

Harmony, unity and diversity in China's world¹

As the international influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) grows, people both inside and outside China increasingly want to know Beijing's views on global issues. This Focus section of The Newsletter examines China's relations with Africa, and I would like to address this topic by putting it in the wider cultural and theoretical context of the competing discourses of unity and diversity in elite Chinese discussions of the PRC's role in the world.

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Harmonious world

As Prof. Shih's essay in this volume shows, many Chinese thinkers assert that China's role in Africa is different from the West's various regimes. Reading recent official, academic and popular texts, I have found that "difference" is the key theme in Chinese discussions about an emerging Sino-centric world order. But as we will see, "difference" does not necessarily entail diversity. Rather, most Chinese voices advocate a new *Pax Sinica* that asserts "unity" as its primary value. The goal, then, is not necessarily to build a post-hegemonic world order that celebrates diverse ideas, cultures and peoples; rather, it is to "harmonize" and "pacify" other peoples – including Africans – into the new "benevolent rule" of the Chinese world order.

Of course, discourse in China is far from monolithic. President Hu Jintao, for example, has a cosmopolitan view of China and the world. From the podium of the UN General Assembly in September 2005, Hu introduced "harmonious world" as a new way of thinking about global politics, explaining that his goal was to "build a harmonious world of lasting peace and common prosperity." In this new world order, different civilizations would coexist in the global community, making "humanity more harmonious and our world more colorful." Africa is an important part of Hu's harmonious world; in fact, he first mentioned the concept at the Asian-African summit meeting in Jakarta in April 2005.

China's domestic policy also embraces diversity; the country is officially a multinational nation-state that unites 55 minority nationalities with the majority Han in a harmonious society. Diversity certainly is an important value in Beijing's foreign policy of harmonious world and its domestic policy of harmonious society; but rather than advocating diverse opinions in civil society, diversity here is restricted to the essentialized spaces of "different civilizations" and "national minority cultures." The main goal of harmonious world, it turns out, is not to share culture globally, but to assert the PRC's right to have a different "social system", which is based on communist party rule rather than China's traditional civilization.

Everyday-life differences

To get a better sense of Chinese understandings of diversity and unity, however, we need to go beyond official policy statements to see how people deal with difference in everyday life. We usually think of China as a source of outward migration, most recently to Africa. But as the PRC develops, it is increasingly becoming a site of inward immigration; Wudaokou in Beijing has a Koreatown, and over 300,000 Africans live in a neighborhood in Guangzhou that Chinese call "Chocolate City".

One of the results of this movement is a marked increase of marriages between Chinese and non-Chinese people. Alongside Shanghai's countless multinational corporations, there are more than 3000 mixed-race marriages every year. Since most Chinese take their identity as self-evident – as bloodline descendents of 5000 years of civilization – the recent influx of foreigners from the West, Asia and Africa is challenging what it means to be "Chinese."

On the one hand, such mixed-race marriages were celebrated at the Shanghai World Expo 2010; both the "Future Cities" theme pavilion and Siemens's corporate pavilion presented Chinese-foreign marriages and their mixed-race children as emblems of the future utopian world. But there is a limit to this cosmopolitanism, as Lou Jing's experience shows; mixed-race means Chinese/white, not Chinese/black.

Lou Jing is a young woman from Shanghai whose mother is Chinese and father African-American; she became famous in 2009 as a singing contestant on the "Go! Oriental Angel" television program, the Chinese version of "American Idol". Individual Chinese express a wide range of attitudes about race, and the TV program sparked a spirited debate in the Chinese blogosphere. Some netizens were cosmopolitan, and supported Lou and her mother, but many others saw Lou, and blacks in general, in outrageously racist terms; Lou was described as a "black chimpanzee", a "zebra", whose mixed Chinese and black parentage was an ugly "mistake". One netizen recognized "that fascination with foreigners is indeed a fad", but scolded Lou's mother, "you still can't pick blacks!"²

With racist attitudes like this, we should not be surprised that conflicts between Chinese managers and workers in Africa are growing as an issue. Such events should not be written off as isolated incidents that are alien from Beijing's official policy. If we follow poststructuralist international relations theory, as explained in David Campbell's *Writing Security*, official foreign policy actually grows out of people's encounters with 'Otherness' in everyday social life: ethnicity, race, class, gender, region, and sexuality. Official foreign policy's job then is to guard the identity borders inscribed by popular foreign encounters.³ Lou's ordeal thus can tell us much about the overlap of domestic society and foreign policy in China. But her experience also is significant beyond the problem of racism; it can also tell us how harmony works for both harmonious society and harmonious world.

