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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF:  
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CHINA'S NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE  
SINO-U.S. NATIONAL IDENTITY GAP:  
VIEWS FROM FOUR COUNTRIES

# The Debate Inside China

William A. Callahan

In his recent work Gilbert Rozman explains the growing tensions between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and United States in terms of the symbolic politics of a widening "identity gap." This identity gap is important, he argues, because it pushes both countries towards more fundamentalist views of themselves and each other, which in turn fosters ideas of an "inevitable" zero-sum geopolitical conflict.

This neo-Cold War clash thus goes beyond the material measures of economic growth and military power to be a question of values: the China model versus the Western model (or the American model). While American values—often summarized as the "American dream" of freedom, equality and prosperity<sup>1</sup>—are well-known and much-debated, the content of Chinese values has been in flux over the past century, and especially since Deng Xiaoping inaugurated the reform and opening policy in 1978.

This chapter will assess China's national identity by examining debates about values current in the PRC. The rise of China is of global interest primarily because of its economic growth over the past three decades. Reflecting on their country's recent economic success, China's policymakers and opinion-makers are now asking "what comes next?" How can the PRC convert its growing economic power into enduring political and cultural influence in Asia and around the globe?

Its economic ideas that look to both the authoritarian state and the free market are gaining prominence among those who proffer policy advice in international institutions such as the World Bank as well as among those who craft policies in many developing countries. In 2009-2010, the PRC actually lent more money to developing countries than the World Bank.<sup>2</sup> This renewed sense of Chinese self-confidence, which is understood in the context of impending East-West conflict, has generated important Chinese-language discussions of the China model, the China dream and Chinese exceptionalism.

The China model is more than an economic program, where the Beijing Consensus of state capitalism challenges the neoliberal Washington Consensus. For many, it actually describes a holistic system of politics, economics, society and culture that is seen as both unique and superior to liberal democracy and free-market capitalism. The China model thus is not simply about economic growth; it inspires a China dream that celebrates what many—including President Xi Jinping—call "the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" as a global power.

Rather than look to texts that discuss political and moral values directly, this chapter explores Chinese values indirectly through an examination of the work of three of China's top economic and political-economic theorists: Justin Yifu Lin, Hu Angang and Pan Wei. Their work is important firstly because it reflects the tone of the mainstream values debate in China (which is increasingly essentialized and exceptionalist, fostering a zero-sum framing of China's conflict with the U.S. and East Asian countries),<sup>3</sup> and secondly because it informs state policy (in China and beyond).

To grasp the impact of this debate, we need to understand how economic debates of state planning versus the free market quickly become moral debates of universal values versus Chinese exceptionalism, and the Western model versus the China model. In this way we can explore how China's economic debates inform broader issues of the U.S.-China identity gap and China's role in East Asia.

This chapter will argue two points. First, identity and values in China are moving beyond internal identity debates about “nationalism,” which were primarily concerned with the CCP’s regime survival, to debates characterized by a “statism” that promotes China as a regional and global power. Previously, I argued that to understand China’s national security we need to appreciate its nationalist insecurities, in particular a specific reading of China’s modern history as the “Century of National Humiliation.” The dynamic tension here is between the pride inspired by the accomplishments of China’s 5,000 years of civilization, and its humiliation at the hands of Western and Japanese imperialist incursions since 1839. This pride/humiliation dynamic generated a passive, defensive and reactive foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

In 2008 two events—the success of the Beijing Olympics and the beginning of the global financial crisis in New York—encouraged Beijing to “seize the strategic opportunity” to pursue a more offensive foreign policy. The sense is that since now Beijing is strong (and the West is weak), China will soon return to its “natural place” at the center of the world. According to this popular view, China no longer needs to “bide its time and conceal its capabilities”; it is entitled to strike back to right historical wrongs, including reclaiming territories that neighbors “stole” when China was poor and weak.

