drove through by car. But I guess they will be there, although I am not sure if there are the same as the slums or ghetto's in America or India.

The numbers, size and scales of the flats give you an idea what it means to uplift 800 million people from absolute poverty in forty years. It starts with housing. People have to live, work, recreate and have a decent living in a geographical area, not in a fantasy world.

Another indication of the scale are the high speed railway stations. They don't look like ordinary train stations of Europe. Nanjing train station is huge and very modern. The terminal area is 300,000 m². It looks more like an airport. The museums are huge. The historical tourist sites are huge. Everything is huge.

Ecology

Before our visit to China, my view of Chinese cities were determined by images of people in Beijing riding bicycles in thick smog and dirty environment. A friend of mine who had visited China twenty years ago told us stories about people chewing and spitting on the

ground, a dirty environment, in short a dirty country. Apparently, a lot has changed. The four cities that we visited - Beijing, Xi'an, Nanjing and Shanghai, are very clean. We travelled by high speed train from Beijing to Xi'an, from Xi'an to Nanjing and from Nanjing to Shanghai. The telecom of the train asked the passengers in Chinese and English not to use smelly food and not to take off their shoes and thus spread bad odour. A cleaner in the train regularly cleans the aisles and collects the garbage. There is not litter on the streets of the cities that we visited. There is no smog. Electric cars and vehicles are more and more dominating the traffic. More than half of the cars are electric. They have a green license plate. They hardly produce any sound and no smog at all.

You would think that with thousands of high story flats, the cities are made up only of concrete. In fact there is a lot of green in the cities. The surface surroundings of the flat are full with trees.

The viaducts have a lot of green: small trees, plants, pots with plants.

Cars are not the only vehicle of transportation. I saw a lot of bikes that people share. They unlock them with WeChat for 1,5 Yuan (US\$ 0,21) for 30 minutes and leave it somewhere else.

The electricity for electric cars is very cheap. A guide told us that she has an electric car, a BYD (Build Your Dream). A simple electric car cost US\$ 4000-5000. She charges the battery for a drive of 400-500 km for 13 Yuan (US\$ 1,81).

In the summer she can turn on the air co with WeChat before she enters the car.

The flats have parking garages where people charge their car batteries.

Museums

Museums and historical sites are the entrances to the history of a country. We visited a few museums.

In Beijing the China Archaeological Museum, the Exhibition Hall of the History of the Communist Party of China, the National Museum of China, the China National Museum of Women and Children and the Beijing Grand Canal Museum.

In Xi'an the Shaanxi History Museum.

In Nanjing the Nanjing Museum, the Crossing-the-Yangtze Victory Memorial Hall and the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall.

In Shanghai the Lu Xun Museum dedicated to the revolutionary writer and thinker Lu Xun, the Shanghai Museum and in Taicang, 1,5 hour drive from Shanghai the Zheng He Memorial Museum.

Historical sites

In Beijing we visited the Confucius Temple and the Imperial College that honours Confucius, the Mausoleum of chairman Mao, the Great Hall of the People, the Monument to the People's Heroes which is built to commemorate the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the Chinese people's liberation and the country's independence during modern revolutionary struggles, the Tiananmen Square, the Temple of Heaven, a testament to the grandeur of ancient China, a symbol of ancient imperial power, and a masterpiece of architecture and landscape design, the Forbidden City and Jingshan Park where you can overlook the entire Forbidden City, the Mutianyu Great Wall and the Old Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan) which has been destroyed by Anglo-French forces in 1860 during the Second Opium War; the ruins of Yuanmingyuan stand as a stark reminder of foreign aggression and the destruction of cultural heritage.

