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Rediscovering China: Interdisciplinary Perspectives
Introduction

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The fact that China has been on the rise since the beginning of the 1990s has attracted wide attention from the outside world. Different people have responded differently. International scholarship as well as the mass media have paid particular attention to the Chinese economy, and to the country's politics and society, in the context of globalization. Along the way, various versions of 'Chinese myth' or 'Chinese phantasy' have seen the light, depicting the country as if it were really the most prosperous country in the world. As a matter of fact, this is far from the truth. Thus, it is not surprising that some far-sighted Western intellectuals have found that behind its seemingly prosperous appearance, there are lots of problems which, if not adequately solved, prevent China's future sustainable development. As a domestic Chinese intellectual and humanities scholar myself, I have also found numerous problems behind the apparent prosperity.

So what is the real picture about China? It is beyond doubt that China, together with the United States, is one of the biggest winners of ongoing globalization, not only economically and politically, but also socially and culturally, and that this is why Western scholars and mass media focus on a rising China from different angles. Some observers, such as Doug Guthrie, in associating China with globalization, describe how China, in its quarter-century long rise, has shifted 'from communism to capitalism,', and how it has transformed itself from a 'desperately poor nation into a country possessing one of the fastest-growing and largest economies in the world,' which is certainly 'a story of the forces of globalization.'[1] And Guthrie points out pertinently, after a vivid description of the marvellous development of China's major cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu and Chongqing:

> All of these facts and images are, by now, well known. Indeed, the headlines announcing 'China's Century,' 'The China Challenge,' 'The China Syndrome,' 'Buying up the World,' 'America's Fear of China,' 'China Goes Shopping,' 'Can China be Fixed?' and many others, have thundered across the covers of such magazines as *Business Week*, *the Economist*, *Forbes*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and many other major publications.[2]

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Although the above largely also holds true for how many Chinese themselves think about their country, this represents only one side of China since the country has been developing in an uneven way over the past few decades. China's modernization should be viewed as a direct consequence of globalization, in the process of which a metamorphosed form of Chinese modernity, or a sort of alternative modernity with Chinese characteristics, has come into being, which has not only contributed to the project of global modernity but also largely influenced the process of China's modernization in an overall way.

As we know, China is one of the oldest and largest countries, and has the largest population in the world, and it has – even in its reform era – been developing in an uneven way. In Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and some other coastal cities, postmodern symptoms appear as if they were Western developed metropolises. But many of the medium-sized cities in the interior part of the country are still modernizing themselves toward the goal of a real modernity. In those frontier areas and ethnic minority regions, pre-modern conditions still exist even while they are engaged in the process of modernization. So modernity is still an incomplete project, both economically and culturally. In his popular and influential book, Guthrie also raises questions such as: will China become more democratic? Will the government become more serious about protecting human rights and creating a transparent legal system? How will China's explosive growth impact both East Asia and the larger global economy? It should be recognized that Guthrie's description, largely based on his personal experience in China and long meticulous sociological observation from the outside, is comparatively precise and fair and free from prejudices. After analysing some of the problems involved, he still believes that a 'form of democracy' of Chinese characteristics 'will emerge in China, but for reasons that are not well understood by Western politicians and pundits'.[3]

Guthrie's observations largely pertain to the period preceding 2012. Other people, such as for example Daniel Vukovich, who grew up in the United States but for some time now has been teaching in the University of Hong Kong, love China and therefore show themselves very optimistic about China's development. They even marvel at its dramatic change and rapid development.

> Why China, then? Let us begin by assuming the antagonisms and epistemological challenges – such as orientalism – that have subtended the China–West relationship for, say, three hundred years... So, too, let us recall that 'our' relationship to China is overwhelmingly an economic (and political) one. China's rise, its status as the 'next' superpower, the manufacturer of the world, the new Asian hegemon, the world-historical consumer market, the buyer of last resort for U.S. dollars, the second largest economy – and so forth.[4]

Frankly, in recognizing China's fast growth and prosperity, they tend to overlook that China is such a large country that there is still a striking contrast between rich and poor, between urban and rural areas, and between coastal and interior cities, etc. Thus, the Chinese project of modernity or modernization is still an incomplete one with lots of problems, social, political, environmental and cultural, to be solved by both the Chinese government as well as global governance if China is really the

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biggest winner of globalization. China, as it portrays itself in official statements, on the whole is still a developing country moving towards a well-off society.