Since 2009, Beijing has revived long-dormant territorial disputes with South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and India. In 2010, Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi added insult to injury when he explained Beijing’s new Sinocentric approach to his Southeast Asian counterparts: “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact.” A *Global Times* editorial fleshed this out when it warned “small countries”—South Korea and the Philippines—to stop challenging China in the Yellow Sea and the South China Sea: “If these countries don’t want to change their ways with China, they will need to prepare for the sounds of cannons.”<sup>5</sup> Here the goal of “national rejuvenation” is to make China the number one power first in the Asian region, and then in the world. The chapter will explore this new dynamic of hubris/humiliation, where Chinese public intellectuals stress “statism” more than nationalism.

Although nationalism and statism often overlap in China, it is important to understand their differences. In his critique of current trends in Chinese thought “Does China Need a Leviathan?” Xu Jilin argues that there has been a significant shift from nationalism to statism (in the sense of Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan that has complete control over people). This can explain what Xu calls the “collective right turn” of many of China’s intellectuals over the past decade.<sup>6</sup> People who were liberals in the 1980s and nationalists in the 1990s are now statist. Their China dream involves tight state control of politics, economy, and society to promote the key values of hierarchy, stability and unity—which are different from nationalist themes that look to cultural values of civilization, and from socialist themes that value equality over hierarchy.

In this vein, Zhang Weiwei argues that Chinese people have an overwhelming collective fear of chaos.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the debate in China is not about finding the correct balance of freedom and security (which we saw in American debates about the “War on Terror”), but about a stark choice between total Order and total Chaos. In Chan Kooncheng’s science fiction novel, *The Golden Era: China 2013* (translated into English as *The Fat Years*), a character explains that when offered the Hobbesian choice between anarchy’s “war of all against all” and the order of absolute dictatorship, the Chinese people will always pick the Leviathan.<sup>8</sup> In this

new statist era, China is more than simply a nation-state: it is a party-state, a civilization-state, a military-state, and an empire-state. Chan's novelistic description of ideological debates in China thus confirms Xu's critical discussion of trends among China's top thinkers where Hobbes's *Leviathan* is also more prominent than Confucius. This is what I mean by statism—which comes from Chinese and Western sources—as a distinct trend that differs from cultural nationalism that looks primarily to Chinese tradition.

Values discourse typically evokes essentialized fundamentalist themes—e.g. the purity of China's exceptional values, which must be protected from the pollution of Western values. But the second conclusion of this essay is that “national” values are intimately intertwined with extra-national sources in a global conversation. The China dream is a response to the American dream (which, in turn, was a response to European values, and so on). Indeed, discussion of China's distinct economic development model actually originated in the West with Joshua Cooper Ramo's “The Beijing Consensus” (2004) think tank report that challenged the then-dominant Washington Consensus.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, public intellectuals like those considered in this essay characteristically have had an international experience that includes studying, living, and working in the United States. For some, it led them to formulate more complex views of China's relation to the world; for others, it hardened their belief in a zero-sum notion of “China versus the West.” For both groups, living abroad was an important experience that shaped their views. Thus, this essay examines how the China dream is interwoven with the American dream, although sometimes in negative “Occidental” ways.

By examining how China's new statism grows out of its (often negative) interaction with the West, we can see how essentialized zero-sum identity gaps can foster predictions that zero-sum geopolitical conflict is “inevitable.” The solution is to critique such essentialized views of identity and knowledge, and foster a more nuanced appreciation of the overlapping identities and shared values of people in China, East Asia and the United States.

## JUSTIN YIFU LIN'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY<sup>10</sup>

As the first Chinese to rise to the leadership of an international financial organization—in 2012 he completed a five-year term as vice president and chief economist of the World Bank—Lin is hugely influential in China and abroad. Before he went to the World Bank, Lin was famous, according to Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz, for bringing “market economics into China.” Then at the World Bank Lin became the “global ambassador” for the Chinese model of economics.<sup>11</sup> Lin thus is a key figure who works at the center of both the Beijing Consensus and the Washington Consensus. To a large extent, then, Lin reflects Beijing's official view of economic development strategy.

