As China rises to prominence on the global stage, the notion of the Chinese dream has become a powerful political rhetoric—a rallying call to build a strong sense of belonging and nationalistic fervour, and an anchor to hold Chinese society together.

But what exactly is the Chinese dream? Professor Alan Chan, NTU Vice President (Alumni & Advancement), posed this question to the audience at a Tête-à-Tête session held at the NTU Alumni House at Marina Square on 22 March 2018. More than 100 alumni had gathered to hear Prof Chan share his insights on Confucian values and the Chinese dream.

**OF VALUES AND VIRTUES**

Describing findings from surveys of the Chinese population, Prof Chan gave alumni a glimpse of what mainland Chinese think the Chinese dream is. Some Chinese wanted the renminbi to be the only internationally recognised currency in the world. Others wished for free education. But many, especially among the younger generations, wanted to be rid of corrupt officials, contaminated food and polluted air. What became apparent was a prevailing sense of discontent in Chinese society.

"Yet, behind every complaint, there is an implied desire and value. It's not what you want to see on the streets of Beijing every day, but rather, something that is nobler; something that is more human," said Prof Chan.

Prof Chan also spoke about Confucian values and how they are still relevant today. He used the example of filial piety (xiao) to highlight how Confucianism transforms basic sociological and biological relationships into ethical relationships, beginning with the family as a core unit of society.

"When you combine filial piety with the value of being humane (ren), and the value of conducting oneself in a rightful manner (yi), these three values together transform the whole network of human relationships," said Prof Chan.

**CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL**

However, one could argue that Confucian ethics are no different from universal ideals, and therefore, should not be regarded as unique to Confucianism. In response to such arguments, Prof Chan applied the analogy of chicken soup.

Chicken soup, he said, is not unique to Chinese cuisine—other cultures have it too. No two soups are exactly the same or completely different; rather, they are similar in some respects and different in others. Thus, when it comes to sets of values, Prof Chan advised the audience to go over differences and similarities with a fine-tooth comb, noticing how particular virtues may take on diverse forms of expression depending on the geographical context.

"You can have the individual ingredients, but when you put them together, you get the chicken soup’s unique flavour," he said, emphasising that when components are combined correctly, there is harmony, be it in terms of taste or in terms of social compact.

"So, one could say that Confucian ethics are universal values embedded in a specific cultural complex."

**MORE RELEVANT NOW THAN EVER**

Recounting a presentation he made at a conference on China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative, Prof Chan alluded to Confucian values, advocating that the initiative should be viewed as a means to enhance human relationships. He also said that at a time when technology is rapidly advancing, it is even more important to gel society together with shared values.

"How do we ensure that technology does not overrun humanity? How do we make sure innovation is carried out responsibly? When relationships are not just between humans, but also with machines, how will society adapt? These are some critical questions that are surfacing, Prof Chan noted, and an ethical perspective is needed to steer humanity into the future.

Alumni found Prof Chan’s discussion thought-provoking and informative. Ms Chua Hui Zi (SBS/2011), a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) physician, liked the analogy of the chicken soup in the explanation of Confucian values.

"The ideas of Confucian ethics and harmony raised during the session resonated with me and my practice of TCM," she said.

"One could say that Confucian ethics are universal values embedded in a specific cultural complex."