

# Harmony, unity and diversity in China's world<sup>1</sup>

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

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## Harmonious world

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

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

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

## Everyday-life differences

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

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

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

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

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

## Harmony-with-diversity or Great Harmony

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

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

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

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

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

According to the Xinhua News Agency, harmony-with-diversity was the Chinese idiom that Premier Wen Jiabao "most frequently used" on his visit to the U.S. in 2003.<sup>5</sup> Although Wen was still repeating the phrase during his visits to America and the Arab League in 2009, harmony-with-diversity has decreased in popularity since the mid-2000s. Hu Jintao's "harmonious world" appears to have replaced "harmony-with-diversity" as a way of describing Beijing's dealings with different nations, and the "China's Peaceful Development" White Paper (2011) even retranslates "harmony-with-diversity" as "unity without uniformity."<sup>6</sup> Each of these phrases is used to tell foreigners two things: China respects diversity among nations, and it demands that foreign critics likewise respect Chinese "difference".

## China's future is the world's future

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

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

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

*"Difference" is the key theme in Chinese discussions about an emerging Sino-centric world order, but it does not necessarily entail diversity since most Chinese voices advocate "unity" as their primary value.*

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



Left: Kang Youwei (1858–1927).