

Contemporary China: Tradition, Political Leadership, and Foreign Policy (*)

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With **the replacement of Revolution by Reform** as the primary theme of China, state practice and leadership behavior have decisively changed. Somewhat like reforms in the traditional Chinese history, the contemporary reform is essentially inherently differentiated, carefully selective, and therefore sophisticated. There has been “the determination to change the political and ideological framework as little as possible”. At the same time, the package of economic reform “is more systematic than anything earlier regimes attempted; there is a decisiveness about ends and means in the efforts to achieve dramatic results that is in fact quite new,” while “population reform” of family planning and one-child policy is really a massive drastic action, “one of the most radical reform policies the Chinese people have ever experienced” that doing “more to transform the whole fabric of traditional society than any other single reform in Chinese history.”⁵⁹

Also profoundly embedded in the traditional Chinese history and the contemporary Chinese reformist practice is **the central idea of “maintenance”**. Maintenance as one of the theme in China’s long history means “the heavy burden of keeping an enormous country like China together and more or less stable and peaceful.” It in traditional China emphasizes the way the Chinese dynasties had endured the conquests and rebellions inflicted on them since the 3rd century B.C., and in the contemporary China the stamina, flexibility, and skills of China’s political leaders in keeping the country united and even prosper despite the massive transformation brought about by the extraordinary reform. Really, “what is impressive is that the generations educated under Mao Zedong’s China, who have suffered so greatly from the Cultural Revolution, have been able to adapt to the new challenges,” totally different from what happened in the Soviet Union.⁶⁰ It is what Professor Andrew Nathan, one of the best of the China Hand in the American academia, called insightfully with introspection the “Authoritarian resilience”,⁶¹ or **maintenance depending upon adaptive creation**, not rigidity and imitation.

One of the most traditional Chineseness or the Chinese notion of the world had been something like that of **biological cycles governing universe**, together with its political version of cycles of dynasties, “of political success and prosperity inevitably followed by decline and fall.”⁶² As for the contemporary political leadership in China, this must have high relevance in their mind particularly because of their personal experience of the mistaken governance in China during two

⁵⁹ “Reforming the Revolution,” in Wang Gungwu, *To Act Is to Know*, pp. 13-15.

⁶⁰ “China’s Return,” in Wang Gungwu, *Ideas Won’t Keep*, pp. 4-5.

⁶¹ Andrew J. Nathan, “Authoritarian Resilience: Institutionalization and the Transition to China’s Fourth Generation,” in Christopher Marsh and June Teufel Dreyer, eds., *U.S.-China Relations in the 21st Century* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2003). And there is at the same time another fundamental meaning of maintenance for the contemporary Chinese leaders, much more traditional in its best sense: to keep China’s frontier areas including Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan within China, about which no one in the world can doubt their determination and the Chinese popular support to them on that.

⁶² “Chinese Society and Chinese Foreign Policy,” in Wang Gungwu, *To Act is to Know*, p. 89.

decades before reform as well as of the challenging and difficult transformation brought up by reform. The most recent prominent demonstration in this respect is in President Hu Jintao's speech for celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the beginning of reform and opening up. "The progressiveness of a political party and its ruling status," he emphasized, "are not things that are obtained once and for all. That it was progressive doesn't necessarily mean it is progressive and will still be progressive. The power it had doesn't ensure that it's only right and proper to have the power now, let alone have it forever."⁶³ This sense greatly increases the political leaders' concern about the benefits they should bring to the Chinese people, and therefore greatly enhances their political wary, prudence, diligence, and innovativeness in economic policies and more.

One Chineseness both traditional and contemporary is **the paradox in the question of equality**. While the Chinese traditionally had always had a hierarchical society and conception of different privileges, rights and duties for different groups of society, there were an ambiguous element arising from the belief that "righteousness is based upon that kind of justice and fairness whereby men are equal at specific times when faced with specific problems."⁶⁴ This paradox is still embedded in the core of China's political culture today though in a different form. Through the modern Chinese revolution which had an ideational element of universal applicable equality, equalitarianism has for more than half a century been one of the most fundamental "orthodoxy" in China's political ideology and constitutional conceptions. This contributes greatly to making the Chinese today in some sense one of the most instinctive and vocal in resorting to equalitarian rationale to inspire and support their demand for justice, and therefore potentially easier to incline to "mass disturbances" (*quntixin shijian*) as one standard official term in today's China calls. Largely also because of this feature of political culture, the present Chinese top leaders have persistently characterized their policy program and even personal image by "people-oriented" (*yi ren weiben*) populism and won great appeal among the populace.⁶⁵

While at the same time, the hierarchical "official-oriented" (*guan benwei*) system and culture, very traditional in China, has been so widely regarded as one of the most important contemporary Chineseness that nearly every adult in China roughly knows its basic meaning and its prevalence. So in a sense the political credibility of Chinese leadership and government today among the people has always had to deal with this paradox of "people-oriented" ideology vs. "official-oriented" political culture.

