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Patriotic Cosmopolitanism: China's Non-official Intellectuals Dream of the Future¹

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One of the fascinating things about China today is that it is a country in flux. With each turn along China's path of rapid economic growth, a new set of political, economic and social questions arises. Hence it is very difficult to understand what is going on in China – not only for outsiders, but also for the Chinese people themselves.

In the west, we usually think of China's rise in terms of its convergence to or divergence from international norms of free trade, human rights, and environmental protection. As Robert Zoellick asked when he was deputy secretary of state in 2005, will China be a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system?

Yet increasingly China's elite are asking a different set of questions about their country's proper role in the world. Qin Yaqing, the Vice President of China's Foreign Affairs University, put it simply: the main issue for China's engagement with the world is not the institutional politics of how China will fit into international organizations, but the identity politics of answering the question “Who is China?”³

In other words, understanding China's recent diplomatic and economic successes is not enough; to grasp the growing impact of the rise of China it is necessary to probe how the Chinese people themselves understand the PRC and its new role in the world.

There is a debate among scholars about where to look for China's identity. Some tell us to look to the official voice of the party-state which casts the PRC as a “peacefully rising” great power that is working for a “harmonious world” within the international system. Others point to the raucous demonstrations of China's “angry youth” who take personal offence at any criticism of the motherland, especially when it comes from foreigners.

But rather than understanding Chinese identity in terms of the party-state's top-down propaganda or the angry youth's bottom-up spontaneous feelings, it is necessary to see how other groups are increasingly guiding public feeling. Leading public intellectuals like philosopher Zhao Tingyang, film makers Zhang Yimou and Ang Lee, and artist Cai

¹ Many thanks to Elena Barabantseva, Bob Hathaway, Wei Hsueh, Dick Kraus and Susan Shirk for their comments.

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³ Qin Yaqing, “Guoji guanxi lilun Zhongguo pai shengcheng de keneng he biran” [The Chinese School of International Relations Theory: Possibility and Inevitability], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* no. 3 (2006): 7-13, on 13.

Guoqiang are interesting because their work gives a good sense of current debates over China's past, present and future. Rather than promote a singular vision of China's trajectory, they offer a complex range of possibilities and opportunities that go beyond being simply pro- or anti-China. In this way, they provide different views of Chinese identity, China's future and the world's future. These public intellectuals are important because they engage a broad audience while also generating official interest. In addition to being popular in China, many are also hugely successful on the world stage; Lee and Cai actually live in New York, and are prominent examples of the global impact of Sinophone (i.e. Chinese-speaking) culture.

Such public intellectuals are important beyond their professional fields because their creative work reflects discussions taking place among a broad group of opinion-makers and policy-makers. Even though they are not the usual sources for ideas about China's grand strategy, such cultural figures are influential because their work focuses on the big issues of war and peace, world order and world institutions, and civilization and barbarism. In other words, these public intellectuals are talking about what it means to be Chinese, and how China fits into the world.

Zhao, Zhang, Lee and Cai are typical of a new breed of intellectuals in China who do more than simply promote or criticize the party line. They actually operate in a social space where there is no clear distinction between official and dissident work. So while engaging in utopian theory and experimental art, they also have ties to the party-state: Zhao works at China's largest think-tank, while Zhang and Cai created the official ceremonies at Beijing's 2008 Olympics and the National Day celebrations of 60 years of the PRC in 2009. Because they play for both state and non-state audiences, they are best understood as "nonofficial intellectuals."⁴



Figure 1: Sign in Beijing's new airport terminal

⁴ "Nonofficial intellectuals" comes from Barmé's analysis of "nonofficial artists" (Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 202).