Harmony-with-diversity or Great Harmony

"Harmony" is taken as a quintessentially Chinese ideal. While I was (shamelessly) promoting my book *China: The Pessimist Nation* (2010) last year, a young Chinese diplomat in the audience confidently stated that all Chinese "instinctively" know what harmony means. I wish I had asked him to explain this, because a closer examination reveals that what we now call "harmony" in both Chinese and English can have two quite different meanings: *he er butong* (和而不同) means harmony-with-diversity, while *datong* (大同) is Great Harmony.

Great Harmony describes an overarching unity: the "tong" in *datong* also means sameness. This sameness is seen as harmonious because it describes a united universal utopia. The main source of the ideal of Great Harmony is a famous passage from the Book of Rites (Liji 礼记): "When the Great Way prevails, the world will belong to all. They chose people of talent and ability whose words were sincere, and they cultivated harmony. Thus people did not only love their own parents, not only nurture their own children ... In this way

selfish schemes did not arise. Robbers, thieves, rebels, and traitors had no place, and thus outer doors were not closed. This is called the Great Harmony."⁴ Great Harmony remains one of Chinese thought's key ideals, and still informs plans to create a perfect world.

While Great Harmony creates perfection through a unified order, "harmony-with-diversity" questions the utility of sameness. In the famous passage that gives us the phrase harmony-with-diversity, Confucius discusses the harmony/sameness (*he/tong* 和/同) distinction that is found throughout classical Chinese literature: "The exemplary person harmonizes with others, but does not necessarily agree with them (*he er butong*); the small person agrees with others, but is not harmonious with them." (*The Analects* 13/23) Here Confucius tells us that agreeing with people means that you are the same as them, in the sense of being uncritically the same: sameness-without-harmony. Harmony-with-diversity, on the other hand, allows us to encourage different opinions, norms and models in a civil society.

Rather than describing the same value that is instinctively known by all Chinese, Great Harmony and harmony-with-difference thus present very different models of social order and world order; one appeals to the benefits of overarching unity, while the other seeks to encourage opportunities for diversity. This is not simply a philosophy lesson; these two concepts of harmony continue to be invoked by China's political leaders and its public intellectuals as a way of describing Chinese visions of future world order.

According to the Xinhua News Agency, harmony-with-diversity was the Chinese idiom that Premier Wen Jiabao "most frequently used" on his visit to the U.S. in 2003.⁵ Although Wen was still repeating the phrase during his visits to America and the Arab League in 2009, harmony-with-diversity has decreased in popularity since the mid-2000s. Hu Jintao's "harmonious world" appears to have replaced "harmony-with-diversity" as a way of describing Beijing's dealings with different nations, and the "China's Peaceful Development" White Paper (2011) even retranslates "harmony-with-diversity" as "unity without uniformity."⁶ Each of these phrases is used to tell foreigners two things: China respects diversity among nations, and it demands that foreign critics likewise respect Chinese "difference".

China's future is the world's future

Once again, the celebration of cultural diversity in international space is employed to preserve ideological unity for the domestic population. While interest in harmony-with-diversity has been waning in the PRC, declarations of Great Harmony as China's long-term goal have become very popular in recent years. This certainly is not a totally new trend; Kang Youwei's *Book of Great Harmony* (*Datongshu* 大同书), written at the beginning of the 20th century, revived this ancient concept as a way of solving the problems of modern society.⁷

Great Harmony, then, informs a Chinese-style futurology that looks to the past for ideals to shape a utopian future. In recent years, many public intellectuals have been publishing books and articles describing China's future as the world's future.⁸ This public discussion of China's future is inspired by the transition to the 5th generation leadership in 2012-13; China's intellectuals are promoting new ideas in public space with the hope that they can influence Xi Jinping's and Li Keqiang's new signature policy narratives.

