

“Historians and Chinese World Order:  
Fairbank, Wang, and the Matter of ‘Indeterminate Relevance’”\*

Paul Evans

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Comments welcome to paul.evans@ubc.ca

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“On balance, after 150 years of interactions, the Chinese have integrated outside and inside views sufficiently to begin to make contributions to a future international order.” WGW and Zheng Yongnian, editors, *China and the New International Order* (Routledge, 2008), p. 30.

“The prospect of enduring world peace would in large measure depend upon a *recognition* that there are a plurality of theoretical visions of the dynamics of change in the world, and a concerted effort to *reconcile* these in a consensual world order which would incorporate a diversity of goals and aspirations from the standpoints of different peoples.” Robert Cox, speech to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, October 2008.

“Perhaps the Chinese have finally joined the great outside world just in time to participate in its collapse.” JKF, *China: A New History* (Harvard University Press, 1991), p. xvii.

It is a great honour and daunting prospect to take part in this special event celebrating the career of a gifted and influential historian and academic superstar who I have admired, mainly from a distance, for many years. It has been said that the great issues the world faces are too important to be left to historians and too difficult to be left to political scientists. In my own case as someone operating at the outermost margins of both disciplines, it is a challenge to contribute to the discussion of where Chinese history, diplomatic practice and international theory intersect.

Chinese conceptions of world order can now confidently be placed into the “great issues” category. A decade ago Gerald Segal could pen, with a hint of bitterness but no irony, an

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\* Prepared for the “International Conference in Honour of Wang Gungwu’s Scholarship: Bridging China Studies and International Relations Theory,” organized by the East Asia Institute at the National University of Singapore, Singapore, 25-27 June 2009. Paul Evans is Professor in the College for Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of British Columbia. He recently returned to the university after a three-year secondment to the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada where he served as Co-CEO and Chairman of the Executive Committee and is now a Senior Advisor to the Board. He is finishing a book on Canada and global China.

essay entitled “Does China Matter?”<sup>1</sup> The big issue of today is “What Does China Think?” The topic has moved from a mainly academic concern to top-of-mind for government leaders, journalists and pundits around the world. When a Chinese Premier refers to China as a “great power,” as Wen Jiabao did recently in London, it gets attention, adding a note of immediacy to the earlier debates in China and abroad about “peaceful rise,” “peaceful development,” “harmonious society,” and “harmony without uniformity.”

The interest in Chinese thinking and attitudes tracks directly the rise of Chinese power and its global reach. China may be a “fragile superpower,” to borrow Susan Shirk’s term, not yet in the same class as the United States in many dimensions of national power. But in a little more than a decade ago China emerged from the Asian financial crisis as a significant regional force; in the midst of the current economic crisis China it is a global force. Decisions of Chinese officials, citizens and consumers have immediate impact around the world. Is there any global issue – like climate change, environmental degradation, pandemics, non-proliferation, human security in conflict situations – where the road to a solution does not run through Beijing? Ten years ago the discussion focused on China in regional institutions; three years ago on China in international forums like the G-8 or L-20. Now we are at a moment where many outside China and a few inside it are talking about not just China in the G-20 but the prospects of a G-2. The G-2 scenario may be premature, though shows how far policy perceptions and discussion has shifted in a breathtakingly short period of time.

Most of the academic debate on China’s rise and what China thinks has been handled by political scientists and journalists. They have produced a shelf of articles and books, mainly in English, that use the tools of foreign policy analysis including power transition theory, constructivism, cognitive mapping, and image studies, to tease out the patterns of thought and social forces that help explain current Chinese behaviour and predict its future.<sup>2</sup>

The questions they raise are numerous and rarely matched by conclusive answers. Can China be a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system? What is China’s “grand strategy”? Does China want to dismantle, reform, or abide by the institutions and norms of the current international system? Will China seek to rewrite the rules of international politics and economics? Is it a status quo or revisionist power? What are its views on sovereignty, territorial boundaries, and the use of force; on the future of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, David M. Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money and Minds* (University of California Press, 2008); C. Fred Bergsten, Charles Freeman, Nicholas R. Lardy and Derek J. Mitchell, *China’s Rise: Challenges and Opportunities* (Peterson Institute for International Economics; Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008); James Kynge, *China Shakes the World: A Titan’s Breakneck Rise and Troubled Future and the Challenge for America* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power is Transforming the World* (Yale University Press, 2007); and Robert Ross and Zhu Feng, Eds., *China’s Ascent: Power, Security and the Future of International Politics* (Cornell University Press 2008).

international financial system; of America's international role and military presence in Asia; on managing weapons of mass destruction? Are present international norms universal or the product of specific cultural, civilization and power interests? Who are the key thinkers in China and what shapes their thinking? Is a new pluralism emerging in policy and thinking in Beijing? Is a liberal internationalist foreign policy compatible with China's illiberal domestic order? Are the patterns and influences from the Imperial, Republican and Maoist periods relevant to the needs and outlooks of global China? Is Middle Kingdomism finished forever or is China ready to reprise its ancient leading role?<sup>3</sup>

And behind all of these questions is a new doubt, perhaps better framed as a new modesty, about the capacity of current theorizing. The dozen thoughtful essays by leading political scientists in the US and Asia presented in a recent book edited by Robert Ross and Zhu Feng all address the complexity of making sense of China's rise and where it, and the international system, might be heading. They reject the two important theories of the 1990s, conflict inevitability and democratic peace, and come to the conclusion that a peaceful outcome to the current power transition is possible and even likely. But in the blunt words of two of the authors, "The policy choices of China cannot be adequately explained by any of the major international relations theories."<sup>4</sup>

### **Fairbank and Wang**

Can historians help? What can China's past tell us about contemporary Chinese views on world order?