In Xi'an we went to the Big Wild Goose Pagoda Music Fountain Square with two pagoda's that were built to house Buddhist scriptures brought from India. They are the symbol of the city's rich Buddhist heritage; the Tang Dynasty Never Nights City, a vibrant pedestrian street that recreates the grandeur of the Tang Dynasty. It features cultural performances, Tang-style architecture, and modern attractions, blending history and entertainment. There is the archaeological site of the Terracotta Army, the guards of the

Mausoleum of Qin Shi Huang, China's first emperor. The Lishan Garden is the broader area of the Mausoleum of Qin Shi Huang and encompasses the entire funerary complex, including the tomb and its surrounding cultural and historical features. The Xi'an Incident Memorial Hall commemorates the 1936 Xi'an Incident, a pivotal event in Chinese history when communists detained Chiang Kai-shek to push for a united front against Japanese aggression. The site features historical documents, artefacts, and exhibits detailing the event and its impact. The Muslim Quarter is a vibrant cultural and culinary hub located in the heart of Xi'an. The Xi'an City Wall is one of the best-preserved ancient city walls in China and a symbol of the city's rich history. Originally built in the Ming Dynasty (14th century), it stretches 13.7 kilometres and features watchtowers, gates, and a moat. We went with a day trip to Mount Hua, one of China's Five Great Mountains, where we took a cable car over its breathtaking cliff and ancient temples.

In Nanjing we visited the Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo, an area of over 50 hectares that houses more than 200 species of animals. We enjoyed looking at the large panda's. The Grand Bao'en Temple Heritage Park showcases its Buddhist relics and a modern pagoda that reflects the temple's former magnificence. The Fuzimiao (Confucius Temple) is a historic complex dedicated to Confucius in Nanjing.

The Presidential Palace is the former headquarters of the Republic of China and now serves as a museum, highlighting revolutionary events and the founding of the republic. The Jiming Temple is one of the oldest and most famous Buddhist temples in Nanjing, with a history of over 1,500 years. The Xuanwu Lake is a large and scenic park in Nanjing, surrounded by ancient city walls.

The Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum and the Meiling Palace are a great tribute to Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the "Father of Modern China. It blends traditional and modern architecture, set on the scenic Purple Mountain. The Meiling Palace is the residence of Soong Meiling (1898–2003), who was a prominent Chinese political figure and the wife of Chiang Kai-shek, who served as the leader of the Republic of China and the Kuomintang.

In Shanghai we visited the site of the First National Congress of the CCP, where the Chinese Communist Party was founded in 1921. The Yu Garden is a classic Chinese garden built during the Ming Dynasty over 400 years ago. Surrounding the garden is a vibrant bazaar with shops and food stalls.

The impressions

Obviously twenty days in a small part of China are not enough to get a full picture of what China is. I share some impressions from a personal point of view.

Standard of living

We visited four big cities: Beijing 22 million, Xi'an 12 million, Nanjing 10 million and Shanghai 25 million. We drove around these cities extensively. You see how people dress, how they look and how they carry themselves. The overall image is that people seem to be well off. They dress well. They don't seem to be impoverished. It confirms the general picture of a rapidly expanding middle class in China, which goes hand in hand with urbanization. In 2000, only 3.1% of China's population (39 million) belonged to the middle class. In 2018 increased to 50.8% (707 million people) and it is expected to reach 1.2 billion by 2027. The Chinese government defines middle class as households with annual incomes between 60,000 Yuan (\$ 8,400) and 500,000 Yuan (\$ 70,000).

Another thing that struck us was that most Chinese people were slim. The hotels serves warm meals for breakfast (rice, noodles, meat, apart from bread etc). People have warm meals for lunch and dinner. I wonder how they manage to keep a slim body figure, while my weight would rapidly increase with three warm meals per day. I did not see many people with obesities in China and I still wonder why.

A proud nation

The Chinese are very proud of their civilization. We were often the only foreigners at the museums and historical sites that we visited. There huge numbers of visitors and they

are all Chinese who take pride in their culture and civilization. In Xi'an our hotel was near the Tang Dynasty Ever Night City, a pedestrian street where thousands of people enjoy the evening with music and just wandering around in traditional Chinese dresses from the Tang dynasty. Young men and women take photos in the traditional dresses for their social network accounts. When we talk about history, we talk in terms of centuries. In century X this or that happened. The timetable for the Chinese are the dynasties and empires within the dynasties. When they talk about the Xia dynasty, then apparently they know that it was 2070–1600 BCE. The guides regularly talk about what happened during dynasty X or Y and you have a clue about the historical period she is referring to. But they know. They marvel about the ingenious technological advances of their civilization. They speak about the Four Great Inventions of China: paper making (105 CE), block printing (1040 CE), gunpowder (9th century) and the compass (206 BC–220 AD). In the West they call it gunpowder, because they used it for warfare. But originally the Chinese called it "huo yao", fire medicine. This name reflects its origins in alchemical experiments aimed at discovering elixirs of immortality, rather than as a weapon. It was used to treat skin infections and fungal ailments. It also played a role in rituals, such as warding off evil spirits with early fireworks (bamboo tubes filled with gunpowder). The thousands of people we encountered in the museums and historical sites were very much interested in their history. They studied the objects, took pictures and showed their enthusiasm in the way they spoke to each other.

