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SPECIAL TOPIC: CHINA STUDIES

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A Comparative Study of Older People with Disability in Two World
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Mandarin and Chinese Dialects in Western Sources: The Earliest
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Contents

Special Topic: China Studies

- 1 China's Market Transition: A Third Reform Strategy *Zhang Wei-qi*
18 Macro Determinants of Health Expenditure in China *Feng Jin*
38 A Comparative Study of Older People with Disability in Two World Cities:
The Pursuit of an Inclusive Community
Chen Hong-lin, Wang Xing-ling, Wong Yu-cheung
59 Mandarin and Chinese Dialects in Western Sources: The Earliest Docu-
ments *Henning Klöter*

Articles

- 84 The Growing Conceptualisation, Institutionalisation and Concretisation of
Civil Society's Role in Global Governance *Martin Westlake*

Outlook

- 97 Communication, Technology, and Authoritarian Regimes
Benjamin A. Elman
101 China as a Laboratory for Social Science *Gudmund Hernes*
108 China's Rise: Challenging the Binary Discourse of American Civil Society
Jeffrey C. Alexander, Hans Andersson
115 China's Transformation after the Global Financial Crisis: Implications for
Developed and Developing Nations *R. Bin Wong*

Book Reviews

- 122 Arthur Sweetman and Jun Zhang: *Economic Transitions with Chinese Character-
istics: Thirty Years of Reform and Opening Up* *by Lim Tai Wei*
128 Jonathan Unger: *Associations and the Chinese State: Contested Spaces*
by Hao Zhi-dong
133 Cécile Laborde and J. Maynor: *Republicanism and Political Theory*
by Cao Qin
139 R. A. Newman: *Equity in the World's Legal Systems: A Comparative Study*
by Lin Xi
147 Stefan Halper: *The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model Will
Dominate the Twenty-First Century* *by John Keane*

152 New Books

Within the Academe

- 156 Interdisciplinary Research by Collaborative Means *by Lin Xi*
167 China in the World *by Lin Xi*

178 Contributors

China's Rise: Challenging the Binary Discourse of American Civil Society

Jeffrey C. Alexander, Hans Andersson

For the US, China's rise presents an extraordinary challenge. Many called the twentieth century the "American Century," just as the nineteenth was the "British Century." Yet the United Nations found in 2007 that no fewer than a dozen countries have in our twenty-first century advanced beyond the United States in overall development per capita. This feat the People's Republic of China has not yet accomplished, and whether it ever will remain to be seen. What is already apparent, however, is that the PRC already has a far larger pool of labor and human capital than the United States, more telephones and internet users, and a faster-growing GDP. The "communist" country's GDP has increased more than tenfold since the institution of "Reform and Opening" in the late 1970s. Though still lagging behind the United States when the measurement is GDP per capita, the PRC more than doubled its per-capita gross national income from \$ 930 to \$ 2,000 between 2000 and 2006, and breakneck growth continues. At the same time, Beijing is pouring money into infrastructure and high-tech research,^[1] savvy choices which have already yielded such apparent results as a testable ballistic missile defense system.^[2] To this litany one could add much, but the point is clear. The collectivity of the United States appears to be losing its place as the world's material hegemony,^[3] and the country rising to replace it is China.^[4]

America has not ignored this development. It cannot, and perhaps it ought not. In its imminent confrontation with the PRC, America theoretically has a range of choices, from hostility to indifference, from

[1] Shengwei Wang, "China's Ascendancy: An Opportunity or a Threat?" International Publishing House for China's Culture 2007:53-58, 61-63.

[2] Andrew Jacobs and Jonathan Ansfield, "With Defense Test, China Shows Displeasure of US," *The New York Times*, 2010/01/12, online.

[3] For the United Nations' measurement of the United States' "Human Development Index" (HDI), see "Human Development Report 2009," *The United Nations Development Program* online.

[4] See Nicholas Eberstadt, "Will China (Continue To) Rise?" in Eberstadt, *The Rise of China: Essays on the Future Competition*, Encounter Books 2009:131-132, 153-154.

amicability to deference. But in this choice, neither the political, social, and cultural elites of the United States, nor its people, are entirely free. How America has long viewed China exerts no small influence on which path Washington shall follow in its material and cultural relations with the People's Republic.

Let us assume, for normative if not for empirical reasons, that the ultimate desire of America's people and elites is peace with the Chinese. For this to come about, how the US views and speaks about the PRC will have to undergo a deep cultural change. In the democratic discourse of the United States, there is a striking binary that divides the civil from the uncivil side. America will have to resolve its ambivalence about contemporary China and move itself from the uncivil to the civil side. This will be difficult for Americans because they have persistently equated civilization with being not only capitalist but democratic, with being just like their own country, the United States.