Starting with his co-authored book *China's Miracle* (1994), Lin has argued that a country's development strategy needs to follow its comparative advantage and endowment structure.<sup>12</sup> Hence, developing countries that have abundant unskilled labor and scarce capital need to attract foreign investment to develop labor-intensive light industries that make consumer goods for trade on the global market. Using the profits from this global trade to develop human capital (i.e., educate workers) and physical capital (i.e., build infrastructure), the country will be able to shift from labor-intensive industry to capital-intensive industry, thus making the transition from a developing to a developed economy that has an equitable distribution of wealth. In so

doing, countries can move from an agricultural to an industrial economy and from a centrally planned economy to a free-market economy.

Lin argues that ideas determine developmental success. To explain his mix of industrial policy and free markets, he locates his advice in the historical context of the two “bad ideas” that dominated postwar social thought: import-substitution industrialization and the Washington Consensus. Import-substitution industrialization was adopted by many new postcolonial states in the 1950s and 1960s as a means to develop heavy industry, which was seen as the key to modernity, security and prosperity. This “leap-forward strategy” that relied on the nationalization of strategic industries, subsidies for heavy industry, increased taxation, and protectionist trade policies did not lead to sustainable economic growth, Lin argues, because capital-intensive development defied the countries’ comparative advantage of abundant cheap labor. Since the government could not keep subsidizing heavy industry, economic growth stagnated, unemployment rose, and income distribution polarized.

The Washington Consensus, which was promoted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, was a direct response to the failure of the import substitution strategy. It instructed developing countries to privatize and liberalize their national economies. But the IMF’s “shock therapy” actually led to declining economic growth and rising unemployment in many countries. Lin thus concludes that such “shock without therapy” produced “economic chaos.”<sup>13</sup>

Lin’s economic theory is innovative because it employs elements from both failed economic models to argue for the importance of both government intervention and free markets. He looks to examples from East Asia, the only region to successfully graduate from developing to developed economies. While it is common to argue that Confucian civilization is the key to the East Asian economic model, Lin explains the model through economic theory, although at times with a cultural twist.

Rather than submitting to shock therapy and rapid transition, East Asian countries shifted from centrally planned economies to market economies through a hybrid approach that gradually opened their economies to foreign competition. Lin thus subscribes to the standard view of “Reform China”: Its economic success over the past three decades likewise comes from Deng Xiaoping’s pragmatic and experimental approach of gradually opening the Chinese economy.

Since 2008, Lin’s most important impact has been on the international stage. When World Bank president Robert Zoellick hired Lin in 2008, he was encouraging China to be a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system—the policy Zoellick inaugurated in 2005 when he was deputy secretary of state in the administration of President George W. Bush. Yet, from the very beginning Lin and the Chinese leadership planned to use the World Bank to promote Chinese ideas to a global audience. By showing the utility of government intervention and industrial policy, Lin set a new research agenda at the Bank, which successfully challenged the Washington Consensus’s market fundamentalism.

Lin’s development model combines state planning and the free market to argue for the economic convergence of the developing world catching up to the developed world. Rather than contrasting “Western” and “Chinese” models, he combines features from the import-substitution and the export-oriented regimes. In this way, Lin goes in a slightly different



direction from the trend mentioned in the introduction: (1) rather than engage in a shift from Chinese “nationalism” to a globally-focused “statism,” he is primarily concerned with issues of economic development around the world; (2) his activities in China and the U.S. show a curious engagement with both the Beijing Consensus and the Washington Consensus.

## HU ANGANG’S WORLD OF GREAT HARMONY

Hu Angang teaches at Tsinghua University’s School of Public Administration and Management and runs its China Studies Center. Over the past decade, he has been fine-tuning the China model as a key government adviser and public intellectual. Three of his recent books attest to his influence: *2020 China: Building a Comprehensive Well-Off Society* was originally commissioned by the party to make policy recommendations for Hu Jintao’s “Report to the 17th Party Congress” (2007); *China: Going Toward 2015* was commissioned by the National Development and Reform Commission as a policy study for the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015); Hu’s latest academic book, *2030 China: Towards a Common Prosperity* (2011), uses the data from these official projects to think about China’s long-term future.<sup>14</sup>