Mapping the field is a much a bigger project than I can take on here or am qualified to undertake. Instead, I will focus on John Fairbank and Wang Gungwu, two big-picture historians who have written a great deal about the past and present of Chinese views of world order and tried to make the connections for audiences broader than professional historians. In selection of topics, British doctoral training, careers largely spent in universities, vaunted entrepreneurial and administrative talents, abiding fascination with the cultural and civilizational underpinnings of international relations, encyclopedic and synoptic grasp of the events, institutions and people of Chinese history, a desire to speak to audiences beyond purely academic ones, and intention to see China from both the inside and outside, the two have something in common.

I should underline from the outset that I am much better versed in Fairbank than Wang. I spent a decade reading Fairbank's publications, examining his private papers and speaking with his students, colleagues and critics while writing a biography of him that

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, "How China Sees the World, *The Economist*, 21 March 2009; Pei Minxin, "Beijing's Closed Politics Hinder 'New Diplomacy'," *Financial Times*, 12 September 2004; Bates Gill and Michael Schiffer, "A Rising China's Rising Responsibilities," Working Paper, The Stanley Foundation, November 2008; Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Qin Yaqing and Wei Lang, "Structures, Processes, and the Socialization of Power: East Asia Community Building and the Rise of China," in Ross and Zhu, *China's Ascent, op. cit.*, p. 136.

was published in 1988. Fairbank wrote his own account of his life and times a few years earlier and there is a fairly robust secondary literature looking at aspects of his life and views.<sup>5</sup>

While some of Fairbank's ideas live on, he is not producing any new ones. He died in the fall of 1991 at the age of 84, about the time that Deng Xiaoping's Open Door began to pay big economic results. In his final years Fairbank wrote about the power of a billion Chinese consumers bursting into life under Deng's leadership and the restructuring of the Chinese economy, but the contemporary for Fairbank was the Maoist period and its immediate legacy. He adjusted his views of China on many occasions as times changed and scholarship produced new evidence and interpretations. He sensed China was on a new path yet could hardly have imagined how substantial the changes were to be. The China that was the respondent in adapting to the West only assumed global prominence – a shift some have described as from rule taking to rule making -- after his passing. Global China came a decade after his death.

A focus on Wang Gungwu offers the advantage of seeing China as global China. He is a generation younger and the product of a different continent. Most importantly, he is alive and well and living in Singapore. His sense of China's past resembles Fairbank's in many ways, but his contemporary is our contemporary, real time. I'm not aware of a biography of Wang or an autobiography and am only familiar in the sketchiest way with his private life based on occasional biographical reflections in his writing, some wonderful conversations, and seeing him in action at several conferences and workshops. I've read only a small fraction of his books and articles, and not even all of the materials kindly provided by the organizers. We await the memoir and the biography that will open Wang's life and times for the edification of us all. Life stories matter. As the French historian Etienne Balazs wrote, "We can understand only what we already know, and, what is more, we can become genuinely interested only in something that touches us personally."

My initial sense is that the two men share a considerable intellectual commonality though they belong to different generations, experienced living China in different ways and at different times, interacted with the policy establishments in their worlds rather differently, and above all came from different ethnic and national starting points.

Fairbank's connections with living Asia were, save for occasional visits to other parts of East Asia and Southeast Asia, almost exclusively China during several years living in China during the early 1930s and then during World War II. He spent his entire professional career, minus wartime assignments in Washington and China, in the United States. He was a passionate advocate of the idea of looking at Asia from the inside out and worked with Edwin Reischauer and others on the intellectual and administrative infrastructure for focusing American academic attention on East Asia rather than the Far East.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Evans, *John Fairbank and the American Understanding of Modern China* (Basil Blackwell, 1988); JKF, *Chinabound: A Fifty-Year Memoir* (Harper and Row, 1982).

If China was his subject, America was his home and Harvard his base. Cosmopolitan scholars speak to a world-wide audience but most of them operate in a particular national community. In writing about China in America and for an American audience, the great issues of social revolution and the rise of Chinese Communism were indelibly connected to a nation's unexpected engagement in war with Japan in Asia, inextricable involvement in China's civil war, painful recriminations about "who lost China?," a fighting war with China in Korea, Cold War McCarthyism and anti-communism, the delicate dance of rapprochement, the ups and downs of US relations with China through normalization and the late Mao and early Deng periods, and, at the end of his life, the aftermath of Tiananmen Square.

