Harmonious world

As Prof. Sha’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 “duality” in favor of “unity” rather than advocating diverse opinions. China’s domestic policy also embraces diversity; the country is China’s future is the world’s future.

China’s domestic policy also embraces diversity; the country is officially a multi-national nation-state that unites 55 minority nationalities with the Han majority 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 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 cultures.”

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One of the results of this movement is a marked increase of marriages between Chinese and non-Chinese people. Alongside Sha’s countless multinational corporations, there are more than 3000 mixed-race marriages every year. As these people 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.”

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.

William A. Callahan

Right: Lou Jing (right) and her mother (center) appearing in 2009 as a singing contestant on the “Got Oriental Angel” television show.

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What does Great Harmony mean here? Descriptions are generally vague; but Pan Wei's detailed outline in *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 a 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 “divison,” 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)).

**Darwinism “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 Darwin; this book also stresses the importance of social relations in global ordering.

Kang's goal of universal equality and global unity is laudable; but it has its serious costs. Rather than harmony with diversity, his Great Harmony world promotes an unhealthy 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 “whites” 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-analitohism.

**Uniquely China**

In many ways, the netizens’ harsh comments about Lou Jing echo Kang’s utopian plans. In a similar vein, Liu Mingxiu’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 Wei’s Great Harmony world promotes a global society; the China model sees international politics as a battle of civilizations (which can easily be refrigerated 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 universalist” of liberal democracy, he simultaneously asserts an essentialized 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 politiics from “critics” who are all labelled as “foreign.”

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Notes


8 *One world, one dream*. Beijing: Zhongyang bianshi chubanshe; Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee, 2005.