On the last page of *China in 2020: A New Type of Superpower* (2011), Hu states that Chinese need to “rethink” the “China Dream” beyond pure economics. Since China’s success in the 21st century will be measured by its contributions to the world, Hu argues that “China’s modern rejuvenation” will be shown through its “contributions to human development, science and technology, the green movement, and culture.”<sup>15</sup> This progressive view of China’s future role in the world is indicative of Hu’s role as a social critic. As a public intellectual he is famous for pushing the government to address the problems of rural poverty and environmental degradation in order to make China’s economic development inclusive and sustainable. It is significant, therefore, when Hu tells the world that the PRC will be a different kind of world leader, “predict[ing] that China will be a mature, responsible, and attractive superpower.”<sup>16</sup>

But a closer look at Hu’s work shows that tension exists between the qualitative human development goals and the quantitative goal of surpassing the United States. Simply put, both Hu’s reports for the government and his academic work stress the quantitative target of catching up to and surpassing the United States. Like Lin, Hu is optimistic about China’s prospects, forecasting that by 2020 the PRC will surpass the United States to be the world’s top economic power.<sup>17</sup>

Lin argues that China will prosper by following its comparative advantage at every stage; catching up to the United States is an added benefit of this general process. Hu’s argument is quite similar: he likewise praises Deng Xiaoping’s pragmatic policy that gradually reformed China’s political economy through a process of trial and error. The key, once again, is to develop China’s infrastructure and human resources. Hu argues that the PRC is shifting from an export-oriented economy to one in which the domestic consumption of China’s growing middle class will drive development.<sup>18</sup> While Lin sees government facilitating the market, Hu was an early critic of market fundamentalism. Following this state-centric view, Hu thinks that China’s state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are the key to its continued success.

Hu deviates from most economists’ views, however, when he declares that we need to acknowledge the importance of the Maoist period (1949-1976) in China’s economic

development. He challenges the popular notion that views the Cultural Revolution as “ten lost years,” explaining that this “ten-year upheaval . . . made reform and opening possible. It provided the circumstances necessary for the last thirty years of progress towards increased unity, stability and prosperity.” Hu credits Mao for creating “the strategic concept of catching up and then surpassing the U.S.,” declaring that “it now seems that Mao’s grand strategy for China is on the verge of being realized.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet, if we follow Lin’s analysis, Mao’s political campaigns to develop heavy industry actually retarded China’s economic growth. In other words, Mao’s grand political goal of beating the United States could be achieved only by discarding Mao’s economic policies. In asides and footnotes, Hu acknowledges the problems with Mao’s “leap-forward” economic theory—which he recently called the “Moscow Consensus”<sup>20</sup> (as opposed to the Washington or the Beijing Consensus). Yet he still quotes Mao’s aspirational statements throughout his work. In the end Mao’s thought is useful, Hu argues, simply because it is Chinese.<sup>21</sup>

Hu’s arguments go beyond economic issues to target the United States not just as an economic or a political competitor, but also as a moral problem. In *2030 China*, Hu states that Washington Consensus advice to “completely privatize the economy and democratize politics” is not just mistaken (as Lin argues), but is the “evil road.”<sup>22</sup> Americans, he tells us, are selfish because their culture is “exceedingly individualistic.” Chinese are “more tolerant” because their culture is guided by “the principles of harmony, peace, and cooperation.” China thus will be a “mature, responsible, and attractive superpower,” Hu explains, because it is *different* from the United States.<sup>23</sup> This essential difference, for Hu, is an unbridgeable identity gap.

Consequently, China’s different style of economic power will transform the way the world works economically, politically, and culturally: “China can promote the reform of global governance systems, break the monopoly of the United States, and assert a greater influence in the world. This can also serve to break the western culture’s long-standing monopoly over modernity and bring more diversified cultures and values to the world stage.”<sup>24</sup> Hu thus forecasts not simply a great convergence of developed and developing economies, but a “great reversal,” one in which the global South has more wealth and power than developed countries in the North.