Wang's personal story offers a different vantage point. Born in Southeast Asia, a product of the overseas Chinese that was the topic of his early scholarship, and a professional career outside China but in its hemisphere and most often in its immediate neighbourhood.<sup>6</sup> Fairbank spoke of looking at China from the inside out but Wang was one step closer to being on the inside and in some respect lived and reflected the inside-out philosophy. And for the latter part of his career he operated in the political and social contexts of Hong Kong and Singapore, rather closer to China and its gravitational field of power and ideas with different ideas than Fairbank's America about the role of intellectuals, freedom and autonomy, as well as political inclinations on matters of democracy, human rights, individualism, exceptionalism, universalism, and triumphalism. The very fact that Fairbank repeatedly challenged the universality and soundness of all of these basic pillars of the American perspective on the world was immutable testament to their tenacious hold. He seemed to see his role as vigorously challenging some of America's most cherished cultural predispositions and he used China as a foil rather than a target. "Our American way," he argued in the successive editions of *The United States and China*, "is not the only way, nor even the majority way for man's and woman's future."<sup>7</sup>

Wang seems to be responding to some of the same concerns but also interacting with a more nuanced set of regional responses to the good, the bad and ugly of modern China and the challenges it raises for those on the immediate periphery who are neither Chinese nor American. Fairbank is the erudite observer looking at the inside of China from the outside; Wang is the equally erudite observer half-way in between.

Despite these differences, their views of history and historiography are very similar in broad outline. Both are skeptical about the existence of universal values, Western supremacy, the transferability of Western institutions and norms to Asia, and the prospect of a deep convergence of the West and Asia on Western terms. As historians both have been modest about their own impact and comfortable with the idea that theories, including their own, will come and go. In Fairbank's framing, even academic progress is relative, "Each generation learns that its final role is to be the doormat for the coming

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<sup>6</sup> Here I use the Gareth Evans' idea of an "East Asian hemisphere" that conveniently includes Australia.

<sup>7</sup> JKF, *The United States and China* (Harvard University Press, fourth revised and enlarged edition, 1983), p. 477.

generation to step on.”<sup>8</sup> And they see good scholarship as an antidote to ethnocentrism and a necessary foundation for effective policy. Cultural conflict can lay the powder train to international conflict, but knowledge of the other makes management of differences possible. Both devoted a great deal of time to addressing public audiences and generating a strong following, and respect, in policy circles in their respective domains.

At the same time, it is difficult not to detect several differences in interpretation and prescriptions. While both doubted that societal convergence was likely, Wang sees greater prospects for Chinese adaptation to outside influences, what he sometimes describes as blending heritage with modernity. On the key issue of democracy and human rights, Fairbank, the American, may well be more skeptical of their adoption in China, having spent much of his career both observing Chinese autocracy and authoritarianism and telling Americans that they are at the heart of Chinese civilization and political institutions, past and present. Wang shares the sense of the autocratic streak in Chinese political culture but sees it as more malleable. Fairbank regularly chastised Americans for failing to understand China on its own terms and for policy errors; Wang is usually more circumspect in criticizing Asian officialdom and publics.

### **China’s World Order: JKF and China’s Response to the West**

Fairbank wrote on the domestic sources of China’s foreign relations for almost sixty years. His doctoral dissertation at Oxford (1936) and the ensuing monograph on the Treaty Ports were the foundations of his academic career. He returned to the theme many times, primarily in the context of books, monographs, translations, textbooks and articles on China’s response to the West, aimed at professional historians, students and a broader public audience.

China’s response to the West focused on the idea of the penetration of China by an alien and more powerful society. He later put more nuance on the argument and conceded that the Western intrusion was but one of many factors eroding the late imperial order. The methodology of stimulus and response and the theoretical construct of modernization theory combined to produce the conclusion that the Confucian tradition was incapable of modernizing China in accordance with the universal principles of nationalism, science, livelihood, participation and industrialization. Confucianism, he consistently maintained, was complex but did not contain within it the prospects of genuine liberalism or effective modernization. The political significance related to the debate about whether the Nationalists on the mainland or then on Taiwan had a chance of economic and political success. Conversely, he felt that the Chinese Communists were being successful in restructuring society by resonating with the authoritarian elements of China’s great Imperial tradition.

Throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s in more than fifteen books and fifty essays, he painted a picture of the Chinese world order as one of sophistication, an abiding sense of superiority and hierarchy without the concepts of sovereignty, territorially-bounded

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<sup>8</sup> JKF, *the Great Chinese Revolution, 1800-1985* (Harper and Row, 1986), p. ix.

nation states, or a balance of power. Rather, it was given order and unity by the universal presence of the Son of Heaven. The internal order was reflected in the external one, power commingled with culture.

In the mid-1960s he organized a series of meetings and commissioning a set of papers that eventually appeared as *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Harvard University Press, 1968). The book's fourteen essays, two by Fairbank and the remainder by scholars from Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the United States, proved to have a seminal impact. Though the book sold only a few hundred copies, 40 years later it may be the most cited of his thirty edited or authored volumes. Fairbank's own essay, "The Early Treaty System in the Chinese World Order," drew on *Trade and Diplomacy* and an essay he had written in 1957, "Synarchy Under the Treaties."<sup>9</sup> The treaty system, he argued, was an outgrowth of the earlier tribute system, functioning as both a mechanism for managing trade and diplomatic relations and a ritual reaffirming the universality of the Confucian order.

This volume began with a sparse but intriguing suggestion about the significance and context of its content:

This book is about China's relations with non-Chinese states before the present century, mainly during the Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1912). The author's look at the Chinese empire and its world order partly through its own eyes and partly as seen by half a dozen outside people...The result, I think, opens the door a bit further on a system that handled the interstate relations of a large part of mankind throughout most of recorded history. This chapter of man's political experience even has *some indeterminate relevance* to the world's China problem of today."<sup>10</sup>

The "indeterminate relevance" was not spelled out in the book but did coincide with his advocacy-based work in the mid-1960's that grew out of a recurrent fear of direct US-China confrontation. China was entering the Cultural Revolution and the escalating American role in Vietnam signaled the prospect of a second hot war with China.