This **paradox between equalitarianism and hierarchical order** even has its counterpart or similarity in the contemporary Chinese foreign policy, though less fundamental and less difficult to deal with. On one hand, resulted from PRC's tradition, principle, and vital interests in foreign relations, China is almost the only great power in today's world to advocate and practice an international equalitarian philosophy based on conceptions of sovereign equality, non-interference,

⁶³ "Highlights of President Hu's speech at reform eulogy meeting," <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90785/6557160.html>.

⁶⁴ "Chinese Society and Chinese Foreign Policy," in Wang Gungwu, *To Act is to Know*, p. 90.

⁶⁵ The most authorized official elaboration of Hu Jintao's "Scientific Outlook for Development", his ideological innovation for the Party and the benchmark of his political program, even declares *yi ren weiben* as its kernel. See "Interpreting the Political Report of the 17th Party Congress," New China News Agency, November 12, 2008. http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-11/12/content_7054717.htm.

and what China calls “the democratization of international political life.” But on the other hand, compatible with China’s magnitude and status as a great power as well as other parts of her vital interests, the idea of diplomacy with the great powers (*daguo waijiao*), a term often used since late 1990s by numerous Chinese and foreign scholars. Indeed, *daguo waijiao* itself has almost never used in China’s official public documents, unlike the often appeared *daguo guanxi* (“relations with the great powers”), because of the considerations paid to traditional doctrine and relations with developing countries. The Chinese government has already recognized with prudently expressed but increasing proud that it has to conduct a “*daguo waijiao*” strategy with the appropriate management of *daguo guanxi* as a first priority.⁶⁶ This paradox or two mutually opposing imperatives has to be grasped for understanding China’s behavior in dealing with most “hot issues” in the international stage, e.g. that of North Korea, Iran, Darfur, Myanmar, and more.⁶⁷

As everyone who knows China in history and culture knows, “**the emphasis on morality** is clearly Chinese in all its aspects” and “it is rooted very deeply in the Chinese tradition.”⁶⁸ In terms of the leaders’ concern and governmental political program, contemporary emphasis on morality has its domestic aspect, not only as a seemingly restoring effort after years of “cultural destruction” and the loss of a part of the Chinese “very being”, but also as a attempt to resist and reverse those serious corrupting impacts of the rampant marketization upon social ethics and general discipline, besides reflecting a potential and ambiguous aspiration to began to develop the spiritual and moral dimensions for a historic new way of modern life with Chinese characteristics. Hence Jiang Zemin’s exhortation for ruling not only by law, but also by virtue (*yide zhiguo*), and then Hu Jingtao’s for “Eight honors, Eight disgraces” (*barong bachi*). These, especially the former, sounded like a very traditional appeal as those in Chinese history.⁶⁹ Effectiveness is quite limited, probably less that that at the international front.

At the international front, Hu Jingtao launched “Harmonious World” conception accompanied with China’s prominent rise, highlighted by his speech on April 21, 2006 at Yale University. In it he emphasized four features of the traditional “Chinese civilization” and therefore, by quite explicit implication, China’s moral/political ideal on world order: “always” giving prominence to the people and respect for people’s dignity and value; to unremitting self-improvement, reform and innovation; to social harmony, unity and mutual assistance; and to

⁶⁶ Ye Zhicheng, “*Daguo Waijiao* Strategy: An Inevitability for China” (in Chinese), *World Economy and World Politics* (Beijing), No.1, 2000. For China’s contemporary *daguo waijiao*, the most focused and detailed research has been produced is probably that by Dr. Zhang Dengji, a Taiwanese scholar. See his *Constructing China: Great Power Identity and Diplomacy in an Uncertain World* (in Chinese) (Taipei: Yangzi Press, 2003).