Still others, while recognizing that it is really a miracle that China, 'one of the globe's poorest countries' before its reforms, has 'become a booming economy – second biggest in the world'[5] in the current century, point out that the country also faces some severe 'challenges':

> While major cities boast gleaming new infrastructures and attendant urban amenities that equal or surpass those of the advanced industrial world, much of the rural interior remains mired in grinding poverty. The affluence of new urban middle and upper classes, flush with the proceeds from lucrative real estate deals, is offset by the indigence of the millions of migrants who labor in their midst.[6]

To these people, since China is unique in many aspects, they 'would be foolhardy to disregard or discount China's efforts to resolve global problems' simply because they 'predict that its political system is someday destined to disappear.'[7]

We may agree or disagree with the different views of China just sketched, but not with the fact that they voice certain impressions and expectations of China from their own perspectives, mostly economic, political and social. As a Chinese humanities scholar mostly active in literary and cultural studies, I have, over the past few decades, published extensively on China in the process of globalization, especially from a cultural and literary perspective. So in this special issue, next to offering my own view again, I will also collect a number of views on China from both domestic and foreign scholars, and this mainly from a cultural perspective so that a relatively comprehensive picture about China will emerge for a broad reading public that may know little about this ancient and legendary country. This is one of the reasons why I have invited my colleague and friend John Aldrich, who is a leading social scientist on China as well as on international studies, to co-edit this special issue of the *European Review*.

Writers and intellectuals outside of China have long been attracted to write about this mysterious country in literary works, mostly so in fiction and other prose works. These people, however, have also long held many false views of China, due to various biases such as those famously critiqued as *Orientalism*. To some it has been the once-powerful 'Middle Kingdom', while to others it was the 'sick man of East Asia', poor, weak, and far from the centre of world civilization. These were of course old stories about China. But in either case, these biased and incomplete views have contributed to the surprise often expressed in observing the rapid and dramatic development of China today in this globalized world. Even more importantly, many are puzzled about what to make of the newly emerging China. Will its rise threaten the world, or at least the major developed powers of today? How will its bilateral relations with the US, with Europe, with other parts of the world unfold? Beyond its new-found prosperity, what is this new China really like? Is it so very different from the images of China already held in the Western world and in the major international media? These are all questions that have long puzzled us, and to which we try to give at last some partial answers in this special issue.

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The current issue, then, will serve as a vehicle to explore how China has been constructed and reconstructed in various disciplines in the Western academy. Then, we will look at how China has changed, how it is currently embedded in the contemporary globalizing world, and where it is likely to go. Unlike the special issue dedicated to China, recently published in *Daedalus*, edited by Elizabeth J. Perry, and which adopted a largely social sciences perspective, our issue will focus more on the humanities, even though some essays also deal with social issues from a social sciences perspective.

As we all know, China is one of the most ancient civilizations in the world, and in the past it contributed a lot to world civilization. Hence, it should not come as a surprise that the country again has come to play an increasingly central role in the global economy and in international affairs more generally. But to me, as well as to various contributors to this issue, the true strength of China lies in its culture, with its long history and splendid heritage. When the poetry of the Tang dynasty was at its most beautiful and influential point in the history of Chinese literature, European literature was still in its dark ages. Today, with the Western powers suffering a severe financial crisis, the Chinese economy continues to grow rapidly, although in recent years it too has slowed a bit, yet it still surpassed Japan's at the end of 2010 to become the world's second largest economy. While in Euro-American universities many humanities programs and projects are cut for financial reasons, the Chinese government is still investing huge amounts of money to build world-class universities, also in the humanities, and to boost its language teaching and cultural dissemination abroad. But as mentioned before, in China, with its vast territory and the biggest population in the world, there still pertain stark differences between the North and South, between the coastal areas and the interior, and between the urban and rural areas. If modernity in China is still an incomplete project, then it is also incomplete economically and culturally. In the past few years, the country has witnessed the grand scene of the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 and the prosperous Shanghai World Expo in 2010. These two events have certainly made China much better known to the outside world and attracted many visitors from different parts of the world. And yet, according to official statements voiced by China's leaders and the country's mass media, China continues to be a developing country, emerging from third-world status in much of its countryside. It is therefore no surprise that China projects different and contradictory images in much of the West.

To counterbalance the ideas that many people may still have of China, grounded in the writings of Pearl Buck and perhaps reminiscent of the worst of the Cultural Revolution, the various essays that follow offer recent research results. Aldrich, and Jie Lu and Liu Kang, on the basis of statistics and hard data demonstrate that China is still a poor and backward country, one that cannot be compared with the successes of the Western nations in spite of its splendid cultural heritage and long tradition of civilization. Indeed, the recent rise of China may generate another false image of a 'miracle' in the Western media.

Other people may well hold that China reached its prime long ago, in much earlier historical eras. For them, it is the survival of the 'Middle Kingdom' that is the real

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miracle, one that cannot be reproduced in any other country. Some overseas Chinese intellectuals and humanities scholars always have been confident that, as one of the oldest ancient civilized countries in the world, Chinese literature and philosophy, particularly as embodied in Confucianism, hold lessons for the contemporary world.