To promote what he calls the “China Road,” Hu argues that the PRC’s public intellectuals need to develop the “discursive power” of the “Chinese voice” and the “Chinese perspective.”<sup>25</sup> Although he occasionally references China’s classical culture, the Chinese perspective for Hu is guided by “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Rather than quote Confucian aphorisms, Hu cites Deng Xiaoping’s “well-off living standard,” Jiang Zemin’s “well-off society,” and Hu Jintao’s “harmonious society” and “peaceful development” as “modern Chinese innovations that bear strong Chinese and socialist characteristics.”<sup>26</sup>

To understand how Hu is developing a political-economic China model, it’s helpful to compare his views with those of Justin Yifu Lin. While Lin analyzes China as a “developing country,” Hu is shifting from a general view of “China in the world” to a more specific view of China as a unique case, which other countries can follow if they choose. While Lin looks to Deng’s economic reform and to its opening to the West, Hu cheers Mao’s challenge to the West. While Lin explores how the rise of China will usher in a multipolar world, Hu concludes that, by

2030, China will guide a Sinocentric world order to establish the “World of Great Harmony” (*datong shijie*), which is not only “China’s dream,” but also the “world’s dream.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Hu is moving from general arguments about global developmental economics to a specific argument about the PRC’s unique “China road.” His arguments develop the two points raised in the introduction: (1) a shift from “nationalism” to a “statism” that sees regional and global power as its main arena, and (2) his China dream is interwoven with the American dream, albeit in a negative way as a response to “Western values” in what he sees as an essentialized East/West conflict.

## PAN WEI’S CHINA MODEL

Although Justin Yifu Lin and Hu Angang offer sophisticated explanations of China’s hybrid strategy of economic development, to many the China model is still simply shorthand for “authoritarian state + free market capitalism.”

However, Pan Wei, the director of Peking University’s Center for China and Global Affairs, is not satisfied with this description. In the long introduction to his popular edited volume, *The China Model (Zhongguo moshi, 2009)*, Pan argues that Western social science concepts such as “authoritarianism” and “the free market” cannot explain China’s unique experience. China’s experience thus “challenges the ‘market/state planning dichotomy’ of Western economics, the ‘democracy/autocracy dichotomy’ of Western political science, and the ‘state/society dichotomy’ of Western sociology.”<sup>28</sup>

These concepts are not “universal,” he argues, because they grew out of Europe’s (and then America’s) particular historical and cultural experience. Since China has a uniquely different historical experience, Pan says that it can be judged only by its own set of concepts. Pan here is doing more than describing the Chinese experience. Through his books and speeches in China and abroad, Pan is building his unique China model to challenge the very idea of “universal values” such as democracy and human rights. Yet his arguments do not entail a critique of universalism itself; his essentialized understanding of Chinese civilization has its own historical and theoretical problems.

Pan explains the China model in terms of three “indigenous” Chinese submodels—public/private (*guomin*) economics, people-based (*minben*) politics, and organic (*sheji*) society—that are contrasted with “Western” approaches to order and governance. Mainstream Western philosophy generally recognizes the diversity of interests in modern society, and it sees order in terms of balancing competing interests through “checks and balances.” Chinese philosophy, Pan tells us, starts from the assumption of unity, and it sees order as a process of integrating divisions into an organic whole, ultimately into the “World of Great Harmony” (*datong shijie*). While Western economics sees a struggle between free markets and state intervention, China’s public/private economic model harmonizes both sectors. While Western politics looks to legalistic concepts of competing rights, China’s people-based political order is based on mutual responsibility. While Western sociology sees a battle between the state and civil society, China’s economic development and political stability are based on organic society’s integration of officials and the people.