While some Chinese writers and artists hope to profit from official censorship by marketing their creative work to a foreign audience as “packaged dissent,”⁵ these nonofficial intellectuals are playing for both a global audience and a Chinese audience. By using distinctly “Chinese” ideas to address universal questions they profitably engage in what can be called “patriotic cosmopolitanism.” These nonofficial intellectuals thus can help us to decode the meaning of Beijing’s foreign policy narrative of “Harmonious World,” as well as its 2008 Olympics slogan: “One World, One Dream.” (see Figure 1)

Zhao’s Chinese-style utopia

In the past decade a group of theorists has emerged that looks beyond modernity – which is criticized as westernization – to see how Chinese concepts are necessary for the 21st century, which they see as China’s century. Zhao Tingyang’s book *The Tianxia System: The Philosophy for the World Institution* (2005) is a prominent example of this trend.⁶ Zhao works in the Philosophy Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS); but his goal is to reach a broad audience to tackle problems not just in political philosophy, but in public policy. And Zhao has been very successful both in China and abroad: officials use similar concepts to talk about China’s “harmonious world” foreign policy; *China Security* recently commissioned Zhao to write an essay for its special section “Debating China’s Future.”

Chinese people need to discuss China’s worldview, according to Zhao, because to be a true world power, China needs to excel not just in economic production, but in “knowledge production.” To be a knowledge superpower, the PRC needs to stop importing ideas from the west, and exploit its own indigenous “resources of traditional thought.” To be a world power, therefore, China must “create new world concepts and new world structures.”

To do this, Zhao looks to the traditional concept of Tianxia, which literally means All-under-Heaven, but also means Empire, the World, and even “China” itself. His aim is to solve global problems in a global way; thinking *through* the world in an “all-inclusive” way, rather than thinking *about* the world from an inferior national or individual perspective. He appeals to Chinese philosophy for answers, and bases his argument on a passage from Laozi’s *Daode Jing*: “use the world [Tianxia] to examine the world [Tianxia].” World unity, for Zhao, leads to world peace and world harmony. Tianxia thus is a utopia that sets the analytical and institutional framework that is necessary for solving the world’s problems.

The Tianxia system prescribes a global unity that is geographical, psychological, and institutional. Since there are no physical or ethical borders in Zhao’s Tianxia, the main task in this all-inclusive system is to transform enemies into friends. Since it is a utopia, Zhao does not provide many details of his Tianxia system; but he thinks that imperial China’s hierarchical tributary system that distinguished between civilization and barbarians is a good model for transforming enemies into friends not just in the past, but in the future. Zhao thus provides the Tianxia system as the solution to the world’s

⁵ See Barmé, *In the Red*, 179-200.

⁶ Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun* [The Tianxia system: The Philosophy for the World Institution], (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005).

problems; it is a new interpretation of Confucianism's hierarchical system that values order over freedom, ethics over law, and elite governance over democracy and human rights.

But Zhao's argument that Tianxia is all-inclusive seems to miss the point that not everyone wants to be included: some people want to stay different and outside. Yet in Zhao's Tianxia system any difference risks being seen as a barbarian enemy that needs to be converted into a civilized friend – otherwise you risk being branded as a terrorist, as we have seen with Beijing's recent dealings with Xinjiang and Tibet.

While Beijing says that China will peacefully rise as a responsible power within the present international system, the success of *The Tianxia System* shows that there is a thirst in China for "Chinese solutions" to world problems, especially when they promote a patriotic form of cosmopolitanism. While most notions of cosmopolitanism are suspicious of nations and states, Zhao's aspirational project looks to a China for a model of world order. As he says, Tianxia is a utopia with practical applications. In many ways, the Tianxia system is the theoretical and institutional plan for "One World, One Dream."

Zhang and Lee's Cinematic World Orders

Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) also address the grand issue of world order in terms of the problems of war and peace, identity and difference. These two films are exemplary cases because they were popular and critical successes at home and abroad. *Hero* grossed \$185 million worldwide to *Crouching Tiger*'s \$215 million, and both were nominated for numerous Academy Awards (*Crouching Tiger* won Best Foreign Film and two others).