Terracotta

One of the most interesting stories we heard about Chinese history and how it is experienced today was in Xi'an at the archaeological site of the Terracotta Army. They formed the guards of the Mausoleum of Qin Shi Huang (259-210 BCE), China's first emperor who unified the country. The Terracotta Army (terracotta=baked earth) was a collection of 8,000 soldiers, 130 chariots with 520 horses, and 150 cavalry horses from baked clay discovered in 1974 by a group of farmer in Xi'an near the tomb of emperor Qin. They discovered them after trying to dig a well.

It is a world famous archaeological site. As a normal foreign tourist you walk around the three pits where they were found and marvel about the ingenuity of the Chinese artists who created this work. You take pictures and a video and move on.

The guide told us a remarkable story. In 2006, a young man called Ma Lin from Germany, who was studying in China, came here to visit the Terracotta Army Museum. He was impressed by the warriors and wanted to become one. He had observed them many times. He went back to Germany and made the armour. There were not many tourists. Suddenly he jumped inside the pit and stood in line in the army. Nobody had noticed anything. A Chinese tourist was making a video and suddenly saw his eyes blinking and thought that a terracotta soldier had come to life. She was terrified and screamed: "Wah!! Help! He is alive!!". Two police men jumped into the pit and drew him away.

The official story on the internet is less juicy. There is no mention of tourist screaming, but apparently it made its way to the popular culture. The official story is that a 26-year old German student, Pablo Wendel (his Chinese name is Ma Lin), who studied art at a Chinese university, was so fascinated by the Terracotta soldiers, that he wanted to become one. He meticulously crafted a costume resembling the warriors, including a paper-mâché hat, a coat of maille, and shoes made from old car tires. He even brought a pedestal to stand on, mimicking the statues' postures. He managed to make his way into the pit and stood there for a few minutes, before the guards discovered him and took him out of the pit. He was not arrested or charged since his performance caused no damage to the relics, but his costume was confiscated, and he received a serious criticism and education from authorities. I wonder how he would deal with it in a Western Museum.

Museum technology

What impressed me most was the modern technology that they use in museums. In one museum we received a mobile device with a screen and a headphone. It is set to the English language. We did not have to do anything. It automatically picks up where you stand, shows the image of the object on the screen and tells you its story. In the Terra Cotta site they had a theatre where laser beams coloured the clothing and armour of the soldiers in different colours. The statues transformed according to the laser beams. In Shanghai they used a combination of mirrors to create the illusion of a 3D scene of the harbour of Shanghai where people were working at the docks as if they were real people. The most artistic technological feat was the construction of a Buddha face with lines of lights beaming hanging from a ceiling (see the image). It is just amazing.

The start of modernity

In my DTM book I deal with the May Fourth movement in China. This movement started with a mass demonstration on the morning of May Fourth on the Tiananmen Square, 1919 against the Treaty of Versailles. During World War I China had lost the territory of Shandong to Japan. The Chinese expected that after the defeat of Japan, they would get Shandong back, but the Western powers betrayed the Chinese people and Shandong remained under the control of the Japanese. It ushered in a new era of protest. I thought that that was the beginning of modernity in China.

I was surprised to hear and read in different museums that the Chinese historians locate modernity with the two Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860). That opened up the country for Western penetration in terms of technology and semi-colonization. In decolonial literature colonial exploitation and oppression are two sides of the same coin: modernity. For the West modernity is technological and cultural progress. For its victims it is about exploitation, oppression and humiliation. If the Chinese position modernity as the start of semi-colonialism, then this offers an opportunity to link it to decolonial theory where the other side of modernity is a key concept.

