

cover feature

Harmony, Hegemony,



& U.S.-China Relations

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GRAPHIC DESIGN BY CONG ZHANG

THE HARMONY OF CIVILIZATIONS AND PROSPERITY FOR ALL" was the title of last October's third annual Beijing Forum, an academic conference hosted by Peking University "under the auspices of" the Beijing municipal government. The title's focus on "harmony" did not surprise: President Hu Jintao began pitching the concept of "harmonious society" in 2005 to counter growing popular unrest within China, and the "harmony of civilizations" seemed a natural international extension of the idea.

It was the subtitle of the Beijing Forum, instead, that intrigued: "Reflections on the Civilization Modes of Mankind." Beijing University's Yuan Xingpei, who spoke at the forum's high-profile opening ceremony at the Great Hall of the People about the lessons we can learn today from the history of Chinese civilization, explained "civilization modes" the most eloquently. The first and foremost lesson of Chinese civilization, he argued, is the "choice of peace and harmony." The second is the "choice of tolerance," or "harmony amid differences" (*he er butong*).

As the conference proceeded, it became clear that the emphasis for many Chinese participants was on the *butong*: there was something different, and better, about the Chinese "civilization mode." And their foil for Chinese peace, harmony, and tolerance was Western—and especially U.S.—war, hegemony, and intolerance.

A new discourse of difference is emerging in twenty-first-century China. Wang Jisi, the dean of American studies in China today, wrote one of its first cogent manifestos in 2003. In "The Logic of American Hegemony," Wang argues that there is a close link between American liberalism and American hegemony. He quotes Walter Russell Mead and Arthur Schlesinger at length to claim that Americans "worship violence," have a "warlike disposition," and are "bloodthirsty." Wang concludes with a clear policy prescription: "To eradicate American hegemony," he argues, "we must make them believe that there are other systems that are more admirable."¹ Little is left to the imagination: that "other system" is clearly Chinese. A discourse of difference between an inherently aggressive U.S. "hegemony" and an inherently "peace-

ful" China is central to emerging Chinese nationalist views of China's "harmonious civilization."

Chinese Occidentalism—Chinese uses of the "West" in general and the United States in particular as others against which to define what it means to be "Chinese"—is nothing new.² Ever since the emergence of popular Chinese nationalism in the mid-1990s, with best-sellers like *China Can Say No* (1996) and *Behind the Demonization of China* (1997), the United States has been central to Chinese nationalist constructions of "China's rise," both as a marker of similarity against which to establish China's great-power status and as a marker of difference against which to establish China's "peaceful" nature.

A discourse of similarity was central to late-1990s Chinese responses to American "clash of civilizations" and "China threat" discourses. In each case, many Chinese nationalists objected to American implications that China might be threatening—but simultaneously delighted in being perceived as threatening. This paradox begs explanation. American perceptions of a China threat, in my view, served to confirm Chinese nationalist assertions about China's great-power status. Indeed, many Chinese nationalists obsessively compare China to the United States, generating a discourse of U.S.-China similarity. Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" argument created a sensation among Chinese nationalists in the 1990s less out of a stated opposition to his view of a "Confucian threat" to the West than out of a secret delight that high-status Westerners like Huntington felt threatened by China. Writing in Beijing's influential *Reading* magazine, for instance, the Chinese Academy of Social Science's Li Shenzhi argued that China "should take Huntington's perspectives seriously because they represent a kind of deep [racial] fear."³ Huntington's argument was celebrated because it provided external validation of Chinese nationalists' own claims about "China's rise."

Similarly, journalists Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro's *The Coming Conflict with China* (1998), Bill Gertz's *The China Threat* (2000), and other American "China threat" diatribes were both reviled and celebrated by Chinese nationalists—reviled for their challenge

to in-group positivity (“China is good, not bad”) but celebrated for confirming China’s rise (by feeling threatened). American “China threat” discourse played a central role in a Chinese discourse of similarity with the superpower United States, confirming Chinese nationalist assertions about China’s great-power status.

Conversely, Chinese nationalists’ anger at Westerners who deny “China’s rise” represents the flip side of this same discourse of U.S.-China similarity. For instance, in 1999 the late Gerald Segal relegated China to “middling power” status in a high-profile *Foreign Affairs* article. He promptly drew the ire of the *Beijing Review*’s most prominent nationalist, Li Haibo, who retorted that “Chinese feel insulted when their strength is underestimated.”⁴ Similarly, Gordon Chang’s *The Coming Collapse of China* was the subject of Chinese nationalist ire upon its publication two years later in 2001.