They also are related in the sense that *Hero* was a reaction to *Crouching Tiger*: after Lee's success on the world market, Zhang was encouraged to direct an epic martial arts epic for the first time. *Hero* then opened new doors for Zhang: after the success of the film he was appointed by Beijing to organize all the ceremonies of the 2008 Olympics.

While Zhao's *Tianxia System* is about world order and world institutions, *Hero* is about war and peace, order and chaos, conquest and surrender. Again, the focus here is on the state and state power. The film's narrative is based on a historical story about the unification of China under the first emperor of the Qin dynasty in 221 B.C. It is actually topical for international relations because the film is about the transition in China from the multi-centric Warring States period – which has been compared to the Westphalian world order – to the universal empire of Tianxia. As we saw with Zhao, the goal for many Chinese intellectuals is to find a way back to China's ethical Tianxia system that was destroyed in the nineteenth century by the Westphalian system's immoral violence.

Tianxia itself is mentioned throughout the film in ways that are strikingly similar to Zhao's *Tianxia System*: the film concludes with the assassin being transformed into a hero when he decides *not* to kill the emperor, which is much like Zhao's goal of transforming enemies into friends. The lesson drawn is that the individual has to sacrifice himself and his kingdom for the greater good of the Tianxia empire, because as the hero reasons, "Only the King of Qin can stop the chaos by unifying Tianxia" through conquest. The individual person – and individual nations – thus has to sacrifice everything for the greater good of universal empire. Once again, unity defines security, and diversity is seen as dangerous dissent: the goal is "One World, One Dream" rather than a multiplicity of worlds and dreams.

Conversely, in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* civilization and barbarism collide when Jiaolong and Xiaohu meet in China's Northwest borderlands. This is not just an issue of identity politics: Central Asia's premier security forum, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, was founded to control the flow of these "minority populations" across national borders in Central Asia. The encounter is instructive because it states the traditional civilization/barbarian distinction seen in Zhao's *Tianxia System*, before blurring it through sex, love, and finally mutual-respect.

This narrative starts with a journey from the civilized center of Beijing to the wilderness of China's Northwest borderlands. The trail literally leads the caravan of Chinese officials through a desert, prompting Jiaolong's mother to ask: "Will I ever see a tree again? Why couldn't your father get an appointment closer to civilization?" The uncivilized nature of the terrain is confirmed when the caravan is attacked by barbaric bandits, whose leader, Xiaohu, steals Jiaolong's jade comb – a symbol of civilization.

The second meeting, where Jiaolong seeks to recapture her civilized comb, leads to another struggle with Xiaohu – which in time transforms from a violent struggle to an erotic encounter. After wandering around the beautiful desert together, Jiaolong and Xiaohu come to love and respect not just each other, but each others' way of life.

Still, Jiaolong decides to go back to her family and civilization, because neither Jiaolong nor Xiaohu could meaningfully live in the other's space. Xiaohu later pursues her to the center of civilization in Beijing, but she rejects him. They can only come together again far away from both the civilized center and the barbaric borderlands in the alternative space of a martial arts academy that sits atop an isolated mountain. The ending is ambiguous: it is not clear how and where the lovers can be together.

This fruitful ambiguity provides an interesting solution to China's enduring problem of barbarian/civilization relations, where the aim is not to convert barbarianism to civilization by turning enemies into friends, but to allow space to appreciate different ways of life. Rather than asserting a cultural or an institutional unity like *The Tianxia System* or *Hero*, *Crouching Tiger* helps us to question the limits of any singular understanding of political identity. Indeed, here Chinese identity is not located in the imperial capital of Beijing, but in various translocal centers of activity.

Lee's work thus challenges the idea that China's strength lies in unity, because violence is converted into respect by encouraging difference. Indeed, while *Crouching Tiger* was popular in Greater China and around the world, many critics in the PRC panned it for not being "Chinese enough" – especially since Lee is originally from Taiwan. However, if we widen the scope of analysis to include the global Sinophone community, can't we take "Crouching Tiger" as an alternative way of understanding China's search for respect in the world? Doesn't it provide an alternative solution that encourages difference and love rather than unity and hate?