In other writings of the time he clearly had in mind refuting Marxist theories of imperialism popular at the time in China and indicating the process of interaction, rather than outright domination that was the characteristic of the system. The Qing leadership could accommodate co-management with the foreign powers but it was the ideas that came in their wake, especially nationalism, which eventually unraveled the system.

In considering the impact of the Imperial world order on Communist China, Fairbank and his co-authors took pains to indicate that the treaty and tribute systems were from a different world that was shaken in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and dead by 1911 when the traditional world order disintegrated. He wrote later that "Six decades of change in the

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<sup>9</sup> In John K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 204-31). Italics added.

<sup>10</sup> JKF, *the Chinese World Order* (Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 1.

nineteenth century and six in the twentieth have destroyed China's inherited order and created an unprecedentedly new one."<sup>11</sup>

In the final essay in *The Chinese World Order*, Benjamin Schwartz was blunt: "When the empire was weak, the Chinese perception of the world had little effect on the course of events. The ultimate fact is the fact of power." However real the system was over a long period of time, he was skeptical that it had "great causal weight in explaining present or future Chinese policies." Elements of Confucianism live on, but Chinese survival depended upon responding to new realities, chief among them that the centre of world order lay elsewhere and that China had inferior status within it. "In the end, of course, the Western system of international order may prove as transient as the Chinese traditional perception of world order" concluded Schwartz ironically. "As of the present, however, it seems to conform more closely to the realities of world politics than anything derived out of the Chinese past."<sup>12</sup>

Fairbank did not do the kind of basic documentary research on the Republican and Communist periods that he did for the Qing. But in an outpouring of essays and books, especially the five editions of *The United States and China* (1948, 1958, 1971, 1979, 1983) he wrote for a broader public on China's 20<sup>th</sup> century social revolution and its implications for the United States. He often returned to the echoes of history that could be found in the views of Mao and the Chinese Communist leadership.

Despite the caveats that the old Imperial order was dead and that the Chinese communists came to power equipped with a different ideology, Fairbank inevitably saw recurring patterns in foreign policy attitudes and behaviour. He often made the case that it is impossible to understand American foreign policy without looking at past practices and attitudes. He claimed that Washington's farewell address, the Monroe Doctrine and the Open Door formed part of "the historical matrix of our thinking." Though dangerous to suggest that "tradition governs Peking's foreign policy today (however much it may seem at times to govern ours)...to imagine Peking acting completely free of history would be the height of unrealism."<sup>13</sup>

When Fairbank looked at the remaining sense of identity and continuity, his most frequent concrete examples were the recurring strategic primacy of Inner Asia, the disesteem of sea power, the doctrine of Chinese superiority, and the idea of hierarchy.

In explaining Mao's foreign policy he noted that though Mao's emphasized egalitarian struggle rather than hierarchic harmony, revolutionary militancy rather than the civility and etiquette of the Imperial era, "the ancient idea of China's central superiority

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<sup>11</sup> JKF, "China's Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective," originally published in *Foreign Affairs*, April 1969 and republished in his collection of essays, *China Perceived: Images and Policies in Chinese-American Relations* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 55,

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Schwartz, "The Chinese Perception of World Order, Past and Present," *Chinese World Order*, *op. cit.*, p. 278 and p. 288.

<sup>13</sup> JKF, "China's Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective," *op. cit.*, in *Foreign Affairs*, April 1969, p. 42 and p. 43.



flourishes under his care. As in former times, the doctrine can be used to abet power abroad or equally well to substitute for it.”<sup>14</sup>

In foreseeing the Sino-Soviet split he argued that China was more nationalist and Chinese than Communist and that there was no single Communist monolith. In explaining Chinese support for people’s wars of national liberation and the slogan “surrounding the cities from the countryside,” he emphasized that this was not a “Hitlerite blueprint for conquest” but advocacy of self reliance such that “China could point the way and offer aid but not itself achieve the world revolution by its own expansion. (One is reminded of the ancient theory of tributary relations: China was a model which other countries should follow but on their own initiative).”<sup>15</sup>

He repeatedly tried to explain why Chinese leaders felt so strongly about China’s territorial integrity and the One China policy. “It [*t’ien hsia*] cannot be expunged from the Chinese language or from the minds of the Chinese people. This is not only an idea, but a sentiment, a feeling habituated by millennia of conduct. It attaches the highest importance to Chinese civilization, which consists of all those people who live in a Chinese way...and springs for a sense of culturalism, something a good deal stronger than a mere Western-style nationalism.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1969, and subsequently, he felt that the sense of superiority, humiliation, and the tough pursuit of national interest would not make China’s introduction into international organizations an easy one. “We may at times have to meet righteous vituperation, arrogant incivility. In the end, we outsiders will probably have to make many more adjustments to China’s demands than we now contemplate.” Chinese diplomacy would not seek territorial expansion but nor would it be friendly in multilateral institutions.<sup>17</sup>

### **Wang: Inside and Outside Chinese World Order**

The Wang essays selected by the organizers of this conference reveal that on many issues and in general approach Fairbank and Wang are on the same wavelength about the sources, content and implications of traditional cultural and civilizational views of *tian xia*. They appear to have read each other’s works, and with pleasure. That said, Wang writes with not just the benefit of hindsight but from a deeper knowledge of the Chinese language, a finer-grained perspective on Chinese culture, closer personal contact with post-Mao China, and the powerful concepts of identity, heritage and what he calls “economic global.”

