

China

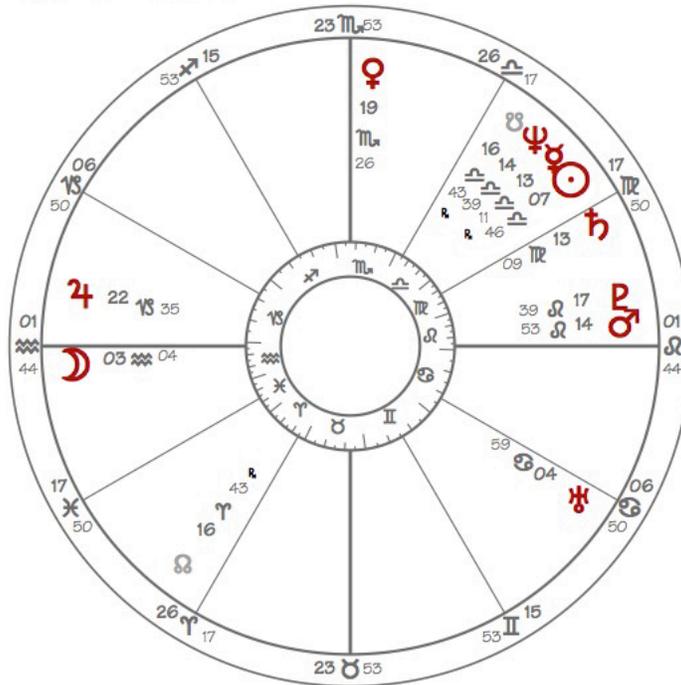
by Bill Herbst

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Consider China. Below is a chart for the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, shown in traditional format. This is not the only chart used for modern China by astrologers, but it is in very common usage:

People's Republic of China

Natal Chart
Saturday, October 1, 1949
3:01:36 PM BE
Beijing (Peking), China
Tropical Placidus True Node



With 1.4 billion people, China is the most populous nation in the world (just slightly higher than India). This means that roughly 1 in 6 human beings currently alive is Chinese (with about the same ratio for India). By contrast, only 1 in 30 people are Americans. As a culture that extends back millennia, China's history is both illustrious and tormented. Once the most advanced civilization on earth, recent centuries have been particularly tragic for the Chinese people.

Few Americans are aware of China's tragic turbulence during the 19th and 20th centuries. The Taiping Rebellion was a savage and devastating civil war between the Qing Dynasty and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom that ravaged China from 1850-1864. Conservative estimates put the death toll at 20-30 million Chinese.

The creation of the modern Chinese state was similarly long, bloody, difficult, and turbulent. During the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s, multiple famines killed 30-50 million. As recently as the 1960s during Mao's Cultural Revolution, China was wracked by state-inspired revolutionary chaos, and hundreds of millions suffered.

Over the past four decades, however, China has made great strides in getting its act together. By synthesizing authoritarian socialism with market-based industrial capitalism, Chinese leaders have dramatically elevated the country's overall economic prosperity. Along the way, they've implemented gradual programs to address a host of problems, such as population control, alternative clean energy to replace fossil fuels, and improving the dismal air quality in China's hundreds of mega-cities. None of those challenges are solved yet, but an effort is being made. The Chinese are also partnering with many countries around the world in a multi-faceted project called *The New Silk Road* to open and develop trade corridors globally. China's government has a long-term strategy for the 21st century that is intended to result in its becoming, if not the dominant economic and social power in the world, at least the most effective and respected.

I'm not implying that China is some sort of paradise or the new savior of humanity. Far from it. China remains decidedly totalitarian with a tight control over its people. Its economic imperatives of expansive growth are questionable in a world of finite resources. My point is not that China is terrific, but rather that the Chinese are, at least to a meaningful extent, pragmatic and rational in attempting to address the daunting problems faced by civilization.

Contrast that with America. Anyone who reads my Commentaries knows that I don't regard America as the "Shining City on the Hill." American Exceptionalism seems to me not only wrong-headed, but dangerous. Throughout our history, we have consistently espoused laudable ideals, but we've fallen far short, sometimes to the point of acting as a violent rogue nation. At least half our population knows only comforting platitudes about our relations with the rest of the world, while remaining completely unaware of the brutal history of America's actual foreign policy. In fairness, I don't know any culture that I find compassionate and generous — those qualities still seem to be found only in individuals, but not in collective societies — so in fairness I can't fault America for that failing.

In the past, however, even when realization of our social ideals fell short, the American economy was tied to the betterment of a majority of the population. Not any more. Now the "haves" get everything. Not only has income inequality reached staggering extremes — the three richest individual billionaires in America command more wealth than the entire lower half of the population — but we struggle with a changing social demographic that has divided us by economics, class, and race. The wealthy and powerful live in their own worlds, insulated and too often unconcerned with the very real plight faced by the remainder of the country, while those of us below struggle to make ends meet and fight amongst ourselves about who is to blame.