Cai's explosive art

Our last public intellectual, Cai Guoqiang, is celebrated on both the Chinese and the global art scenes because his "creative transgressions and cultural provocations have literally exploded the accepted parameters of art making in our time."⁷ Indeed, Cai's

⁷ See Alexandra Munro, "Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe," in *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want To Believe*, edited by Thomas Krens and Alexandra Munroe, (New York: Guggenheim

work has geopolitical significance: both Chinese and Western critics draw a parallel between the Rise of China and the rise of Cai. Cai thus is a key example of a nonofficial intellectual who is both outside China's intellectual bureaucracy, and still occasionally works with the Chinese state: while his solo exhibit was showing in New York at the Guggenheim Museum in early 2008, Cai was busy creating the visual effects for Beijing's Olympic ceremonies.

Cai's explosive impact is not just metaphorical: he is most famous for using gunpowder creatively. In his early career in China, he experimented with gunpowder in painting to explode the conventions of traditional literati art. More recently, Cai has tried to get out of the art gallery by experimenting with fireworks at public events at places like China's Great Wall. (see figure 2). Since he came to the US in 1995, Cai has created massive explosion events that evoke joy and wonder for huge audiences, including a pyrotechnic tornado on the Potomac for the Kennedy Center's "Festival of China" in 2005. Many of these "explosion projects" are part of political events in China as well: in October 2001, Cai's official fireworks display celebrated China's hosting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Shanghai.



Figure 2: "Project to Extend the Great Wall" (1993)

Since September 11, Cai has acted as both a showman and a shaman – the Chinese word for fireworks literally means "fire medicine." By directly deploying fireworks in a pyrotechnics of hope and mourning, Cai worked to heal the wounds of terrorist attacks in "Transient Rainbow" (2002) for New York and "Black Rainbow" (2005) for Spain after the Madrid train bombing. Cai's art thus is creative destruction, where fireworks perform a sort of non-violent violence. The explosion – complete with fantastic light and sound – does not destroy its target; the fireworks actually enhance its value.

So like Zhao whose Tianxia system challenges Eurocentric international relations theory, Cai's work challenges the art system, by adding a critical eye to the globalized art

Museum, 2008). This passage is taken from the exhibition website, which contains pictures and video of Cai's art:

http://www.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/exhibition_pages/cai.html.

world. Cai's combination of beauty and danger mesmerizes critics who declare that he uses explosive techniques "to suspend, provoke, and challenge our habits of the mind," and thus open up space for the "contemplation of alternative, co-existing, or multiple realities."⁸

But just what is the target of Cai's criticism? While Cai's art opens up space for different interpretations, there are two main ways of understanding his art. In the west, Cai's work is praised for providing a different view that challenges the "stereotypes" that we use to understand China and Asia. He plays with "China threat" alarmism, for example, in works like "Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan" (1996), which recalls European memories of Mongol invasion in the past, and western worries about Japan's "economic invasion" more recently.⁹

While Cai is an active part of a multicultural art scene in the west that values outsiders' critique, in China his art is seen as patriotic in familiar ways: Cai shows how a Chinese intellectual can succeed on the world stage by criticizing the west.

Cai's first major work in America, "The Century with Mushroom Clouds" (1996), is telling. (See figure 3) As a way to explore the U.S. after he arrived in 1995, Cai traveled around the country detonating home-made, hand-held explosives at iconic sites including a nuclear test site in Nevada and by lower Manhattan where a "small, almost delicate 'mushroom cloud'" is framed by the Statue of Liberty and the Twin Towers.¹⁰

When asked to cite his favorite book soon after September 11, he chose *Unrestricted Warfare: War and Strategy in the Globalization Era*. Although art historians might not be familiar with this book, it is well-known among IR specialists as a call by a pair of People's Liberation Army colonels for Beijing to use asymmetrical warfare, including



Figure 3: "The Century with Mushroom Clouds" (1996)

⁸ Munroe, "Cai Guo-Qiang," 20.