Given that reassuring China’s neighbors about the peaceful nature of “China’s rise” is at the heart of Chinese foreign policy today—“peaceful rise” was even officially changed to “peaceful development” to avoid appearing militarily threatening—Chinese nationalist anger at Western “China is not a threat” arguments is actually counterproductive to China’s national interest, revealing the multiple and contradictory motives that drive Chinese nationalism today.

Chinese Occidentalism has thus involved a discourse of similarity to the United States; it also includes a vital discourse of difference. And it is this discourse that is ascendant. Chinese nationalist texts today are full of references to Western and American “selfishness,” “materialism,” “conflict/discord,” and “impersonal coldness” that seek to construct an Eastern and Chinese “beneficence,” “spiritualism,” “harmony,” and “warmheartedness.” This discourse of difference has arisen at a time when more and more Chinese have expressed anxiety about the rise of materialism and conflict in a rapidly modernizing China that has now experienced almost thirty years of “reform and opening.” Unwanted traits like selfishness and aggressiveness have been thrust upon the Western Other to reassert traditional Chinese values like beneficence and harmony. This process is reminiscent of the way eighteenth-century European liberals projected their fears about their own passions and society (“the mob”) onto the “Orient,” seeking to construct the Enlightenment vision of themselves as rational

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individuals. Indeed, twenty-first-century Chinese Occidentalism replicates many of the same dichotomies and epistemologies long central to Western Orientalism.

As noted above, “U.S. hegemonism” is a particularly important marker of difference vital to Chinese constructions of a “harmonious” China. In English—at least in international-relations theory—“hegemony” is an objective and largely value-free description of a particular balance of power. The Chinese “hegemony” (*badao*), by contrast, has a decidedly normative overtone: it is a judgment about an aggressive American character. The concept actually has over three millennia of history in China: it was during the ancient Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1045–256 B.C.) that Chinese political philosophers first juxtaposed the “Way of the King” against the “Way of the Hegemon.”

And this is what strikes me as new, and potentially dangerous, about Chinese Occidentalism today. The dialectic of similarity to and difference from the U.S. has swung decidedly in favor of difference. Unlike China’s earlier “peaceful rise” and “peaceful development” discourse, which clearly had a status quo orientation, focusing on China’s development within the existing world system, the new discourse of “civilization modes” and “harmonious worlds” appears more revisionist, pointing to a distinctly Chinese and different regional order. It evokes a hierarchical, China-at-the-center vision of East Asian politics.

Furthermore, the new Chinese Occidentalism depicts Americans as an aggressive, militaristic, and threatening people. It certainly does not help that the current Bush administration’s embrace of military and unilateral means to resolve international disputes in Iraq and elsewhere has provided ample fodder for Chinese nationalist arguments. The danger is that heightened Chinese perceptions of U.S. threat could promote the

emergence of an acute “security dilemma” in U.S.-China relations. Feeling threatened by a “hegemonic” U.S., Chinese could decide to step up their military modernization for defensive reasons. Americans would likely respond to increased Chinese arms acquisitions with heightened threat perception of their own, leading the U.S. to embrace its own defensive arms buildup. The unintended result: a possible U.S.-China arms race in East Asia. Absent feelings of mutual trust, and given the deep animosities that have led to the recent deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations and the always volatile situation in the Taiwan Strait, there is a real possibility that the United States will get drawn into yet another conflict with China in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

What can be done? While American and Chinese nationalists produce Orientalist and Occidentalist discourses based on similar epistemologies of difference, other Americans and Chinese can construct discourses of similarity. At its best, American and Chinese cultural products, like the special section on contemporary Chinese literature in this issue of *World Literature Today*, celebrate our common humanity. Translation and cultural exchange can reveal our shared challenges: modernization, globalization—indeed, the human condition. In

the end, cultural products that raise awareness of our common humanity can serve as a vital counterweight to the discourses of difference and threat that undermine U.S.-China relations.

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- ¹ Wang Jisi, “Meiguo baquan de luoji” (The logic of America hegemony), *Meiguo Yanjiu* (American Studies) no. 3 (2003): 24–25, 29.
- ² See Chen Xiaomei, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-discourse in Post-Mao China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- ³ Li Shenzhi, “Fear Under Numerical Superiority,” *Dushu* (Reading), 6 June 1997, 31–38.
- ⁴ Li Haibo, “China and Its Century,” *Beijing Review* 42.42 (18 Oct. 1999): 11–16.

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For Further Reading

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