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> JKF, *US and China*, *op. cit.*, p. 425.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 463.

<sup>17</sup> JKF, “Chinese Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective,” *op. cit.*, p. 57. Throughout the 1960s he made the case for “contact” with China (what we would now call engagement) despite Beijing’s hostility for the U.S. See his “How to Deal with the Chinese Revolution,” *New York Review of Books*, 17 February 1966, reprinted in *China: The People’s Middle Kingdom and the U.S.A* (Harvard University Press, 1967).

On the matter of the *tian xia* legacy in foreign relations, Wang has stressed, like Fairbank, that with the coming of the West China was forced to enter a new era that involved law, order and the principal of equality. It abandoned isolationist and Sino-centric attitudes. But not completely. “Communist Chinese,” he noted, still will not play the game and show many signs of continuing China centrism” (p. 127) including arrogance and cynical use of international institutions to dominate the world. Based on a study of the observations of Chinese traditional historians up to the T’ang dynasty, including Ch’ien Ssu-ma and Pan Ku, Fan Yeh and Wei Ching, he demonstrates that diplomatic practice did not always conform with Confucian theory. Emperors and ministers acted on the basis of survival and gain. “It was the historians who decided which policy or attitude towards foreign countries was the correct one” (p. 142). He concludes that Confucian theory was “developed from pragmatic observations and had little directly to do with the philosophic conception of China as the middle of the world” (p. 143). The fusion of moral and physical power, the ability to triumph over invasion and catastrophe, determined China’s relations with other countries. The theory of the historians became myth that was first shaken by the Mongol conquest and then undermined by the Western incursion.<sup>18</sup>

On cultural differences, his powerful essay on “Chinese Values and Memories of Modern War,” originally given as a speech in Melbourne in December 1998 about Weary Dunlop’s war diaries, was conceived at the moment the Asian values debate was generated by a controversy in Singapore about Confucian ethics and the role they played in explaining the East Asian economic miracle. It was in fact a debate about Chinese values and was occurring at a time that arguments about “the end of history” and “the clash of civilizations” were resonating in the U.S. and Europe. Cultural differences were being presented as the post-Cold War equivalent of “evil empire” and he aimed to show that “despite the political hijacking of the subject of Asian values, cultural differences are deep and persistent, and should not be allowed to be so politicized, or trivialized by political agendas” (p.108).

He made his argument by comparing European and Asian conceptions of the total experience of war. Europeans wrote about their wartime experiences, made films about them, and produced official histories. The people of Southeast and East Asia had vivid experiences of war but left no significant writings. Chinese history is littered with wars but only recalled in official histories, without personal heroism or feelings of the protagonists, or books on broad strategy. War was a matter for emperors, not soldiers or civilians. “Modernization may mean that armies learn the same tactics, use the same equipment, organize the same military units to march, sing, train and fight in similar ways. But it need not necessarily mean that there will concomitant change in attitudes towards soldiers and war, to the way political power is shared, or to the mindset about the proper of government and defence policy-making.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> WGW, “Historians and Early Foreign Relations,” originally published in *The Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* and then republished in *To Act is to Know, op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> WGW, “Chinese Values and Memories of Modern War,” a lecture delivered on 17 December 1998 and published in *Joining the Modern World: Inside and Outside China* (Singapore University Press, 2000), p. 126.

His May 2000 essay, "Joining the Modern World," examines Chinese efforts to be modern over a 140 year period. Where Fairbank emphasized interaction and accommodation, Wang pays more attention to the Chinese desire not just to cope with outside pressures but to align with them. There is an undercurrent of both a Confucian identity and a cosmopolitan one. He mockingly refers to "supposedly universal ideals", (p. 6) and echoes Fairbank argument about the sense of territorial integrity and Chinese unity that, despite "hostile calls for self-determination," mean that "No leader in China can afford to let any land go" (p. 11). He makes the case for mutual respect in US-China relations, "not because the Chinese now know how to behave like Americans, but because they are accepted as people who really want a peaceful environment for their country's development" (p. 11). And he sees increasing pluralism in the Chinese elite.<sup>20</sup>

Wang is most persuasive when looking at current Chinese thinking on world order and contemporary foreign policy. Where Fairbank was writing about a time when China was weak, in turmoil or belligerent, at most a power to be integrated peacefully into the international system, Wang's essays cover the period when China is strong, getting stronger, and a recognized influence on international norms and practices. Power, as Schwartz noted, matters. "If China were not rising," Wang writes, "China's cultural problems would only have been of interest to the Chinese themselves."<sup>21</sup>

In an era of China's fourth rise defined by its manufacturing and financial power, what he calls, economic global, China has turned a corner. "For the first time in its history," he wrote earlier this year, "China is reaching across the waves and shooting for the stars." The long-distance trade of the tribute system never challenged the Chinese imperial system but now China is transforming and being transformed by its economic connections in unprecedented way.<sup>22</sup>

In a recent essay he portrays China as having adapted very effectively to the U.N. and other institutions devised by the U.S. and its allies after World War II. As a "status quo" power in the U.N. system and other multilateral institutions, Chinese diplomats have mastered quickly their operations, not just obeying the rules but often more purist in traditional interpretations of matters of territoriality and national sovereignty (p. 22). In a 2005 chapter positively assessing China's role in Southeast Asian affairs, he refers to a "hard headed realism, free from outdated rhetoric, is necessary until China feels secure and confident enough to redefine itself distinctively in ways that the modern world would respect."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> WGW, "Joining the Modern World," a lecture delivered on 9 May 2000 and published in *Joining the Modern World, op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> WGW, "The Fourth Rise of China: Cultural Implications," *China: An International Journal*, September 2004, p. 311.

