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Approaching Chinese Freedom: A Study in Absolute and Relative Values

David KELLY

Abstract: The rise of stability preservation to dominance in the political order coincided with a highly charged debate over "universal values" and a closely related discussion of a "China Model". This paper analyses the critique of universal values as a "wedge issue" that is used to pre-empt criticism of the party-state by appealing to nationalism and cultural essentialism. Taking freedom as a case in point of a universal value, it shows that, while more developed in the West, freedom has an authentic Chinese history with key watersheds in the late Qing reception of popular sovereignty and the ending of the Maoist era. The work of Wang Ruoshui, Qin Hui and Xu Jilin display some of the resources liberals now bring to "de-wedging" universal values, not least freedom. They share a refusal to regard "Western" values as essentially hostile to Chinese.

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Keywords: China, freedom, values, statism, historicism, Qin Hui, Xu Jilin

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Terms of Debate

An ideological controversy over "universal values" loomed in the intellectual world in the twenty-first century, exposing deep-seated fault lines in contemporary Chinese thought. The discussion has a number of complicating features, including the fact that while several authorities in the Communist Party of China (CPC) hierarchy have spoken as if an opposition between "universal" and "Chinese" values is to be taken for granted, others, including former Premier Wen Jiabao, have expressed what amounts to dissenting opinions, both affirming universal values and denying that the latter in any way oppose the values Chinese people are considered to espouse (*Economist* 2010). The discussion – which at time of writing appears to remain in play (Buckley 2013; Guo 2013) – has often been frustratingly abstract as well, with little attention to what the term "universal values" refers to in detail. At times they are stated to be spuriously universal, to be particular values of a certain geopolitical power (the West, understood to be under American hegemony) masquerading as universal. At other times, the term is used as though it were a euphemism for something else; much as someone might speak of fundamentalism when strictly meaning Islam. In such cases, it is pointless to ask for a list of the universal values.

The discussions that interest us here are of an intermediary kind, taking a conceptual framing of values seriously and reflecting on "Chinese value outlooks" (中国价值观, *Zhongguo jiazhiguan*) as a field of reflection and rational choice. In this part of the overall controversy, we find lists of the values in questions. With slight variations, the list includes democracy, freedom, rule of law, human rights and civil society. In our view, they are packaged together as "universal values" largely for rhetorical effect; they are not always comfortable bedfellows, having inner relations of tension and conflict. Freedom and democracy may run on different tracks, as shown by "illiberal democracies" like Singapore; human rights may apply to minorities otherwise neglected under majority rule. Rule of law is theoretically achievable with little democracy or freedom, and so on. For all this realm of value conflict, however, there are powerful relations of overlap and mutual entailment – the subject of an enormous literature that crosses many disciplinary boundaries. The study attempted here deals with freedom only, without pre-empting judgments about these inner connections. Left aside for discussion for another occasion are the following issues:

- Human rights is a term of art in law; interpretation is often very technical and, like democracy, is the focus of much argument that tends to have a life of its own.
- The CPC is signatory to relevant international conventions and also claims in the 1982 Constitution to be a democracy, albeit of special type.
- Civil society is generally seen as an empirical datum rather than a value; it is, however, currently (2013) a banned word on *weibo* (微薄), hence as a value.

Freedom (自由, *ziyou*) is a prominent example of a value to which claims of universality are attached. However, insofar as the PRC Constitution makes little claim for a special "Chinese" freedom, it often appears that Chinese people are less disturbed by a lack of freedom than by a lack of democracy. It is *ziyou* that will concern us here. (In the Constitution, *jiefang* (解放) means "liberation" – that is, of the Chinese nation from alien colonising and conquering powers, and of the Communist state from Guomindang oppression. It lacks many of the connotations of *ziyou* and is not discussed here).

The universal values controversy was at its height between 2008 and 2011, when the global financial crisis strengthened belief in a putative China Model in official quarters and (what will be discussed below as historicism) a view that China, a nation state with its own destiny, need only march to its own drum, taking heed of no other. Since then, the transition to a new administration under Xi Jinping, prefaced by the Bo Xilai affair, has lowered the temperature and moderated the tone of exceptionalism.