Public/private economics, people-based politics, and organic society are all new concepts; but Pan looks to China's two traditions—ancient Chinese culture and modern socialist ideology—to argue that they are an integral part of Chinese civilization. He quotes many passages from classical Chinese philosophy to show how the “China model is the 21st century's new edition of the Chinese system.” Pan also looks to socialism to describe his public/private economy, which he concludes is the same as what CCP “officials call the ‘socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics.’” Like Hu Angang, Pan reclaims the Maoist period (1949-1976) as part of the China model's “60 years of achievement” because “our country's state-owned sector was built in [the PRC's] first 30 years.” The economic, political, and social submodels all rely on a strong CCP, which Pan describes as “an advanced, neutral, united ruling group.”<sup>29</sup>

In this formulation, Chinese society is presented as a conflict-free organic whole that must be defended from Western attack. According to Pan, Chinese critics who advocate deeper political reform really want “to demolish the Forbidden City in order to build the White House” in China, so “foreign forces can control China's military, politics, economy and society.” China thus is at a “crossroads”: “In the next 30 years, which direction will the Chinese nation take? Will it preserve China's rejuvenation? Or will it have superstitious faith in the Western ‘liberal democracy’ system, and go down the road of decline and enslavement?” Chinese people, he tells us, should celebrate the China model simply because it is not “foreign” or “imported.”<sup>30</sup> The irony here is that Pan does not question the Western roots of the ideologies of nationalism, socialism and communism, which he fully supports.

To put Pan's China model in context, it is helpful to think of it in terms of the conceptual distinctions mentioned above. Although Pan stresses harmony and balance as Chinese values, his model very clearly advocates government intervention in place of the free market. It sees Chinese political-economic-cultural trends diverging from Western “hegemony,” and he pits the China model against what he calls the Western model to promote Chinese exceptionalism against universal values. Like Hu Angang, Pan argues that the China model is different from the East Asian development model that Lin supports. Even more than for Hu, the West is for Pan a source of conspiracies to keep China down, including “booby traps” like liberal democracy. While Hu insists that China needs to enhance its “discursive power” so the world can hear the “Chinese voice” and appreciate the “Chinese perspective,”<sup>31</sup> Pan argues that Chinese scholars need “to be confident about their own native civilization to promote the formation of ‘Chinese discursive power’ and the rise of the ‘Chinese school.’”<sup>32</sup>

One of the main goals of China model discourse is to affirm and support Beijing's current system of governance that is dominated by the CCP. The China model involves tight state control of politics, economy, and society to promote the key values of hierarchy, stability and unity. Pan's expression of “Chinese exceptionalism” justifies the status quo of authoritarian rule because China's uniqueness shields it from criticisms that look to values that Pan would dismiss as “foreign.” In this way, Pan exemplifies the trends outlined in the introduction: (1) his nativism demonstrates the shift from “nationalism” to “statism,” and (2) his China dream is interwoven with the American dream in ways that are even more negative than Hu Angang's. His identity gap is wholly unbridgeable.

## FROM DEVELOPMENTAL ECONOMICS TO WEALTH AND POWER

While this essay's analysis has focused on people who are crafting an alternative to the West, there are certainly critics of the China model within the PRC.<sup>33</sup> However, among the China model's supporters and detractors the key issues remain the same: What is the proper relation between the government and the market, the China model and the Western model, and Chinese exceptionalism and universal values? Justin Yifu Lin's explanations of the China miracle generally look to the market, Western economics, and universal values—his goal is to move from developing to developed economy and from state planning to a full market economy.

Hu and Pan, however, see China's goal as a combination of government intervention and markets. They also are much more interested in political, cultural, and social explanations of China's success. Their explanations describe a shift not just from developing to developed economy, but also shift from seeing such transitions in terms of economics, first to political-economics and then to the search for China's unique road to wealth and power.

Lin is critical of Mao's early heavy industrial strategy, which he calls the "leap-forward strategy" after the failed Great Leap Forward mass movement. He argues China's success started with the economic reforms of 1978. The other two public intellectuals each date China's emergence as a great power to 1949 in order to reclaim the experience of the PRC's first thirty years. Rather than criticizing Mao's leap-forward strategy, they see it as the secret of China's success.