<sup>22</sup> WGW, "China Rises Again," *Yale Global*, 25 March 2009, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> WGW, "China and Southeast Asia: The Context of a New Beginning," in David Shambaugh, ed., *Power Shift: China and Asia's New Dynamics* (University of California Press, 2005), p. 198.

Two forces are at work. The first, similar to Fairbank's view, is a long tradition of *tian xia* strategic thinking dating back to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. . . "From inside looking out, it does seem that key Chinese leaders and thinkers take as their starting point the deep structure that gave shape to the civilization and state that came into being over 3,500 years ago." As he notes, "The Son of Heaven was not merely a king or emperor but also the symbol of the system of values that made the Chinese what they were" (pp. 23-24).

The second is an equally deep-rooted concept of change, and not necessarily progressive change. Not being progress-minded, "the Chinese have never viewed any political order as permanent." In the contemporary period "What China sees today is not an international order at all, least of all *the* international order, but merely the product of the struggles among the Great Powers of half a century ago" (p. 24). Cold War, bi-polarity, uni-polarity are transient moments. The result is that China supports the existing international system, embodied in its role as a member of the P5 in the UNSC, but only for so long as it suits its interests. It will support reform but only if it strengthens China's place in the world (p. 26).

He sees three strands in the existing world order that China seeks to strengthen: a balanced and restraining multipolar system; a rule-based global market economy; and a world of modern, rational and secular civilizations. The secularism it has in mind is based on a humanistic rationality compatible with the enlightenment histories experiences by the other members of the P5. And it is grafted on to communitarian and family-based values (p. 29).<sup>24</sup>

He and Zheng Yongnian develop the argument further in the introduction to the volume, claiming that the hegemonic understanding of the international order is breaking down quickly. In looking at the domestic sources of Chinese views, they stress the erosion of ideological legitimacy and the rise of nationalism. Referring to Fairbank's *China's World Order*, they emphasize the need for outside-in and inside-out interpretations of how views of world order reflect domestic order, especially in the areas of nationalism, sovereignty and civil-military relations. And they reinforce the argument that China wants "a balanced multi-polar world order capable of restraining the United States, but does not want to challenge the US itself." Chinese officials are generally comfortable with the world's principal international institutions while being unhappy with US dominance and an alliance system that they see will unravel in due course.<sup>25</sup>

Coeval with this long-term view is a self-confidence born of economic success and expanding political influence. China has a long way to go before its views on world order can be seen as credible or inspiring when compared to the values (if the not the practice) espoused by the United States and the West. China's communitarianism may

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<sup>24</sup> WGW, "China and the International Order: Some Historical Perspectives," in WGW and Zheng Yongnian, eds., *China and the New International Order* (Routledge, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> WGW and Zheng Yongnian, "Introduction," in *China and the New International Order*, *op. cit.*

not yet surpass the American dream. But it has already been successful in challenging some of the ideals that only a few years ago were seen by many Americans as universal. Fred Bergsten and his co-authors recently acknowledged this point when they wrote that “China’s rise in influence can be viewed as a prism through which the United States might look afresh at its own international principles and priorities, reaffirming many and reassessing others.”<sup>26</sup> China may be responding to Western demands, but it is doing so in its own way and at its own speed in what Wang calls “whatever is necessary to sustain civilized living and integrate modern ideas with the best of its own heritage.”<sup>27</sup>

Wang is clearly aware that China’s role is viewed with skepticism and hostility by many, partly because of its military modernization program but more importantly because it is not obeying ‘universal norms’ that include individual freedom, democracy and human rights protected by the rule of law. “Until the nation does so,” he states, “critics see China’s dramatic economic achievements as measures to strengthen an authoritarian state capitalism that keeps the regime indefinitely in power.”

Fairbank and Wang are of a similar mind in doubting that democracy and human rights as developed in the West are indeed universal. But their views on the Tiananmen Square episode reveal an important difference. A few days before his death, Fairbank analyzed Tiananmen as a replay of the traditional pattern, albeit before the cameras of the world. The absence of open expression had been endemic to a system in which a loyal opposition was impossible because “policy was part of the ruler’s moral conduct and so of his legitimacy.” The student protestors in Tiananmen Square were thus enemies. (p. 403). He remembered the episode in Taiwan in 1947 when KMT soldiers massacred several thousand demonstrators in Taipei and the millions of executions during the Communist consolidation of power, something he described as “the Chinese rulers’ atavistic off-with-his-head tradition.” (p. 423). He portrayed the demonstrators as traditional Chinese ritual and theatre to petition authorities. As their protest unfolded, “courting martyrdom in the public interest,” the CCP leadership saw them as an attack on their monopoly of power that had to be absolute and destroyed them (425).