The debate on universal and relative values functions in Chinese political life is likely to return, however, because it functions very much like the renowned "wedge issues" found in other political systems – abortion or gun control in the United States, for instance. Such terms evoke sentiments that sections of society, not least the political elite, respond to pre-emptively; it disposes them to take positions on other issues, regardless of logical relationships or their lack thereof. "Knowing" that freedom is a universal value, for example, may dissuade political elites from supporting other projects – such as state-owned enterprise (SOE) reform – of those who subscribe to it.

This paper will introduce the key ideas of a number of Chinese scholars who have developed rational objections to this tendency and

who linked in various ways to the "New Enlightenment" that emerged in the 1980s:

Wang Ruoshui (1926–2002)

Editor of the theory page of the *People's Daily* in the Mao era, Wang was a convert to "Marxist humanism" after the Cultural Revolution who sought to reintroduce the "liberatory" values found in classical Marxism, dissolving Stalinist accretions.

Qin Hui (1953–)

A professor at Tsinghua University, Qin's home field is agrarian history. Using a broad comparative frame of reference, he emerged in the 1990s as a liberal theorist of social justice. As a public intellectual he is generally considered among the most influential in China.

Xu Jilin (1957–)

Professor of History at East China Normal University, Xu boasts a large following on *weibo*, a Twitter-like social media platform. He is an intellectual historian whose extensive publication list concentrates on contemporary intellectual trends.

Values: Chinese, Asian and Universal

This article is concerned with freedom, not as an empirically measurable fact or policy outcome, but "as a value". The former two aspects may, and often do, occur in the same contexts; to be clear, a value as understood here is a "text" (a socially identifiable unit of meaning, that can be labelled and explained as such) to which people subscribe. Importantly, once such a value exists, it can be transferred to new contexts, referred to as a reason for actions of individuals and – not least when incorporated into policy prescriptions – of social collectivities.

The study of Chinese values, their relativity or universality, faces some issues of procedure. Scholars have their points of origin and vantage and are hard put to detach themselves from deeply held convictions, not so much of the superiority of the West – common enough though this is – as of its centrality, its normality. Is detaching or decentring ourselves even possible? Language figures in the arguments against it. The domination of global discourse by Western languages, English in particu-

lar, comes in for much criticism. This is taken further by Chinese critics and editorialists who speak of *huayu quan* (话语权, "rights over discourse" or "discursive power", depending on how one renders the ambiguous term *quan*). China is said to be lacking discursive power/ rights. This charge, while difficult to test, has some properties one may note, one of which is self-referentiality. "Discursive power" originates from Western discourse and thus exemplifies itself. This is not a trivial issue, as an examination of the concept of values, needed for our later discussion, demonstrates.

It would be difficult to formulate a social theory, in the sense of a framework for comparing and interpreting social phenomena, which failed to account for values. Unlike plants with their tropisms, animals with their instincts, or computers with their programmes, human beings are oriented to values that are inscrutable without insight into their governing frames of reference or, in another formulation, their discursive formations. "Value" is a European word, and the modern technical expression in Chinese (价值, *jiazhi*) is clearly borrowed from a Meiji-era Japanese rendition of European usages. While the idea may be readily expressible in Chinese using classical expressions, neither the Asian values doctrine nor the contemporary critique of universal values in the PRC actually bothers to do so.

Freedom as a Chinese Value: A Brief History

A series of historical and cultural developments predispose many in China to respond to "freedom" as a wedge issue. The Chinese state of ancient times was marked by a distinctive hierarchical social structure that included slavery. Where slavery in other societies has produced explicit values of freedom that contrast with the slave status (Patterson 1992), things developed otherwise in China (Kelly 1998). It is arguable that a value system – implicit in early Daoism – containing many of the elements of freedom emerged in later times, and converged even more with "modern freedom" following the introduction of Buddhism; the *liangmin* (良民, good people) of Tang times were evidently manumitted slaves. Nonetheless, no conversion of these implicit ideas into a concrete political agenda – a political movement of the *liangmin*, for example – took place in imperial times. This is consistent with widespread ideas of Oriental despotism. Within China, it helps feed a perception that freedom is a foreign imposition.