⁶⁷ The following picture is typical: “As long as the United States, Britain and France do not push for immediate action and leave open the door to compromise, China is likely to go along with a resolution warning Tehran, said Shi Yinhong, a foreign policy expert at the People’s University of China in Beijing. ‘China is doing its best to meet the U.S. halfway while protecting its own interests,’ he said of wrangling over a resolution [of U.N. Security Council on Iran’s development of nuclear capability]. ‘China may try to soften the wording or--when it comes to sanctions--limit them. But China also knows a vote against a resolution would do terrible damage to relations with the U.S.’” Chris Buckley, “China Unbending on Iran,” *Reuter*, April 27, 2006.

⁶⁸ “Chinese Society and Chinese Foreign Policy,” in Wang Gungwu, *To Act is to Know*, p. 90.

⁶⁹ “China’s Return,” in Wang Gungwu, *Ideas Won’t Keep*, pp. 7-8. Even as early as 1981 under Deng Xiaoping, the government had launched a national movement of “Five stresses and four points of beauty” (*wujiang shimei*). The five stresses are: stress on decorum, manners, hygiene, discipline and morals; The four points of beauty are: beauty of the mind, language, behavior and the environment. For details see <http://www.chinabaike.com/article/316/jiaoyu/2008/200801081126985.html>.

good neighborliness.⁷⁰ Future historians might treat this speech and few similar ones as something like “The World Must Be Made Safe for Democracy” Address or the Atlantic Charter, historic declaration by a rising World Power on what a morally better world order should have and late does have.⁷⁰ However, at the present and probably also in the predictable future, one outside or within China will be easy to have doubt or reservation, not only because of the perennial tension between morality and interest, and right and might, but also because “things have never worked out that way before.”⁷¹

More than other great powers in the world since 1945 or 1990, the contemporary China has **overwhelmingly domestic function for her foreign policy**. Or in other words, she almost uniquely in this comparison “obsesses” with domestic purposes in conducting foreign relations. It is this Chineseness that has contributed a lot to her “strategic concentration” so beneficial to her very prominent achievements of economic growth and social stability in the most recent decades, as well as to her generally conservative foreign policy strategic culture and probably slower future progress than otherwise in obtaining external political influence and power presence.⁷² In fact, foreign policies in Mao Zedong’s era were also in most time overwhelmingly domestic-oriented, for Revolution within China. It was especially remarkable during the founding years of PRC and 1960s.⁷³ But on the other hand, his constant ideological ideal for world Revolution and sometimes impulsive driving for promoting it were a major diversion. For Deng Xiaoping and his successors, domestic economic growth and social stability through reform and maintenance is, as it were, ideology itself. Although China’s vigorous rise, increasing dependence of domestic growth upon available external market and resources, opportunities to expand international influence like the present global economic crisis, and natural attraction to greater national honor could in combination lead to fundamental change of posture and derail Beijing from overwhelming domestic priority, but the strategic culture of prudence and patience based on many years of experience, together with the nearly perennial domestic delicacy of a huge country, keep China

⁷⁰ President Hu Jintao’s Speech at Yale University (English translation for the whole text). http://corner.youth.cn/digest/yanjiang/200606/t20060605_329619.htm.

⁷⁰ Some in the West have already sensed this possibility, insightful but worry. One is Howard French, *The New York Times* journalist and columnist. In an article “What If Beijing Is Right?” (*International Herald Tribune*, November 2, 2007), he wrote: “What if a country could become great and powerful without ever becoming a ‘great power,’ or at least not with any of the connotations that we have come to expect with such a label? Trade and investment would spread around the globe and flourish, and in every instance and for all concerned the result would be a ‘win-win’....What if this power had no need for muscle-flexing, or for military alliances, or for foreign interventions, or for sanctions of any kind? Foreign policy could be reduced to a call for us all just to be friends. And what, finally, if affairs between all states could proceed strictly on the basis of mutual respect, and above all on noninterference in each other’s internal affairs? Might not there be a falling away of conflict, and of inter-state tension altogether?...Whether it is China’s walk or China’s talk, these are all questions posed by the China whose rise is evident almost everywhere one looks these days.”

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² It seems that Professor Wang Gungwu had left this very important feature regrettably untouched in his rare direct discussion of the contemporary Chinese foreign policy. And that for the previous time is the same: He once summarized in some detail the Chinese foreign policy objectives from 1949 to 1971, but no domestic function was ever mentioned as it was in fact with great importance. See “The Re-emergence of China,” Wang Gungwu, *To Act Is to Know*, pp. 73-75.