Dr. Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum and the Meiling Palace

Our visit to the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum and the Meiling Palace in Nanjing were very interesting and helped explain the modern history of China. Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the Father of Modern China, was not a communist. He founded the Kuomintang (KMT). He led the overthrow of the Qing imperial dynasty and established a democratic republic. He was president for only three months (1 January 1912 – 10 March 1912). He was ousted from power by a warlord, general Yuan Shikai. He went into exile in Japan. He returned to China in 1916, after the death of Shikai, to reorganize the Kuomintang (KMT) and establish a revolutionary base in Guangdong. In 1923, he invited the Communist International to help reorganize the KMT and formed the First United Front with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). He died in 1925.

He was married to Soong Ching-ling (1893-1981). She came from a wealthy Christian family. At the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, she stood next to Chairman Mao Zedong. She held several prominent positions in the government without being a member of the Communist Party. She became a member two weeks before her death in 1981.

Her sister Soong Mei-ling (1898-2003) was married to Chiang Kai-shek. We visited her palace which was quite extravagant. She moved to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek. One sister lived in mainland China and the other in Taiwan. The reunification of Taiwan with mainland China would also mean the reunification of the legacy of the two sisters.

Nanjing massacres

I had not heard of the Nanjing massacres until we visited the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall. In July 1937 Japan invaded China. In December they captured Nanjing and started a campaign of terror between December 4, 1937 and ended March 28, 1938. The Memorial Hall contains graphic images, videos and documents about the massacres.

Some 300,000 Chinese have been killed in a planned and systematic manner. When I looked at the images, I was thinking about the genocide that is going on in Gaza. There was not only mass killings, but also mass rapes of women by Japanese soldiers. A large number of rapes were done systematically. The Japanese soldiers went from door to door, searching for girls, with many women being captured and gang-raped. China has a long history of a thriving civilization, but there is also a history of wars, oppression and exploitation both internally and by external forces like Japan. It is part of the public memory of China, but hardly known in the West.

Mao Zedong, successes and failures

China is a great success story of humankind. Contrary to the perception in the West, the Chinese are very open about their failures. A telling example is the evaluation of the leadership of Mao Zedong. Wang Huning, a high ranking member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, offers a devastating critique of him. He writes: *"China under Mao did not separate the three powers, but instead lived through three great catastrophes: the 1957 anti-rightist movement, which attacked more than three million rightists; the 1958-1960 period, when the three red flags were raised high, in which more than three million right-leaning 'opportunists' were attacked and more than 40 million people starved to death; and the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution, which attacked verbally and sometimes physically more than 100 million people, of whom more than 20 million died."*

But wherever we went in China, Mao is honoured and deeply respected. His mausoleum at the Tiananmen Square is visited daily by thousands of people. We stood quite a while in a line to see his body. The Chinese who were there with us in the mausoleum were very respectful to Mao. They consequently refer to him as Chairman Mao. How come? In the West a leader is either good or bad. In China they evaluate their leaders based on successes and failures, not only on failures. A good example is the assessment of Deng Xiaoping of Mao's leadership. He writes: *"When we talk about mistakes, we should not speak only of Comrade Mao, for many other leading comrades in the Central Committee made mistakes too. Comrade Mao got carried away when we launched the Great Leap Forward, but didn't the rest of us go along with him? Neither Comrade Liu Shaoqi nor Comrade Zhou Enlai nor I for that matter objected to it, and Comrade Chen Yun didn't say anything either. We must be fair on these questions and not give the impression that only one individual made mistakes while everybody else was correct, because it doesn't tally with the facts. When the Central Committee makes a mistake, it is the collective rather than a particular individual that bears the responsibility."* He does not single out the individual Mao Zedong for policy failures of the party who is led by a collective. Deng has a harsh judgment about the Cultural Revolution. Deng: *"The 'Cultural Revolution' was an error of particular gravity, one affecting the overall situation. Its consequences were so serious that they are still being felt today. We say that the 'Cultural Revolution' wasted the talents of a whole generation of our people. In fact, it didn't stop with just one generation. It opened the floodgates to anarchism and ultra-individualism, and seriously debased standards of social conduct."* Mao was the leading force behind the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. How does this judgment bear on the authority of Mao? Deng: *"Comrade Mao rendered immortal service to our Party, our country and our people throughout his life. His contributions are primary and his mistakes secondary. But to avoid mentioning his mistakes because of his contributions would not be a materialist approach. Neither is it a materialist approach to deny his contributions because of his mistakes."*

You can see the result of this policy everywhere in China. In general the Cultural Revolution is described as a disaster and a failure, but the contribution of Mao to the liberation of China is still seen as his most important contribution to the history of the country.