Other factors, less historical than political, add to this. Abstract freedom has in modern times been shaped by diverse agendas. Politicians in the United States specialise in converting universal freedom into a term of American exceptionalism (the "land of the free"). Liberalism of the Hayekian school similarly interprets juridical freedom as entailing a market economy. Neoliberalism further associates freedom with limitation of the welfare state, and so on. In China, Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought (MLM) often suggested that reference to freedom as a policy objective was a sure sign that it was in the service of a right-wing agenda.

These factors help build the case against freedom as a universal value. There are other facts to be considered, however. A major watershed occurred in China around 1895, when Japan's humiliation of the Qing dynasty triggered an abandonment of dynastic concepts in favour of popular sovereignty for many (Yang 2012; Yuan, Zhang, and Wu 2013). Thinkers like Yan Fu (1853–1921) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) developed a Chinese liberalism, seeking national salvation through the growth of a free citizenry. Despite the frequent retreat of such liberals to conservative positions, their acceptance of liberalism in various forms was part of a sea change in political culture, resulting in the Republic (1911–1949) with its many juridical and social advances despite its failure.

Equally important has been the impact of MLM, culminating in the Cultural Revolution. This produced conditions of servitude for many people, encouraging them – despite the lack of supporting traditions for this, as outlined above – to crystallise freedom as a universal value.

We leave aside a wide range of intellectual expressions that support this argument. We conclude this section with the comment that history is littered with the migration of values from one cultural frame of reference to another; this capacity for transposition is part of what constitutes a value. Even if absolutely no trace of freedom as a value were to be found in five millennia of Chinese history – on the face of it a dubious proposition – this in itself says nothing about potential impacts of later historical forces and events.

Freedom, Universal Values and the China Model

We turn now to the recent debates and related intellectual expressions. A case in point is Qin Hui (b. 1953), professor of economic history at Tsinghua University with a clear line of intellectual descent from liberal

traditions (Chinese and foreign) and influential in China today specifically as a social democrat. Freedom is a dominant theme in his work, supported by comparative historical criticism.

Qin finds "shoots of freedom" as a value in traditional rural society. They existed in Chinese tradition, but failed to be "developed". There are ways in which this development may be attempted – set out in Qin's "common baseline" (Qin 2013) – though the road is long and the outcome uncertain. And while collective truths and collective freedoms may at some point be achievable values within this project, and may indeed aid in constructing uniquely Chinese contributions to world culture, they cannot be allowed to proceed on the assumption of a required self-immolation, a surrender of individual spiritual freedom, a harmonious servility:

> Americans found it incomprehensible when told that the idea of freedom many people formed after the "Cultural Revolution" came not from Hayek, Rawls, etc., but from Marx. This in fact was the case. In the era of reform and opening up, our generation […] of course understood Hayek, Rawls, and other intellectual sources. But in the era of "exiting the Cultural Revolution", many people's "spiritual independence, and ideas of freedom" came mainly from Marx, just as Chen Yinque's "independence of spirit and freedom of thought" came from somewhere "between [late Qing reformers] Zeng Guofan and Zhang Zhidong". My "ideas of freedom" continued to deepen with time and social experience, but in terms of remembering "intellectual resources", it was in fact very difficult for new ones later entering my mind to overcome those previous ones. Today, when "trendy lefties" use voguish foreign quotations as a stick to beat other people, I can't help but think: "What do *you* know about Marx!" (Qin 2010. NB: unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by David Kelly).

The New Enlightenment of the 1980s was briefly united in a consensus that China needed to liberalise and reform politically as well as economically. As economic reform created new interest groups, new winners and losers, this consensus came under pressure and was eventually to disintegrate (Xu 2007). The critical intellectual front divided into broadly left and right camps.