Napoleon allegedly said that China is just like a sleeping lion. Once it awakens, it will shake the earth. For a long time, people were just puzzled whether this was a true story or a false one. But now it has been proven to be true. At the meeting celebrating the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Sino-French diplomatic relations, Chinese president Xi Jinping publicly stated that 'China is a sleeping lion. When it awakens, the entire world will be shaken for it.' According to Xi, China's image of a lion has significantly influenced the fundamental view of the European intellectuals in the 19th century about China. But, says Xi, 'it is a peaceful, intimate and civilized lion.'[8] As Xi stressed, now the giant really has woken and has risen rapidly before the eyes of the world. In this sense, the rise of China will form a challenge for the West and for the rest of the world.

Although these false and incomplete images may prevent us from objectively understanding the China we are now confronting, its people, and its culture, they at least inform those outside of the country that there is a giant in the distant orient and that its name is China. In the past, it tempted outsiders to imagine it in various ways and thus to make lots of myths about it. Now it has stimulated the outsiders to make careful studies of it. In order for the world to know more about the past and present of China, its economy, political system and culture, we have invited a number of leading scholars both in the West and in China to contribute to this special issue so as to help a broader readership to 'rediscover' the country, its present social, political and economic reforms and cultural transformation, from different disciplines or perspectives. As I have said above, our focus is more on humanities although some articles do touch upon social issues.

This special issue is divided into three parts, dealing with present issues from three different perspectives. In the first part, we find three articles focusing on theoretical issues. Tsui and Berman find that China 'does not fit neatly into the binary pattern implied by the model of Orientalism associated with post-colonial theory' since the cultural relationship between China and the West is more complicated than the established model of Orientalism posits. After an analysis of the so-called Boxer Rebellion, they suggest that the 'rediscovery of China may, perhaps, have something to do with convergences in the economic systems, although China and the West remain very far apart in terms of institutional structures.' If Tsui and Berman's perspective is that of outsiders viewing China, Zhang Longxi in his article tries to observe China from a Chinese perspective. Having challenged the very notions of China and Chineseness raised by Western scholars, Zhang offers a Chinese response from Ge Zhaoguang, who has published extensively in Chinese and whose works undoubtedly will gain greater recognition and renown outside of China once more translations of them become available. Lu's article also starts to review and assess recent attempts to revisit and revise the position of China in the configuration of global modernity, after which he offers his view of an alternative modernity as one of global modernity or modernities.

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To him, such debates on China's position in the world or global modernity are 'efforts to chart out a cultural and theoretical landscape that does not easily fit in existing models of Western cultural studies' as these studies 'are often based on the colonial and postcolonial experiences of the Anglophone and Francophone world.'

In the second part, three articles focus on the new image China assumes in various outsiders' eyes. Aldrich and Jie Lu, drawing on data from public surveys, address the question of how the public in the US, Latin America, and East Asia sees an emerging China. Liu Kang, likewise using survey data, this time also including Chinese people's own views, researches global public opinion on China. His article is part of a more ambitious and comprehensive project. Hornung, on the basis of some objective evidence, discusses the relationship between Maoism and postmodernism, a subject seldom touched upon by domestic Chinese scholars but very much present in international humanities scholarship.

The three articles of the third part concentrate on the role of the humanities in China's relationship with the outside world. Wang Ning discusses how, during China's reform era, the economy has been developing by leaps and bounds while the humanistic spirit has largely been lost. So he calls for strengthening humanities education, with a comparative study of humanities education in the old Tsinghua University before 1949, and at Tsinghua now as a special case, through which more talented personnel will be produced. Giulianotti, examining the interrelations of China, globalization, and soft power from the perspective of an outside observer of Chinese culture and sports, looks at how the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games have helped heighten China's soft power. Cheng Aimin, both as a school leader and a professor teaching Chinese to foreigners, informs us how China attaches more and more importance to the teaching of Chinese in the global context and what are the challenges and strategies involved in spreading the Chinese language and culture worldwide.

It is our hope that readers who perhaps do not know much about China but who are interested in knowing more about this old oriental but recently emerging country will get a comparatively comprehensive picture about China from the present issue of the *European Review*.

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8. See Huang Xiang (2014) Xi Jinping: Zhongguo zhetou shizi xingle. (Xi Jinping: China the Lion Awakens), *Dongfang zaobao* (*Oriental Morning Post*), 29 March 2014.

About the Author

Wang Ning is Changjiang Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Tsinghua University and Zhiyuan Chair Professor of Humanities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. He has held numerous guest professorships or fellowships at leading Euro-American universities, including Utrecht, Oslo, Cambridge, Göttingen, Yale, Duke, UIUC and Washington. He was elected to the Academy of Latinity in 2010, and to the Academia Europaea in 2013 as a foreign member. He has published dozens of books in Chinese and authored two in English: *Globalization and Cultural Translation* (2004), and *Translated Modernities: Literary and Cultural Perspectives on Globalization and China* (2010). Next to many articles in Chinese he has also published extensively in English in *New Literary History*, *Critical Inquiry*, *boundary 2*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Neohelicon*, *ARIEL*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Narrative*, *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology, Semiotica, Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, and *European Review*.

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