This balanced approach I also saw during our visit to the Tiananmen Square. In June 1989, ten years after the start of the economic reforms, thousands of people took to the Square to protest rampant inflation and economic hardship. A photograph of a young man with a plastic bag blocking tanks for moving forward went viral. The "tank man" as

he was called was seen in the West as a hero. I asked the guy "what happened to the tank man of 1989. He said he did not know, but he praised his humanity for not overrunning the guy with the plastic bag. Apparently for him the tank man was the man driving the tank. The guide used to say: there two sides in every story. He admitted that many people were killed in those days. Eric Li, an entrepreneur and political scientist, published a book in 2023 titled *"Party Life. Chinese Governance and the World Beyond Liberalism"*. He openly discusses this period. Li: *"No assessment of China's recent history can be meaningful without an account of June 4, 1989. In the fateful spring of 1989, Beijing was gripped by weeks of mass protests. Unlike previous incidents, which had mainly fielded students and members of the educated class (the so-called zhishi fenzi), this one encompassed a wider cross-section of Chinese society - students and intellectuals, as well as workers, civil servants, and ordinary urban dwellers. The scale was also unprecedented. At its height, the demonstrations brought an estimated 1.2 million people onto the streets. They occupied the nation's most sacred public space, the enormous Tiananmen Square. By mid-May, demonstrations had spread to other cities and provinces and had brought the entire nation to a standstill. Then, it all ended—violently.*

In the predawn hours of June 4, the People's Liberation Army moved in to clear the square. Soldiers used live ammunition. There is still no confirmed accounting available, but estimates for the number of dead range from hundreds to several thousand. It was a significant coming-of-age moment for modern China. And, 30-plus years on, emotions still run high for many of that generation. Around the world, the events are told as a tale of the violent suppression of pro-democracy fighters. But the reality was much more complex."

Li explained that in the West the protests was seen as a vote of confidence against socialism, but in reality it was the other way around. Li: *"The protests were initiated by the political left, which was angry with the inequality and corruption produced by a newly emerging market economy. The first protestors wanted the government to reinstate the socialist egalitarianism of the past. Liberal democratic slogans emerged only later."* He concludes: *"The June Fourth Movement was driven by a complex set of forces in a country undergoing a change of scale, depth, and speed unprecedented in human history. A vast majority of those who took part in the protests were well-intentioned with legitimate grievances, yet the movement came to be led by those who aimed at overthrowing the entire political system... The loss of life was a national tragedy. As we turn the page, the June Fourth incident, though tragic and catastrophic, would be a mere footnote to a larger and much more consequential narrative for the world. China has demonstrated, for the first time in modern history, that it is possible to achieve modernization, in large scale, without modernity. This precedent could prove invaluable to many nations who are still searching for ways to modernize that are suitable to their own cultural and historic conditions."*

This is more or less the general line. Contrary to Western perceptions, Chinese people and their intellectuals are discussing the post painful events in their history with more openness than the West, who has so much difficulty in acknowledging the crimes against humanity that they have committed in the past 500 years.

Admiral Zheng He

A visit to the museum of admiral Zheng He stood high on our agenda. His story is indicative of the big difference between European discovery that led to colonialism and barbarism and Chinese discovery that had none of these elements. Spanish colonialism in Abya Yala started with the first voyage of Columbus in 1492. He sailed with three ships and 90 men. He was discovered by the Tainos when he landed in the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). He saw that there was gold on the island and the Tainos were not prepared for war. They kidnapped seven Tainos and brought them to Spain to show the King that these people could be enslaved easily. His second voyage (he made four in total) was with seventeen ships and 1,500 soldiers. That started the Spanish Holocaust of the people of Abya Yala.