Curiously, the endgame for most of China's chief economic, social and political forecasters is the World of Great Harmony (世界大同 *shijie datong*, 天下大同 *tianxia datong*). World Bank Chief Economist Justin Yifu Lin has a calligraphic scroll of the Great Harmony passage on his wall in Washington D.C.; he recently explained that its ideals guide his plans for the global economy. In 2030 *China* Hu Angang, the PRC's top political-economist, concludes that China will create a Sino-centric world order to establish the World of Great Harmony, which is not only "China's dream", but is also the "world's dream" (see footnote 8, p.188).

Right: Lou Jing (right) and her mother (centre) appearing in 2009 as a singing contestant on the "Go! Oriental Angel" Television show.



Left: Kang Youwei (1858–1927).

What does Great Harmony mean here? Descriptions are generally vague; but Pan Wei's detailed outline in *The China Model* can give us some clues. Pan argues that the patriarchal values of village life, which is presented as a conflict-free organic society, are the source of the PRC's economic success. He sees the PRC as village society writ large, where the party loves the people like a caring father, and the masses are loyal, grateful and respectful, like good children. There is no room in this national village for open debate in "civil society," which Pan condemns as a battleground of special interests that can only divide the organic whole. For him, diversity is "division," and thus a problem that needs to be solved by the state. Unity here is the guiding value because Pan sees social order as a process of integrating divisions into the organic whole, ultimately into the World of Great Harmony (see footnote 8, pp.18, 29 (3-85)).

Darwinist "racial harmony"

Here Pan follows Kang Youwei's *Book of Great Harmony*, which likewise sees division as the source of human suffering, and world unity as the solution to the problems of modern life. Kang thus proposes a plan to "abolish" territorial, class, racial, gender, family and species borders in order to create the One World of Great Harmony. In a sense, Kang is like David Campbell: they both stress the importance of social relations in global ordering.

Kang's goal of universal equality and global unity is laudable; but it has serious costs. Rather than harmony-with-diversity, his Great Harmony world promotes an unharmonious sameness: all women will become like men, for example. More importantly, Kang's Great Harmony advocates a social Darwinist "racial harmony" that we would find offensive today; the "whites" and "yellows" will unite in a new race that excludes "blacks" who, Kang tells us, cannot enter the world of Great Harmony "owing to their extreme ugliness and stupidity".

It would be easy to dismiss Kang's noxious arguments, which were common among global elites 100 years ago, yet Kang's racism is not a quaint exception to his otherwise progressive plans for the future; it is an integral part of his cosmopolitan quest that seeks unity over diversity. Kang's book is important because it has been very popular for over a century, inspiring each generation's reformers and revolutionaries. What is curious is that few, if any, Chinese intellectuals offer a critical view of this Chinese-style utopia's social Darwinist plan for race-annihilation.

Uniquely unique China

In many ways, the netizens' harsh comments about Lou Jing echo Kang's utopian plans. In a similar vein, Liu Mingfu's *The China Dream* sees international politics as a battle between the "yellow race" and the "white race." While Pan Wei's version of Great Harmony does not have explicit social Darwinist plans, it does exhibit another emerging trend in Chinese discourse: Chinese exceptionalism. Pan and Zhang Wei-wei see international politics as a battle of civilizations (which can easily be refigured as races): the China model vs. the "Western" model. China's model is unique, we are told, due to its unique history and culture. Since China is completely different from Europe and America, Pan and Zhang argue that it can only be judged by its own "Oriental civilization" values.

Here we move from "difference" to "exceptionalism" because Pan's China model is not only unique, it is uniquely unique – and "uniquely superior" to Western ideas of democracy and human rights. While Pan deconstructs the "Western universals" of liberal democracy, he simultaneously asserts an essential, singular and unified version of Chinese civilization. The China model thus is more than an economic plan that can be shared with other countries: it is the sign of China's unique "cultural renaissance." The upshot is much like harmonious world and Great Harmony discourse; Chinese exceptionalism builds up a discursive wall to protect Chinese politics from "critics" who are all labeled as "foreign."