⁹ Munroe, "Cai Guo-Qiang," 25; Barmé, *In the Red*, 227.

¹⁰ Miwon Kwon, "The Art of Expenditure," in Krens and Munroe, *Cai Guo-Qiang*, 70.

terrorism, to attack the United States.¹¹ The center piece of his retrospective exhibit at the Guggenheim, “Inopportune: Stage One,” continues this theme of blowing up Americans. Cai here asks “his viewers to appreciate some kind of redeeming beauty in terrorist attacks and warfare”¹² through this simulation of a car-bomb explosion, complete with blinking colored lights. While cultural critic Wang Hui tells us that Cai’s work deploys “art as a substitute for weapons,”¹³ Cai’s creative destruction not only transforms physical violence into art – it also risks celebrating the transformation of art into physical violence.

We saw this on September 11, which was not just planned to blow up the Twin Towers; it was designed as a “spectacular” for a global audience – which it was, and continues to be. The beginning of the Iraq war was similarly designed in aesthetic terms to “Shock and Awe” not only Baghdadis, but a global news-watching audience. Indeed, “Shock and Awe” is the title of a recent interview with Cai.¹⁴

While he blows up Western icons, Cai embellishes China’s sacred space. His explosive project at the Great Wall does not destroy this nationalist symbol; it actually extends the Great Wall by another ten kilometers. In 2008 this project was celebrated again when Beijing issued a special stamp of the Great Wall that is embellished with gunpowder art to recognize Cai’s success in America. (see Figure 4)



Figure 4: Cai’s New York exhibit commemorated on a Chinese stamp

¹¹ Kwon, “The Art of Expenditure,” 70. See Qiao Liang and Wang Xianghui, *Chaoxianzhan: quanqiu hua shidai zhanzheng yu zhanfa* [Unrestricted Warfare: War and Strategy in the Globalization Era], (Beijing: Social Sciences Press, 2005 [1999]); for the FBIS translation of the 1999 edition see <http://www.terrorism.com/documents/TRC-Analysis/unrestricted.pdf>.

¹² Kwon, “The Art of Expenditure,” 65.

¹³ Wang Hui, “The Dialectics of Art and the Event,” in Krens and Munro, *Cai Guo-Qiang*, 45.

¹⁴ John K. Grande, “Shock and Awe: An Interview with Cai Guo-Qiang,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 6:1 (Spring/March 2007): 39-44.

According to Wang Hui, Cai's public art at APEC (2001) ushered in a new era by "display[ing] the dynamism of China."¹⁵ Cai therefore was invited to be visual arts director for the 2008 Olympics because his art is "palatable to this group of leaders and the way they want their national project to be seen."¹⁶ Another art critic puts it simply: Cai is "very patriotic, and it shows in the Olympics work."¹⁷ As the world saw in August 2008, Cai's fireworks show at the Olympics was a celebration of China's state power, just as his APEC fireworks were seen as an "event symbolizing a transformed global order."¹⁸

More to the point, when Cai faces political criticism from China, he backs off: "Rent Collection Courtyard" (1999), which reinterpreted a famous Cultural Revolution era sculpture at the Venice Biennale, generated ferocious controversy in China. But it won't be included when the Guggenheim exhibit moves to the National Museum in Beijing for the summer Olympics because, according to Cai, it "is still forbidden in China."¹⁹

Recent Chinese experimental art shares Cai's "fascination with various kinds of destruction." But while others use their explosive art to engage in social and cultural critique of China's domestic problems,²⁰ much of Cai's art is seen as a celebration of the rise of China on the world stage. Rather than exploring the pleasures and pains of a common humanity, or criticizing power in both China and the west, Cai sees identity (and security) in terms of difference. The meaning of Cai's art thus is multilayered: while it engages in a radical critique of Western values and the global art system, it celebrates Chinese icons. He is cosmopolitan as the voice of China on world scene; in the PRC, however, he is quite patriotic. Cai is thus a prime example of patriotic cosmopolitanism.