Meanwhile, as China reinvents itself, we see in America all the telltale signs of an empire in decline, heading for ruin. The diplomacy that for more than half a century served to provide an alternative to violence and hold the world together (however selectively) is being systematically dismantled. Militarism is now equated with patriotism to the tune of nearly a trillion dollars per year. Look at the way every major city's Law Enforcement (police) has morphed into functional paramilitaries. Meanwhile, education, health care, and even prisons have been corrupted into rackets to enrich the coffers of corporate profiteers.

No, America does not look like Stalin's Soviet Union or Mao's China. Our brand of authoritarianism is still more veiled than overt — the iron fist inside the velvet glove. The ideal of freedom is still touted in America, although the forms that takes are more and more perverse: "Freedom" to buy products and consume ever more junk, often with borrowed money that results in debt servitude. "Freedom" to impose neoliberal economic policies that remove public protections and business guard rails. "Freedom" to gut the social safety net and privatize what little remains of the public commons. "Freedom" to transfer all wealth upwards toward the richest among us. This is accompanied by a worrisome trend to ignore evidence-based facts in favor of tribal opinions that are increasingly fictional untruths.

America's economy is still technically larger than China's, but both nations have spent lavishly, so that each is in debt. America's total national debt is estimated at \$22 trillion — a staggering amount that some economists consider crippling — while China's is much lower, approximately \$5 trillion (in U.S. dollars). The U.S. has a significant trade deficit with China, since our consumer society imports so many Chinese-made products.

Even more seriously, American infrastructure is old and decrepit. Our roads, bridges, dams, and electrical grid are in serious disrepair, while China has undertaken huge public works projects, including building thousands of miles of high-speed rail throughout Eurasia (facilitating near on-demand economic trade with affordable shipping and supply throughout the gigantic Eurasia land mass). America's educational system is failing and our technological prowess evaporating. America spends far more on its military than any other nation, but China is investing aggressively in the technological sophistication of its military forces. China is often accused of stealing America's "intellectual property," but it really doesn't need to do so, since it now outpaces us technologically, from supercomputers and innovative patents to development of an alternate internet and the militarization of space.

In terms of archetypes, the U.S. is a culture and a nation based on individuality. That emphasis was once an asset for America. Now, however, it's a liability. By contrast, Chinese culture has a long history stretching back thousands of years that emphasizes collectivity. For the Chinese, conformity, responsibility, and obedience to authority are more relevant as archetypes than individuality. This is a distinction that may make a profound difference as the 21st century unfolds.

The unipolar world of American hegemony is coming apart at the seams, being dismantled after little more than half a century. For better or worse, America is losing its status as the world's ruling 800-lb. gorilla. And China is waiting in the wings, biding its time as America declines.

If the 20th was "the American century," will the 21st be "the Chinese century"? My guess — uninformed though I may be — is that it will not. For one thing, China faces a set of very serious national problems. Its workforce is demanding better wages, which eats into China's prospects for the accelerated pace of economic growth it has achieved over the past decades. For another, agriculture presents major challenges. China already imports a significant amount of foodstuffs, and feeding its population may become a serious problem as the earth continues to warm.

Still, a difference between China and the U.S. is that China is attempting to address its current and future problems. No similar cohesion of will or resolve yet exists within America, as we are deeply mired in cultural in-fighting and political gridlock. Both China and the U.S. are effectively oligarchies, ruled by elites. In the past, however, America's republic, based on government by representative democracy, gave the U.S. an advantage, as long as resources were plentiful and the culture was unified in attitudes and beliefs. That is no longer the case. Now the more overtly totalitarian government of China is more effective at setting policy and getting things done.

Both "democracy" and "freedom" are waning around the world. Given the looming disasters that are bearing down on humanity — with disruptive climate change as the biosphere gets hotter being a primary threat — those ideals, first promulgated during the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, may all but vanish before the end of this century. If civilization survives into the 22nd century, the world inherited by future generations — both natural and human-created — may look fundamentally different from the one we inhabited. "Freedom" could disappear entirely.

What the global order appears to be headed for is not the replacement of American supremacy by an ascendant China. What's happening is not the dethroning of one dominant nation for another that is more vital or capable. Instead, a world dominated by a single superpower is likely to be supplanted by a multipolar world where numerous major players exert influence.

Greater cooperation is coming, because cooperative efforts will be increasingly necessary, even critical, to civilization's survival. Nations that insist on standing alone will find themselves in deep trouble. Over the next decade, America must decide where it will stand in addressing the global crises of this century. Right now, the old order — that of the liberal project put in place and maintained by the U.S. since the end of World War II — is coming apart. America's starring role is ending, and the Chinese are patiently waiting in the wings, getting ready for their time in the limelight as one of a new ensemble troupe of actors.