Although these three public intellectuals differ about the past, there is a consensus about China's long-term objective: Great Harmony (*datong*). Hu and Pan specifically mention "Great Harmony World" as their goal for China and the globe. This utopian ideal, which comes from China's two millennia old Book of Rites (*Liji*), describes a happy, conflict-free, organic society. Lin, who brought a calligraphic scroll of the Great Harmony passage with him to Washington, D.C., explains that "it advocates a world in which everyone trusts each other, cares for others and not only for himself. . . . This was my vision for the World Bank. . . . We try to work on poverty reduction and promote sustainable growth."<sup>34</sup>

While promoting Great Harmony, Lin, Hu, and Pan all agree that democracy is the problem rather than the solution. Pan is particularly defensive, seeing democracy as a conspiracy, a trick, a booby trap that the West wants to use to enslave China. At times, China model discourse seems to boil down to Occidentalism: For China to be good, it needs to understand all Western things as "evil" (and all evil things as "Western").

## CONCLUSION: OCCIDENTALISM AND CHINESE EXCEPTIONALISM

The idea that Chinese civilization is not just uniquely unique but "uniquely superior"—and uniquely threatened—is where the China dream becomes Chinese exceptionalism (*Zhongguo teshulun*). While American exceptionalism grows out of the idea that the United States is the world's first new nation, Chinese exceptionalism looks to 5,000 years of uniquely continuous civilization to see China as the world's first ancient civilization.<sup>35</sup>

While American exceptionalists see the United States as a beacon of freedom and democracy, Chinese exceptionalists see their country as a peaceful and harmonious alternative to Pax Americana. Although historians have provided a nuanced analysis of China's turbulent imperial history,<sup>36</sup> many strategists and public intellectuals still take for granted the exceptionalist argument that China's civilization is "inherently peaceful." But Chinese exceptionalism actually involves more than just trumpeting the country's "peaceful civilization."

Just as in the United States, Chinese exceptionalists assume that their country is exceptionally *good*. Kang Xiaoguang, a famous political-economist who combines expertise in rural development and Confucian values, explains this in his seminal essay "Chinese exceptionalism": "Chinese people themselves think that their race-nation is the most superior in the world. Even when they are in dire straits, they always feel that they should be the number one in the world."<sup>37</sup>

Although his ultimate goal is a World of Great Harmony (*shijie datong*) based on China's "inherently peaceful" civilization, Kang primarily sees Chinese exceptionalism as a negative factor—defining not what China is but what it is not. The short answer is: China is exceptional simply because it is *not* Western or democratic. Since China's experience is different from that of the West, he explains, "Western experience cannot dictate the future of China, and China's future will not simply repeat the past experience of others." Here Kang joins those who question the economic determinism of the Washington Consensus that tells us that liberal markets inevitably lead to liberal democracy.

But he goes further: because China is uniquely unique, the experiences of the Third World, post-socialist states in eastern Europe and Russia, and the "Confucian cultural circle" of East Asian countries (including Korea and Japan), are also irrelevant to China's development path. A major theme of Chinese exceptionalism, then, is not just promoting China's road as an alternative to mainstream development theory. To make sense of China as an alternative, Kang needs to go beyond criticizing economic theory to figure his model as the "opposite of Western individualism and a rejection of Western culture."

Here Kang joins others who can paint a rosy picture of Chinese values only after they have "Occidentalized" the West through negative stereotypes. "Orientalism," according to Edward Said, was not simply a description of "the East" produced by Europe's imperial bureaucrats. Orientalism mixed culture and politics to become European imperialism's "corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."<sup>38</sup>

Occidentalism works the same way as Orientalism, except in reverse: China asserts authority over itself and the West by first rejecting the West, and then searching for essential Chinese values in a negative quest. Recall that Hu Angang points to America's "excessive individualism" to show the value of Chinese harmony; to promote what he calls the "China road," he has to denounce the Washington Consensus as the "evil road."