Cai's work is quite stunning, and is much more than simply martial or militaristic art. Yet regardless of our aesthetic judgments about his work we need to appreciate how the violence of Cai's art is going in the opposite direction from Beijing's official policy that celebrates China's peaceful rise as a responsible stakeholder. Unlike Zhao and Zhang, Cai is not directly talking about the Chinese state or foreign policy. But he is part of a global aesthetic that takes shape not only through cultural debates, but also in national and global institutions.

Does Cai's aesthetic of creative destruction provide us with a different understanding of China and its relation to the world? Does a Chinese-style harmonious world order actually require both peaceful rises and explosive falls?

Identity and Security in China

When we hear slogans like "One World, One Dream," it is necessary to ask which world, and which dream. We have to be careful, of course, not to over-interpret the meaning of a

¹⁵ Wang, "The Dialectics of Art and the Event," 47.

¹⁶ Philip Tinari in Munro, "Cai Guo-Qiang," 23.

¹⁷ Fei Dawei in Arthur Lubow, "The Pyrotechnic Imagination," *New York Times*, 17 February 2008.

¹⁸ Wang, "The Dialectics of Art and the Event," 47.

¹⁹ Cai in Lubow, "The Pyrotechnic Imagination."

²⁰ Wu Hung, *Transcience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005), 25, 179.

particular work, or the influence of a particular public intellectual. That's why it's important to explore a broad group of nonofficial intellectuals, while highlighting the pivotal work of China's top thinkers, directors and artists.

Certain themes definitely emerge in this sampling of academic, popular and artistic culture – and they go in different directions from how the China's Foreign Ministry talks about China and the world. These works generally focus on identity as difference in a zero-sum game that distinguishes civilization from barbarism, and China from the rest of the world. They thus redeploy stark cold war-style divisions between East and West, not just in terms of policy (which is changeable), but in terms of civilization (which is enduring). Their cosmopolitanism doesn't appeal to global themes of common humanity so much as to patriotic themes that envision China as the model of world order. These nonofficial intellectuals also show a fascination with power as the exercise of control through violence, where unity is the goal and diversity is seen as a security threat. Living abroad does not necessarily temper these views: as we saw, Cai's work celebrates violence and conflict even more than the others.

While it is common to understand China's recent outbursts of aggressive nationalism by looking to the activities of China's "indignant youth," these nonofficial intellectuals are all middle-aged. They are part of China's elite generation that entered university when schools reopened after the Cultural Revolution in 1978. These opinion-makers are noteworthy because their group will supply the next generation of China's leaders. Their thoughts and dreams are important because we now need to look beyond the party-state to see what semi-independent nonofficial intellectuals have to say, especially when their unorthodox ideas provide an alternative view of China's future – and the world's future.

Such examples confirm that the anger and sense of injustice seen in China goes beyond youthful exuberance. It is necessary therefore to look beyond official texts and violent outbursts to carefully analyze and understand this enduring anger, which is seen as righteous rage in China.

Ang Lee's film is interesting because it is the exception to the rule of state violence found in the work of the other public intellectuals: it converts enmity into amity through personal engagement rather than through a grand explosion or a universal institution. Rather than focusing on national hate and humiliation, Lee's characters find happiness through mutual love and respect.

Yet it is fascinating that hope appears in "Crouching Tiger" only when we leave the imperial capital and repair to a remote mountain. This suggests that students of Chinese foreign policy also need to get out of Beijing more, to explore what the rest of China is thinking and feeling.