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Here, "Chinese liberal" is an oxymoron; Chinese people who advocate deeper political reform, according to Pan, really want "to demolish the Forbidden City in order to build the White House" in Beijing, so "foreign forces can control China's military, politics, economy and society."⁹ One of the main goals of China model discourse, therefore, is to affirm and support Beijing's current system of governance that is dominated by the CCP.

Chinese exceptionalism now is primarily defensive; "uniqueness" is used to protect China from criticism, which is coded as "foreign" and thus illegitimate. But Chinese exceptionalism could easily switch to go on the offensive, where the goal is to change the world in China's way. Hu Angang's World of Great Harmony does not offer a world of equality; it advocates a "great reversal" of North/South relations so the South can dominate the world in a way that reproduces the logic of power as hierarchical dominance.

The battlegrounds of this global cultural war emerge in fascinating places. After writer-turned-dissident Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Peace Prize was announced in early October 2010, officials and public intellectuals in Beijing decided that China needed its own peace prize to properly reflect "Eastern values." (This ignores the fact that the Magsaysay Award already serves as "Asia's Nobel Prize"). Later that month, UN Undersecretary-General Sha Zukang gave General Chi Haotian the "World Harmony Award" for his contributions to world peace. To many Chi was an odd choice; this former Defense Minister was most famous for ordering the military assault on protesters in Beijing on the night of 3 June 1989, which killed 1000 citizens.

Then on 9 December 2010 – the day before Liu's Nobel Prize ceremony – a hastily created "Confucius Peace Prize" was given to Taiwanese politician Lien Chan for aiding the unification of Taiwan and the mainland. The 2011 Confucius Peace Prize went to Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, primarily for his decision to go to war in Chechnya in 1999. As the award committee explained: "The iron hand and toughness revealed in this war impressed the Russians a lot, and he was regarded to be capable of bringing safety and stability to Russia."

While neither winner actually collected their Confucius Peace Prize, these Chinese-style peace prizes can give us a sense of official and popular values in the PRC. The three prizes all value unity over diversity: ideological unity for Chi, unity of the mainland and Taiwan for Lien, and national unity for Putin. Chi's and Putin's prizes also show how peace is the result of war, and harmony can be the product of violence.

Otherness – at home and abroad

As this essay's examples show, China carries cultural baggage to its encounters with otherness in Africa and the West. Its racial problems are probably not any more serious than those of other countries. The real problem in the PRC is a lack of critical interest in China's own history of racism and discrimination.

What does this mean for Africa and the world? China's popular discourse of unity and exceptionalism does not leave much room for "diversity," which is seen as a problem that needs to be solved by the state. Since China's harmonious world foreign policy narrative grew out of Beijing's domestic policy of harmonious society, exploring encounters with otherness at home can be instructive for understanding its encounters with otherness abroad.

Beijing's understanding of national minorities in China provides an interesting template for its current and future relations with Africa. Beijing's policy is basically to "civilize" the former "barbarians" by modernizing non-Han groups through assimilation. Economic rewards for cooperative people and groups are considerable. But those who resist assimilation, see the good life in non-economic terms and hope to preserve and develop non-Han ways of life, risk being criminalized as threats to the Chinese state.¹⁰

Chinese government and business have likewise shown considerable interest in the economic opportunities provided by Africa. There is less interest in building cultural and social relations on an equal basis; "exchange" usually involves Chinese instructing Africans about how to be modern in terms of economic development. There is a general lack of interest in Africans who show an interest in different values, including traditional non-economic values and liberal democratic values. China thus is sometimes criticized for exploiting Africa in a "neocolonial" way; its national minorities policies are likewise seen as a form of internal colonialism and internal Orientalism.¹¹

Chinese elites often tell us how their world order will be "different," providing a harmonious and benevolent order that benefits all. As China grows in international influence it is gaining more attention – including critical inquiry – which is certainly right and proper for an emerging global power. But the harsh response to any criticism of China's impact on Africa – which we can also find in this issue of *The Newsletter* – suggests that Beijing wishes to be different in another way. It wants to be beyond critical inquiry.