Qin Hui became influential in this context. Having in the 1970s been a "sent-down youth", a rural cadre and member of the Communist Party, he had seen the Maoist era from the perspective of its grittiest, frequently violent grassroots perspective – somewhat unlike the perspective of an elite establishment intellectual like Wang Ruoshui. Be that as it

may, Qin was by the late 1980s a subscriber to the values of Wang's New Enlightenment. After the fall of Zhao Ziyang and the ensuing disintegration described by Xu Jilin, he took sides with the liberal camp, espousing their values, signing their petitions and engaging in polemics with their enemies. Over the last two decades, it has been "new Left" thinkers such as Wang Hui who have attracted the most attention, especially on the international stage (Leonard 2008). The liberals, as supporters of market reform, were easily confused with neoclassical economists, who seemed, in international terms, tiresomely familiar and lacking in mystique. Qin Hui would eventually target these "mainstream" economists, who had become a powerful pressure group in policy circles, mercilessly exposing the fundamental category errors they committed and the social injustice they supported in applying doctrines such as the institutionalist theory of "transaction costs" to a transitional society like China's (Qin 2005).

Qin's developed position is that of a left liberal, an advocate of social democracy. While accepting the market, he seeks to balance it with a responsible state. As a committed liberal, he supports freedom as a universal value. But unlike the earlier liberals, Qin, often in collaboration with his historian wife Jin Yan, has established a body of comparative political and economic theory within which the conception of freedom plays a role that differs from neoliberal market fundamentalism. While it is a universal value, it is subject to variation. Hayek no more supports slavery than does Marx. It is just that there is more than one way to be other than a slave; freedom is something that is actualised in a process of trading off with other values (Qin 2010).

The Hyperfunction of the Big Community

In his early work on agrarian history, Qin had decided, in the face of the current Mao-influenced mainstream scholarship, that

> in ancient China, conflict between the despotic state and folk society was always more important than that between landlord and tenant, or rich and poor (Qin 2005: 14).

A major thread of his work through the 1990s hinges on comparing traditional society in China and the West in terms of their community structures. A difference he noted was that the basic building block of Chinese traditional society was the "default big community" (i.e., the state), whereas distinctive of the West was the "default little community". The distinction of "big" and "little" communities derives from the

work of Robert Redfield, *The Little Community* (Redfield 1956). The latter allowed the early modern West to undergo a stage of "civil society allied with monarchy" – that is, a collaboration of individual human rights and values deriving from the big community, which enabled an initial breakage of the shackles of the little community. In China, contrary to what is widely believed, the weakness of the little community forced social development to proceed along very different channels (Qin 2003). (The Chinese term 本位 (*benwei*) is rendered here as "default" in the sense of a dominant option that always holds unless otherwise specified.) Qin Hui's interpretation of freedom as a Chinese value is developed on this socio-economic framework, with little reference to cognitive or cultural dimensions. Its political fortunes are linked to the "hyperfunction of the big community":

> Traditional Chinese rural society was neither a polarised society severely split by the tenancy system nor a harmonious and autonomous cohesive little community, but a "pseudo-individualist" society based on the big community. The little community in traditional China was weaker than in other civilisations" traditional societies. But this was not because individuality was developed, but was due to the hyperfunction of the big community (Qin 2003, unpaginated).

China's "traditional folk society", we learn, had rarely been an idyll of harmonious relations, with face-to-face relations among rustics ruled by ethical consensus, sweet reason, or the like. The sinews of the big community, of the state, were too strong. The outlook for freedom is in this context bound to be a mixed bag:

> There is no doubt that, compared to other pre-modern civilisations, the "freedom" of Chinese people (China's "small peasants") with respect to the community (rather than the state) was impressive. However, the subjugation of the Chinese people (China's "registered folk") to the state (rather than the community) was even more so (Qin 2003).

The Common Baseline

Freedom, it follows, must be addressed in the first place by subduing the hyperfunction of the big community. The aim is not to move back to the little community, however, but onwards, to a citizen society that gives people a stake in the order of freedom. This requires alliances and trade-offs. At this stage of China's development, however, the trade-offs

found in developed countries, taking place in the pendulum movement between "Left" (pro-equality) and "Right" (pro-freedom), have no business being transferred to China:

> Given that China's problem at present is not one of "freedom at the expense of equality" or vice versa, we should only have a Third Path that pursues more freedom and also more equality, not one offering neither of these, nor even one offering "semi-freedom and semi-equality" or a "compromise between freedom and equality" (Qin 2005: 20).