Fairbank saw in the episode the “bankruptcy of the heritage left by the Imperial Confucianism of the Neo-Confucian establishment” and the suppression of even the modest pluralism required for civil society. The movement toward civil society in China may be a historical trend but was very unlikely to lead to the Western type of democracy “with free elections, representative government, and human rights guaranteed by law.” In one of the last sentences he would write, “We outsiders can offer China advice about the overriding need for human rights, but until we can set an example by curbing our own media violence and the drug and gun industries, we can hardly urge China to be more like us” (p. 432).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Fred Bergsten, *et. al. China’s Rise: Challenges and Opportunities* (Peter Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2008), p. 226.

<sup>27</sup> WGW, “China Arises Again,” *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> JKF, *China: A New History* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

Wang took a slightly different position. In a lecture, “Outside the Chinese Revolution,” in the fall of 1989 he drew a portrait of two characters in contemporary Chinese history: “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy,” noting the heavy emphasis on the former. He suggested that the two are inseparable: “Mr. Science needs freedom, to be free to think, to innovate, to challenge and criticize, free from obscurant bureaucrats and rigid authoritarian systems, no less than Mr. Democracy does.” Without calling for democracy now, he pointed to China’s need for “the democratic spirit” in a fair legal system; free speech; checks and balances to counter corruption and mal-administration; lawful to criticize those in power.<sup>29</sup>

A year later he pointed to the steady and admirable rise of China’s influence and international reputation in the decade after the Open Door of 1979 and how this was eroded by the outrage and disappointment that Tiananmen produced. Like Fairbank he saw it as a reversion back to the practice of one voice that brooks no challenge. But unlike Fairbank he expected more. “So long as China remains fearful of political change and insists on the constraints it has so far imposed on itself, it will not be able to allow its scientists, technologists, and other intellectuals, let alone all its people, to be free and creative to utilize the rich resources of the country efficiently...What could they not achieve if they became partners in the running of their own country instead of remaining submissive subjects?”<sup>30</sup>

The subjunctive nature of the question delicately conveyed the belief that, Wang could expect and predict the democratic path and the civil society that Fairbank could not foresee. For Wang, China’s future is shaped by its autocratic past but not irreversibly bound to it.

### **Indeterminate Relevance: A New School?**

Beyond the elegance and erudition of the Fairbank and Wang efforts to link contemporary Chinese thinking to that of its long past is the question of relevance. American international theory rarely gets excited by the insights of historians, Chinese historians in particular. Yet when I speak to senior government officials around the Pacific they most often point to historians as the academics who are most useful to them when difficult choices are to be made. In part this is because many of the issues with which they are dealing are bequests from earlier historical eras, for example Taiwan and territorial disputes. It may also be because when decision makers make decisions they too realize that they draw lessons from what their predecessors have done.

The indeterminacy of the relevance is a puzzle. A conception of order, however carefully drawn, does not easily translate into a doctrine or operational strategy. Other sources of

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<sup>29</sup> WGW, “Outside the Chinese Revolution,” a lecture delivered on 15 May 1989, published in the *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* in 1990 and re-published in his *The Chineseness of China: Selected Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 257.

<sup>30</sup> WGW, “1989 and Chinese History,” first published as “China: 1989 in Perspective” in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1990* and then republished in his *To Act is to Know: Chinese Dilemmas* (Times Media, Eastern University Press, 2003), p. 51.

information are required to increase the strength of explanations for specific actions or prescriptions for constructive action. As Wang has noted, China's past, however skillfully dissected, does not stand still. The amalgam of heritage and modernity, continuity and change, is inherently unstable and infinitely complex. And in contemporary China, the force of globalization and the structure of China's market economy make it increasingly difficult for Chinese leaders to escape the liberal ideology that accompanies capitalism.

Yet indeterminacy can also be a virtue. Rather than responding to specific events, intentions or statements, big picture history can reveal a deeper pattern. Americans or Canadians who interact with Chinese officials are increasingly impressed with their professionalism, their preparation and their ability to learn. At the same time they often encounter ideas or constraints that seem to come from a different world. Cultural differences do matter and understanding the deeper sources of these differences is an intellectual and political necessity.

Perhaps the strongest message that links Fairbank and Wang is the view that not only do cultural differences and history matter, they need hard and careful study, and they are a necessary part of an effective path to managing international problems. Their enduring wisdom is that the West and China can live together even without complete convergence, that engagement is the best general strategy, and that deeper knowledge and empathy are the key to mutual survival.

The organizers of the conference have asked us to address these issues from the perspective of whether or not there is a need to develop a distinctive theory of international relations reflective of Chinese experience, material circumstances and vantage point. Is a Chinese school of international affairs needed?

It is perhaps not surprising that the question is being raised in Singapore. The aggregation of talent at universities and research institute in Singapore has been formidable in the last decade. Wang Gungwu's East Asia Institute is just one of the impressive organizations aiming to combine top flight scholarship, views from around the world and especially in Asia. The writings by Wang, Kishore Mahbubani, Tommy Koh, and Barry Desker, among others, have caught attention around the Pacific. The China factor is a major part in all of their thinking.