Beijing's search for unity thus is epistemological as well as ontological: "one world" demands "one dream," as the 2008 Beijing Olympics slogan instructed us. Yet in this Sino-centric world order of the future, peace can become "pacifying," and harmony can become "harmonizing."

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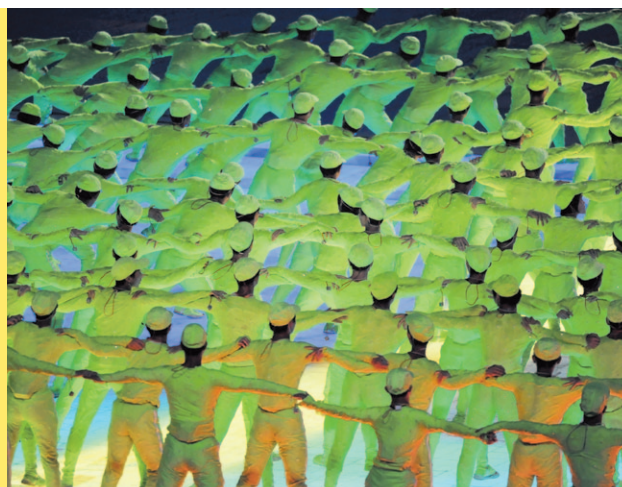
He researches the intersection of culture and policy in China; his current research project examines how Chinese and Indian public intellectuals are thinking about the future.

Notes

- 1 This essay is taken from arguments made in W.A. Callahan and E. Barabantseva (eds.). 2012. *China Orders the World: Normative Soft Power and Foreign Policy*. Johns Hopkins University Press; and W.A. Callahan. 2012 (forthcoming). *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future*. Oxford University Press.
- 2 For a sample of internet comments see Fauna, *Shanghai 'Black Girl' Lou Jing Abused by Racist Netizens*, ChinaSMACK, 1 September 2009; <http://tinyurl.com/23cqs6g>
- 3 David Campbell. 1998. *Writing Security*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, revised edition.
- 4 W. T. de Bary (ed.). 1960. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, p.176
- 5 Xinhua News Agency, 11 December 2003, www.xinhua.org
- 6 State Council, "China's Peaceful Development," Beijing: Xinhua, 6 September, 2011.
- 7 Kang Youwei. 2005. *Datongshu [The Book of Great Harmony]*. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe.
- 8 Pan Wei (ed.). 2009. *Zhongguo moshi jiedu renmin gongheguo de 60 nian [The China model: Reading 60 years of the People's Republic]*. Beijing: Zhongyang bianzhi chubanshe; Liu Mingfu. 2010. *Zhongguo meng: Hou Meiguoguo shidai de daguo siwei zhanlue dingwei [The China dream: The great power thinking and strategic positioning of China in the post-American era]*. Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubangongsi; Hu Angang, Yan Yilong and Wei Xing. 2011. *2030 Zhongguo: Mianxiang gongtong fuyu [2030 China: Towards Common Prosperity]*. Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe; Zhang Wei-wei. 2011. *Zhongguo zhenhan: Yige "wenming xing guojia" de jueqi [China Shock: The rise of a "civilization-state"]*. Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe.
- 9 Pan, "Dangdai Zhonghua tizhi," 3, 83.
- 10 See David Tobin, "Competing Communities: Ethnic Unity and Ethnic Boundaries on China's North-West Frontier," *Inner Asia* 13:1 (2011): 7-25.
- 11 Louisa Schein. 2000. *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press



Left: General Chi Haotian, former Chinese Defense Minister, receives the WHF award from Sha Zukang, the U.N. under-secretary for Economic and Social Affairs, 2010. Photo: Chinanews.com



Left: Beijing 2008 Olympic Opening Ceremony celebrates 'One world, one dream'. Photo reproduced under a Creative Commons licence, courtesy of Familymwr, Flickr.