While most public intellectuals frame the rise of China in terms of China versus the West/America, Zhang Weiwei's discussion of the China model places it in a regional context as well. In *The China Shock* (*Zhongguo zhenhan*, 2011), Zhang certainly starts from

arguments similar to those of Pan Wei: the world is faced with two options, the China model or the Western model. Zhang also romanticizes Chinese culture as harmonious and peaceful, while the West is presented as violently confrontational. But at the end of his book, Zhang tests the China model by comparing it with countries outside “the West”: India, Eastern Europe and East Asia. Rather than examining such countries on their own terms, he slots them into the China model/Western model framework. As his section titles indicate—“The Democracy Predicament: My View of India,” and “The Democracy Predicament: My View of East Asia”—his goal is not merely to criticize these countries as rivals, but to Occidentalize them as part of a general battle against liberal capitalism and liberal democracy.

Zhang spends a fair bit of space, for example, denouncing India; he thus can conclude that rather than being proud of being the “world’s largest democracy,” Indians should be concerned about hosting “Asia’s largest slum” in Mumbai. South Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese, Thai, Mongolian and Filipino problems—which in fact are quite diverse—are likewise all traced to a single source: choosing to follow what Zhang calls the “flawed Western democratic system.”<sup>39</sup>

Zhang’s solution is for these various countries to jettison democracy, and return to the warm embrace of Chinese civilization, whose values, he explains, are shared by all East Asian countries.<sup>40</sup> East Asian society (which he describes as a single entity), is based on harmony and the family. Hence if East Asians foolishly “copy” Western ideas and institutions, then they will fall prey to what Zhang describes as the “five democratic diseases”: social division, weak state power, short-termism, politicization of issues, and populism.<sup>41</sup>

In Zhang’s paternalistic schema, it is problematic for non-western countries to be “low quality” copies of liberal democracy, while it is natural for East Asians to be derivative of Chinese civilization and Confucian values. Like other Chinese exceptionalists, he does not acknowledge that the PRC copied European Marxist ideas and Soviet Russian institutions. Zhang likewise shows little appreciation of the fact that Koreans often argue that their country is even more Confucian than China.

Zhang’s *China Shock* is important for two reasons. Firstly, Zhang is part of the new breed of public intellectuals mentioned above who have traveled widely, speak to Chinese and foreign audiences, and have elite connections: Zhang was Deng Xiaoping’s translator in the 1980s. Secondly, the book (and related newspaper articles) has been hugely popular: it sold over one million copies, was required reading for Shanghai party cadres in 2011, and was on Xi Jinping’s summer reading list in 2012.<sup>42</sup> In this way, it is indicative of 1) the widening identity gap between China and the U.S. because it locates Chinese experiences in a China versus the West framework, and 2) the widening identity gap between China and many of its East Asian neighbors since it Occidentalizes many of the region’s countries in the service of pathologizing liberal values as a Western disease.

As we have seen in this essay, many public intellectuals are much clearer about what they do not like—the West and the United States—than they are about China’s alternative to it. Their China dream is closely linked to the American dream, albeit in a negative way that also neglects consideration of experiences from Asia or Europe (let alone from non-territorial sources). Their impact thus may be more negative—to delegitimize the current Western-influenced world

order—than positive in the sense of promoting a coherent post-American world order. This is because China's Occidentalism is not a conclusion drawn from rigorous analysis. Rather, it is the starting point of Chinese exceptionalism: Public intellectuals first decide that they do not like "the West," and only then go in search of proper Chinese values (which then are presented as China's timeless essential moral code).

The East/West logic of this Occidentalism, in which Chinese authors construct an evil and failing West as the opposite of a virtuous and successful China, inflames Chinese readers' righteous rage and sense of global injustice. While it is laudable to question the economic determinism of the Washington Consensus, it is unfortunate that many Chinese authors replace it with a cultural determinism of "inevitables" and "undeniables" that tell us what Chinese people can—and, more importantly, *cannot*—do. Rather than questioning the rigid essentialism of universal and essentialized identity constructs, many Chinese intellectuals are simply replacing one set of essential values with another, in an effort to justify China's expansionist notion of geopolitical power in East Asia.

## ENDNOTES

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