For example, in a series of recent speeches and articles Barry Desker has raised the prospect of an emerging "Beijing Consensus" as a way to capture Chinese views on global order and their interaction with prevailing American ones. The Washington Consensus" has emphasized elected democracies, sanctity of individual political and civil rights, support for human rights, the promotion of free rights and open markets, recognition of the doctrine of humanitarian intervention. By contrast the Beijing Consensus centres on the leadership role of the authoritarian party state (good governance rather than electoral democracy), technocratic approaches to government, the significance of social rights and obligations, reassertion of the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, coupled with support for freer markets coupled with stronger regional and

international institutions. He is not triumphalist in proclaiming the inevitability or desirability of the Beijing Consensus, nor does he see it as premised on the decline of the West and the rise of the East. He rejects the idea of an inevitable conflict with a rising China and instead sees possibility of the emergence of shared values reflecting alternative philosophical traditions on individual and state rights.<sup>31</sup>

China may find it useful to line up with Western powers but is not always in agreement on matters such as how to stop proliferation, deal with civil conflict, promote, manage maritime issues, or shape global and regional institutions, much less manage the thorny matters of Taiwan, Tibet, Myanmar, North Korea or the Sudan.

There is no indication that officials in Beijing are promoting the idea of a Beijing consensus, though it does run parallel to many of the ideas in the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence and the more recent New Security Concept. And there are a host of American and British writers who are overtly critical of the values and ideals that underlie China's approach. Howard French, for example, states that China has no real friendships and no global ideal, and that "no nation of any import seems likely to copy China's model of government, nor even, despite its many successes, China's supposed economic miracle." The Chinese are "ceding the question of universal values to the West."<sup>32</sup> James Mann describes it as a threat to liberal democracy and "a blueprint for authoritarians clinging to power." And recently *The Economist* observed that "China's record as a citizen of the world is strikingly threadbare."

But why Desker's perspective has vitality is that it resonates with a great deal of thinking in Asia, including in academic circles in China, and draws upon some of the fundamental insights of historians like Fairbank and Wang. For a China that itself was the upholder of a universalism for two thousand years, its confrontation with the current international order puts universalism on a new intellectual and political footing. The key propositions are that the international order is not natural or perfect, but the creation of dominant powers. When Robert Zoellick and others ask whether China is a "responsible stakeholder", the answer that now makes political sense is "who defines responsible" and "on what authority?" Is Desker right in his assumption about the possibility of convergence and synthesis, a premise behind ideas like "the G-2"? And is Wang correct in his views that China is transforming the world at the same time that the world is transforming China?

I doubt that Fairbank would have seen the need or a value for a distinctively or exclusively Chinese theory of international relations. Whatever his reservations about the

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<sup>31</sup> Barry Desker, "Why War is Unlikely in Asia," RSIS Commentaries 71/2008, 27 June 2008; and his earlier lecture on the same topic at the University of Sydney in July 2007 available on-line at [http://ciss.econ.usyd.edu.au/events/2007/Desker\\_Hintze\\_Lecture\\_07.pdf](http://ciss.econ.usyd.edu.au/events/2007/Desker_Hintze_Lecture_07.pdf). See also Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> Howard French, "'China First' Approach: A Missed Opportunity," *International Herald Tribune*, 19 August 2005; James Mann, "China's Dangerous Model of Power," *Washington Post*, 27 May 2007; "How China Sees the World," *The Economist*, 21 March 2009, p. 13.



universalism of the American experience, he did believe in what we now might call a trans-national society or epistemic community of China scholars. For many years he lived in the hope of meeting every China specialist in the world and he found ways to connect many of them to his Harvard enterprise. That said, like Hans Morgenthau, Fairbank rejected the idea of an objective social science or a single theory. He believed in multiple realities, proximate progress, and he valued the differences in opinion, methods and conclusions that came from scholars in different parts of the world.

We are fortunate to be able to turn to Professor Wang for his own ideas.

New theories are always needed and it is essential in the world of cosmopolitan scholarship that the purveyors of one approach be as aware as possible of the purveyors of others. That is certainly what we expect from our graduate students doing qualifying examinations.

The rapid development of academic studies in China, the power shift to Asia, and the emergence of global China make it necessary to ask the kind of bold questions that the organizers have posed to us. If the growth of Chinese capacity and power can be compared to the United States in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, does every rising power not only shape international order to meet its interests but inject its values into the mix? Sixty years ago Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, Walter Lippman and others grafted a new brand of realism onto the American traditions of idealism, isolationism and exceptionalism to produce a set of ideas, guiding principles, and an entire intellectual movement, that transformed not only US policy but the study and practice of international relations around the world.

Behind the self-confidence and success of China's involvement in international institutions in the past two decades has been hard work and new thinking combined with new structures within government that are more institutionalized, more decentralized and better connected to expert groups, the public and the media. And the quality of diplomacy and diplomats are deeply impressive. Two American authors correctly claim that "Today's China is certainly smarter and more sophisticated—but not necessarily kinder or gentler."<sup>33</sup>

China has had rather more experience in managing and leading world order, albeit in a pre-global context. Whether or not a distinctive Chinese theory or school is emerging, won't it?

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<sup>33</sup> Evan S. Medeiros and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's New Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2003; David M. Lampton, *Three Faces of Chinese Power*, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-28; and Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford University Press, 2007), Ch. 5, "The Responsible Power," pp. 105-39.