In 1368 the Ming Dynasty in China had expelled the Mongols. Emperor Yongle, who reigned from 1402 to 1424 and had an interest in naval and maritime matters wanted to send expeditions to the countries around the Indian Ocean. He appointed Zheng He, a Chinese Muslim admiral whose father and grandfather had been on the pilgrimage to Mecca, to lead the mission. His fleet consisted of 317 ships carrying 27,000 men. Six voyages were undertaken. There were "treasure ships" of 400 feet long by 160 feet wide, the largest wooden ships ever built. There were warships and ships for the transports of troops, horses, and drinking water. They visited Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Arabia and East Africa and brought back foreign dignitaries who came to pay homage to the emperor of China and brought exotic gifts such as a giraffe from the ruler of Malindi in Kenya. Emperor Yongle died in 1424, after the sixth voyage. His successor Emperor Hongxi ordered a stop to all further expeditions. Hongxi died a year later. Seven years later in 1432, his son Emperor Xuande ordered one last expedition to take the foreign dignitaries back to their homes.

What a huge difference to the story of Columbus! Another past was possible with voyages of discovery if China was in the lead. Is another future possible in human civilization, if China takes the lead?

Love and romance

I will conclude with an impression about love and romance. When we grew up as young revolutionaries in the socialist movement in Holland, there were passionate discussions took place about free love and a new society. But we came from the Indian community, where other, more traditional, dreams existed than that of free love.

We dreamed of building an island of love and happiness, where you wake up in the morning with a smile and a kiss and go to bed at night with a warm hug. We built that island together based on three principles: a desire for each other, a commitment to each other, and a constant care for each other. There are universal feelings. Every society has their own way of dealing with these feelings. They are captured in popular culture with music, dance, poetry and storytelling. We asked our guide what the typical Chinese story about love is. This is what she told us.

Family is important. A young girl and boy walk on a bridge. Typically it is the girl asking the boy: Suppose your mother and I fall in the river. Who would you save first?

Obviously, every answer is wrong. A feminist can bring a solution by saying: Go rescue your mother, because I can swim and save myself.

We encountered a classical story of love and devotion in the Nanjing Museum that houses historical artifacts from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE). The guide told us the story of Xiang Yu and his concubine Yu Ji as the ultimate example of love, loyalty and devotion to each other. Xiang Yu was a brilliant military leader who played a key role in overthrowing the Qin Dynasty (206 BCE). He and Liu Bang (later Emperor Gaozu of Han) fought for supremacy. Despite early victories, Xiang Yu's arrogance and poor political decisions led to his downfall. Sensing that he would lose the battle Xiang composed a poem for Yu that has the following line: *"What can I do? Oh, Yu Ji, Yu Ji, What will become of you?"* She would probably be raped and enslaved. Yu responded to the poem by performing a sword dance as a final act of loyalty and artistry and committed suicide. Thus she ensured that she would not burden Xiang Yu in his final moments. After Yu Ji's death, Xiang Yu fought desperately but was cornered at the Wu River. He was offered a chance to escape, but he refused, He committed suicide rather than surrender. In the Peking opera "Farewell My Concubine" the sword dance is the dramatic highlight of the story. It happened 2300 years ago and is still embedded in the cultural history of China.

A tragic story, that resonated with us, is the execution of a revolutionary couple on their wedding day. In the Museum of the Chinese Communist Party there is a photo of a revolutionary couple, Zhou Wenyao and Chen Tiejun, on the execution ground before they were going to be killed. Zhou was a young communist leader and labor movement organizer in Guangdong, who played a key role in the Canton Uprising of 1927 against the Kuomintang (KMT). The uprising failed, and he went underground but was later captured. Chen was a female revolutionary from a wealthy family who abandoned her

privileged life to join the CCP. She worked with Zhou in underground operations. She was arrested alongside Zhou in 1928. To evade KMT suspicion, Zhou and Chen pretended to be a married couple while organizing resistance. Over time, they developed deep feelings for each other but remained focused on the revolution. Despite torture, they refused to reveal CCP secrets. On the day of their execution on February 6, 1928 in Guangzhou, they made a final declaration: *"Today, we hold our wedding. Let the gunfire of the reactionaries be our wedding salute!"* They were executed together at Red Flower Hill, embracing each other until the end. Their story remains one of China's most poignant tales of revolutionary love and sacrifice.