How America perceives China depends upon how America views itself. For as long as America has existed, it has believed in its own exceptionalism, in the uniqueness of its character, destiny, and mission. Even before the United States was an independent nation, America imagined itself in the eyes of the world to be a "city on a hill."^[5] For the first Puritan settlers, the beacon of civilization was to be completed in the westward march to America, moving from the Old World to the New.^[6] That relocation completed, the tide of civilization would then change directions, flowing always outward from America back to the West and the East. America had been "chosen" as the next time in the history of progress, its own development representing the next and highest stage of civilization. The boundaries of this first new world civilization were not only territorial but symbolic and moral. Those living outside these boundaries were not only unfortunate; they were different, to some degree uncivilized, in some manner barbarian. Americans felt they needed to defend themselves against such anti-democratic people, morally in every case, politically in many cases, and occasionally militarily. Other nations and peoples who made progress were conceived

[5] John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" (sermon, 1630), *The Religious Freedom Page*, University of Virginia library 2009, online.

[6] Brett Bowden, *The Empire of Civilization* (University of Chicago 2009) 203.

as moving from barbarism toward civilization^[7] via religious conversion, democratic transformation, capitalistic development, education, or some combination thereof. With such progress, these others transitioned naturally from enmity to amicability vis-à-vis America. Indeed, Americans often called the progress of others “Americanization,” a term that illuminates how outsiders to civilization were conceived as becoming insiders. When terrorists brought down the Twin Towers of New York’s World Trade Center, President George W. Bush verbalized these primal convictions, denying the language of Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations.”^[8] The War on Terror was portrayed as a clash between civilization (singular) and its other.^[9]

Vis-à-vis this American “empire of civilization,” China long appeared the backward “Orient,” a region beneath true civilization, outside of true humanity.^[10] For Western civilization, as the critic Edward Said put it, the crucial task was to “control, contain, and otherwise govern (through superior knowledge and accommodating power) the [o]ther.”^[11] What Said misses in his now classical polemic is that, at least for America, this construction of the other did not necessarily imply hatred; America could embed difference in a narrative of future transformation, whether religious, political, cultural or economic.

Mao Tse-tung’s Communist victory transformed China from an oriental backwater that America could patronize into a rival in the twentieth century’s clash of ideologies. America could no longer ignore the quaint Middle Kingdom. It had joined “the Communist side,” fallen under the sway of the Kremlin^[12]. Political confrontation,

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

[8] Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* 1993/summer, v72, n3, p. 22; “The Fault Lines between Civilizations Will Be the Battle Lines of the Future.”

[9] George W. Bush, “Address to Congress and the American People” (speech), delivered 2001/09/20: “This is not, however, just America’s fight. [...] This is civilization’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom. [...] The civilized world is rallying to America’s side.”

[10] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books 1979, Random House, p. 107 and 252, but especially p. 42.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

[12] See US President Harry Truman, “Report to the American People on Korea” (speech), delivered 1951/04/11: “Behind the North Koreans and Chinese Communists in the front lines stand additional millions of Chinese soldiers. And behind the Chinese stand the tanks, the planes, the submarines, the soldiers, and the scheming rulers of the Soviet Union.”

perhaps even war, would be necessary to compel wayward Red China to resume the progress that made Civilization. As for the revolutionary communists, they reversed the civil/anti-civil binary. Like other Communist leaders of the time, Mao advocated world revolution as the only way to civilize the capitalists, whom he and his Chinese comrades regarded as imperialist, war-mongering, and barbarian. So both poles of the America-China binary supported a narrative of confrontation.

Restoration of the official diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China — under the sign of Nixon-Kissinger realpolitik and in the twilight of Mao's reign — placed America in a rhetorical dilemma. No longer could Washington afford to dismiss Beijing as "Oriental,"^[13] but it could not yet hope for the conversion of the latter to Civilization. As a temporary solution, American Presidents admitted the possibility of a future comprising a multiplicity of irreconcilable systems.^[14]

China finally stepped onto the path toward Civilization with Deng Xiao-ping's "Reform and Opening-Up" in the late 1970s, which inaugurated the movement toward market capitalism. Demands posted on Beijing's Democracy Wall also sparked American hope in a future China that would embrace civilization's political pillar, which was democracy. These seemingly twinned developments significantly repositioned China from an American other to a junior member of the American side of history. For two decades, China's rise became grist for the mill of America's self-congratulatory narrative of conversion to Civilization.^[15] In 1983, US President Ronald Reagan described communism as "another sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose

[13] In presidential rhetoric beginning in 1971, the country formerly painted by the US simply as "Red" became "the People's Republic of China" and "a potentially powerful Communist nation, China," as evidenced in Richard Nixon, "Radio Address about Second Annual Foreign Policy Report to the Congress," 1971/02/25.

[14] Compare Gerald Ford, "Address on US Foreign Policy," 1975/04/10: "deep differences in our philosophy and social systems."