⁷³ One major case mentioned for illustration is that anti-U.S. and anti-imperialist foreign policy and mass political education toward the end of 1940s until the Korean War were mainly for mass-mobilization for internal revolution, prevent the suspected partners in the Communist-led coalition or “united front” to become instruments of America’s “‘internal sabotage’ policy”, and consolidation of the Communist power in China. See Shi Yinhong, *The Origins of Confrontation and Conflict: American policy toward the Communist China and the China-U.S. Relations, 1949-1950* (in Chinese, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1995), pp. 56-57, 58-59.

firmly within the limits of “measured assertiveness.”⁷⁴ Even this sort of limited assertion, one can guess according to experienced observance, often has something with domestic need of achieving popular admire or preventing popular complaints against “softness” in foreign policy.

As already suggested, a newly added Chineseness is **the firm belief of** the contemporary Chinese leaders and, through them, most of the Chinese people in **Chineseness per se and its overwhelming importance for engaging in maintenance, reform, and development.**⁷⁵ Their success up to now has provided one major source of the Chinese patriotism today, or to borrow Professor Wang’s words for the previous revolutionary age, “This...was a source of pride. The Chinese were once again able to say that, as with their unique civilization, they had found the key to success largely by their own efforts.”⁷⁶ Great success (“authoritarian” or not) of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” has restored their self-confidence after the disaster of Cultural Revolution and in the face of earlier spectacular success of the contemporary West (which made it wild with joy of “End of History”). This self-confidence now develops to its height in the context of global financial crisis and economic recession which spoils further the West’s prestige and greatly increases its dependence upon China. Its effect on China’s foreign policy is noticeable. Though “it has worked hard to [continue to] underline its message of peaceful rise”, but “China is being more assertive in some respects.” And as this author was quoted recently, “maybe subconsciously, the Chinese leaders have more confidence. China will not ask for this or that. But it will frequently say ‘No’ over Tibet or over Taiwan” or a few other issues closest to Beijing’s heart.⁷⁷ Even more than their political leaders and government, “people have adopted the attitudes,” according to a famous NBC journalist after three-week traveling around China, “that made America great—the optimism, dynamism and patriotism, the can-do spirit, the determination to leave the next generation better off than one’s own.” In short, one found “a country oozing with confidence.”⁷⁸ Foreign policy implication of this may be quite indirect, but it anyway will be rich and ultimately powerful in its effect.

But **prudence** and even the sense of above-mentioned “biological cycles governing universe” has been constant elements in determining political leadership’s behavior in China today, including their foreign policy orientation. And they will probably continue to be so at least for the next generation. Because, the contemporary leaders *and* the people of China keep in their mind

⁷⁴ “Like an ocean liner commanded by a secretive committee of captains, China’s top-down Communist Party government shifts direction slowly and usually without fanfare. Its response to this [present global economic] crisis will be no more nimble, said Shi Yinhong, a professor at Renmin University in Beijing. Expect adjustments, not drama, as Beijing also dwells on problems at home. ‘China has a conservative strategic culture and won’t challenge the United States or seek a basic realignment of international forces,’ said Shi. ‘China’s foreign policy changes will be through gentler adjustment and measured assertiveness.’” Chris Buckley, “China Weighs Assertion and Caution in U.S. Shadow,” *Reuter*, January 20, 2009.

⁷⁵ In this critical aspect, Mao Zedong in a large part prepared them, by his insistence on deciding the strategy of Chinese revolution according to particular Chinese conditions and resistance against the dictation of Comintern and its submissive Chinese agents to impose revolutionary “universalism” upon the Chinese Communist Party. In a sense, this preparation is so profound and effective that Deng Xiaoping and his major supports within the Party began their breakthrough of reform by denying Mao’s revolutionary “universalism” with a way of thinking and even arguments similar with what Mao used and taught decades ago.

⁷⁶ “The Interest of Revolutionary China,” in Wang Gungwu, *To Act Is to Know*, p. 96.

⁷⁷ David Pilling, “Foreign Policy: Assertiveness Alongside A Message of Peace,” *Financial Times*, November 21, 2008.