[15] Consider President Jimmy Carter's, "State of the Union Address," 1979/01/23: "I've outlined some of the changes that have transformed the world and which are continuing as we meet here tonight. But we in America need not fear change. The values on which our nation was founded — individual liberty, self-determination, the potential for human fulfillment in freedom — all of these endure. We find these democratic principles praised, even in books smuggled out of totalitarian nations and on wall-posters in lands [namely, China] which we thought were closed to our influence. Our country has regained its special place of leadership in the worldwide struggle for human rights."

last pages even now are being written.”^[16] Two years later, the President declared not only that American modernity was a universal cultural model but also that America would “nourish and defend freedom and democracy [...] and [...] communicate these ideals everywhere we can.”^[17] In this context, Reagan not only mentioned “East Asia and the Pacific,” but he explicitly named China. Beyond reflecting the adoption in the material sphere of a new system of production (capitalism), China’s “Reform and Opening” seemed to signal a cultural and political rebirth, one upon which the American mind would seize.

Only one decade later, there occurred an abrupt reversal of China’s tide of change, with the post-Mao Chinese leadership issuing its first global rejection of a thoroughgoing Americanization. In 1989, Tiananmen Square erupted. Yet, for an America long steeped in the narrative of conversion, and now interpreting post-Communist China’s every move through this lens, the 1989 incident seemed paradoxically to confirm hopeful expectations. There had been an eruption of democracy. The statue of liberty had appeared in the center of Beijing. Words of President Reagan exemplify the sentiment:

Perhaps most exciting are the winds of change that are blowing over the People’s Republic of China, where one-quarter of the world’s population is now getting its first taste of economic freedom. At the same time, the growth of democracy has become one of the most powerful political movements of our age. [...] Throughout the world, free markets are the model for growth. Democracy is the standard by which governments are measured. [18]

America learned to its disappointment that the actual effect of Tiananmen Square was to launch China on a path away from the American model. Still, in the years following, and despite this dawning realization, America continually tried to embrace this increasingly

[16] Ronald Reagan, “Evil Empire” Speech, 1983/03/08.

[17] Ronald Reagan, “State of the Union Address,” 1985/02/06.

[18] Ronald Reagan, “Address at Moscow State University,” 1988/05/31. See also Ronald Reagan, “Speech on Foreign Policy,” 1988/12/16, especially the following: “When you consider that, according to the Freedom House count, 70 percent of those not living in freedom are in China and the Soviet Union — and even in those nations, as I say, we see glimpses of hope — the picture is even brighter. The most dramatic movement of all has taken place: More than 90 percent of the people are now living in countries that are democratic or headed in that direction.”

powerful and ever more challenging other, and to draw it into American civilization. The effort failed, and the failures often tempted American leaders to place all the blame on the Chinese side. For example, during the 1992 presidential context, Democratic candidate Bill Clinton accused President George H. W. Bush of "coddling tyrants, including those in Beijing."⁽¹⁹⁾

Having once pulled China from the "Oriental" box, however, America could not very easily stuff this newly emerging, ever more powerful, yet still different other back inside. No longer could America write off Chinese deviations from the path to America civilization in essentialist terms. The Orientalism no longer was a going concern. Americans could no longer categorize Chinese as exotic creatures of an unfamiliar species. Obviously, the industrious and ambitious members of this rapidly advancing society were people like Americans, equally materialist and individualist, if not equally democratic, at least not in the Western way.⁽²⁰⁾ If such admirable people chose to rebuff the American system, it could be a severe discursive challenge, and perhaps would eventually present a significant political threat.

America could not justify blatant disregard for its own democratic values; at the same time, it could hardly afford to break off relations with the world's largest and most efficient factory. The rhetorical solution was to align America's economic interests with the democratic interests of the Chinese people. American leaders introduced a policy of economic "engagement" designed not only to benefit America but also to "bring [...] China into the world." The result of economic engagement would allow "the world [to] bring change and freedom to China."⁽²¹⁾ The beacon of civilization was determined to shine its light on China, no matter what, and thereby bring this new behemoth into the global system. So the rhetoric of conversion continues. China's difference, and what sometimes seems its growing hostility, are explained by the fact that China's conversion remains far from complete.

What America cannot face, what culturally it cannot even begin to comprehend, is the very real possibility that China might become a huge

[19] Bill Clinton, debate with George H W Bush and Ross Perot, 1992/10/11.

[20] *Ibid.*, "If we can stand up for our economic interests, we ought to be able to pursue the democratic interests of the people in China."

[21] Bill Clinton, "State of the Union Address," 1999/01/19.

economic success without becoming democratic. In the late 1980's, on the eve of Tianamen, Chinese conservatives spoke about their nation taking "the Bismarck path." The great nineteenth century German political leader had united Germany and coordinated its rise to economic equality with France, England, and the United States. That story did not end well. Western Europe and the US fiercely resisted Germany's effort to remake the world, the German difference deepened, and the central European nation brutally fought back. Let us hope that neither the US nor China wishes to go that way again.