⁷⁸ Martin Fletcher, “The Chinese Dream Has Replaced America’s,” *The Times*, August 23, 2008.

constantly **one of the greatest Chineseness: “Strong China, Weak China”**.⁷⁹ This is a perennial basic theme since reform and opening up for China’s domestic and foreign policy, a theme for both the Chinese ourselves and others. At the present and the predictable future, this means what Susan Shirk called “fragile superpower” for the title of her recent *Foreign Affairs* bestseller.⁸⁰ This can and will still be the theme for China’s future, one of the hottest discussed topics in today’s political world. China will face some major challenges in the future along with her probably magnificent prospect. They include: Changing shape of modernity regarded by the universalistic and demanding West (and, it should be added, increasingly by Chinese ourselves); Persistent calls for “self-determination” by those who are hostile to China’s present political system and national unification as well as territorial integration; Leadership’s ability to inspire the Chinese society that has become more pluralist; Requirement for a “new body of ethics for modern China” and the difficulty in developing it; Popular and conservative nationalism and its possible echoes in the political high echelon.⁸¹ However, the most basic challenge will still be China’s huge magnitude in size and population: perhaps the greatest constant for China’s domestic tasks, her position in the world, and her foreign policy situation.⁸²

All of these are very important and highly demanding, but not the central or most primary. The latter was once touched upon by the very distinguished Singapore professor Wang Gungwu: China’s leaders (and her people) “have yet **to establish the new moral order** firmly and convincingly **within China**. Until they can do that, the prospect of China’s helping produce a new order in the world remain distant.”⁸³ These are really great words, on the key point—the fundamental *value* requirements for a really sustainable rise of China. Major historical innovations, an essential precondition proved by modern history for a nation to become a sustainable world power, relates to her contribution to world history, her attraction to the external world and invigoration to her own people, all at the level of *values*, or in other words the greatest soft power in its strict sense. Since her reform and opening up till now, what has China contributed to the world and world history in terms of values?

The modern transnational values can be reduced into four categories: “economic growth”, “liberty”, “social justice”, and newly born “environment protection”. The primary national achievement China has made since the initiation of reform and open-up falls into the category of “economic growth”. But this transnational value itself is definitely not out of her creation. Moreover, now from the government to the public opinion in China, the sense has become more and more acute that this achievement has been excessively at the expense of “social justice” and “environment protection”. Since the beginning of reform, the economic “liberty” of the 1.3 billion Chinese people has been realized, making a great extension of liberty in the history of the world. However, this value itself is not an innovation by China, not to mention that the cost in terms of social justice and environment healthy is too high because of the largely economic *laissez faire*,

⁷⁹ “Strong China, Weak China,” in Wang Gungwu, *To Act Is to Know*, pp. 108-125.

⁸⁰ Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Cf. Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of A Fierce Yet Fragile Superpower,” Cover story: China 2008, *Newsweek*, January 7, 2008.

⁸¹ See the following works of Professor Wang Gungwu: *Joining the Modern World*, pp. 10, 11, 12; “China’s Return,” in *Ideas Won’t Keep*, pp. 8, 13; “The Revival of Chinese Nationalism,” in *Bind US in Time*, pp. 122-124.

⁸² Cf. “The Interests of Revolutionary China,” in Wang Gungwu, *To Act Is to Know*, pp. 102-104; “China’s Return,” in idem, *Ideas Won’t Keep*, pp. 13-14.

⁸³ Wang Gungwu, *To Act Is to Know*, p. 124.

and that there is still a long way to go before China sufficiently realizes some other fundamental liberties or rights of freedom for her people. So, China must not be complacent over the past achievements but continue to forge ahead in exploring, experimenting, examining, and adjusting with the same strategic cultivation that put the nation on the path of reforms and opening to the outside world. On this note, China's political leadership has already arrived at a critical strategic decision expressed in "Scientific Outlook for Development". It is designed to address the common source of most of the internal and external problems by transforming China's existing unhealthy development mode. Once this task is accomplished (a big uncertainty), China will be able to reach even greater heights in world politics and, as Professor Wang said, fulfill the prospect of her "helping produce a new order in the world."⁸⁴

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⁸⁴ These last two paragraphs are drawn heavily from Shi Yinhong, "China's Peaceful Rise and World Order," *Chinese Cross Currents* (Macau), Vo. 4, No. 3 (July 2007), and Shi Yinhong, "Liberty, Justice, and Environment Protection: Responsibilities China Should Bear for the Mankind" (in Korean), *Donga Ibo*, June 16, 2006.