Qin Hui's is a serious contribution to social theory. Immersed in theoretical literatures of many kinds, it is given substance and direction by the shaping forces of Chinese history and could come from nowhere else. It provides keys to the China Model and is particularly important in recognising the spread – overt and covert – of aspects of this model elsewhere around the globe. Most relevant to the present work is the clear challenge it presents to officially sponsored attacks on universal values, of which freedom is a cardinal member. Qin challenges the essentialising of culture into territorial entities aligned with nation states, and goes further to identify functional equivalents of freedom as a value in different phases of institutional development in China. As a permanent possibility of institutions, freedom is grasped as universal, since it answers to permanent needs and, when given scope, operates as a self-sustaining framework of political and social development. Denied that scope in China's past, it is not thereby removed from China's future. And if this argument holds for freedom, it is likely to hold *a fortiori* for universal values as a whole: if freedom cannot be treated as inherently alien to China, why should democracy, the rule of law or human rights?

Qin's is a tough-minded view of freedom as a value. Little doubt is left that the path ahead is hemmed in with difficulties and is extremely precarious. But it would be a wrong to overlook the element of spiritual freedom in Qin Hui's "common baseline". He transcends the romantic colouration of May Fourth freedom that survived the Maoist onslaught. Sheer force of character apart, this achievement derives from working experience in the rural grassroots, an experience rarely available to older generations of intellectuals. Qin's insistence that China's reality must provide the point of departure provides a common baseline, even with his opponents of the New Left.

Rescuing Chinese Enlightenment: Xu Jilin's Critique of Historicism

Qin's arguments against judging social and political issues by a self-limiting, "purely Chinese" value calculus may, of course, fail to convince sections of the public who have a more limited exposure to Chinese and world history, and who have absorbed the official narrative of national humiliation at foreign hands followed by revolutionary salvation. Xu Jilin (b. 1957) is, like Qin Hui, a historian. Mapping lines of intellectual development that are still at work in China today, his work uses a different set of analytical tools – "historicism", "nihilism" and "statism" – that have somewhat more critical firepower than Qin's abstract social theory and tackle cultural essentialism more directly:

> In the context of this new era, opposing Chinese intellectuals have a new intellectual focus, which falls on the legitimacy of the values behind China's development: is it to continue three decades of reform and opening up, adhere to the universal values of humanity and integrate into the global mainstream of civilisation; or seek unique Chinese values to provide an alternative modernity for the world? While this hidden polemic between "universal values" and "Chinese exceptionalism" doesn't take place in the public realm, its menacing gleam can be glimpsed behind all issues relating to China (Xu 2010).

"Chinese values" or a "China Model" being advanced as an alternative source of universal norms has few precedents in the modern era, but is as attractive to some Western writers as it is to Chinese, albeit for somewhat different reasons (Jacques 2009). Historicism in its Chinese form provides independent validation of the Party's favoured themes of collective truth and collective freedom, which were by the late 1980s unable to gain unequivocal support from Marxism. Xu Jilin's analysis of the framework within which the value constructs of "historicism" are set up is thus of interest.

Xu recalls the historian Meinecke's account of historicism as a current running through the nineteenth century and linked to the rise of Germany. It held, we are told, that no objective law, transcendent will or universal human nature existed behind history: history was just a mode of existence of the individual, of which the state was but a concentrated expression. There were no universally valid values or universal order transcending history and culture in this world. All human values belonged to particular historical worlds, to given cultures, civilisations or

national spirits. Value was justified and could be measured only from the perspective of the nation state when placed in the context of specific historical and cultural traditions.

In Chinese historicist discourse, according to Xu, there is an artificial presupposition that "universal" and "Chinese" values must be opposed:

> The artillery fire of [Chinese historicists'] critique of the West is aimed, not at the Machiavellianism of becoming rich and powerful – which they in fact regard with awe – but at the Enlightenment values of freedom and democracy. Thus, the onslaught on Western modernity turns into a selective contrary discarding: discarding civilised values that constrain human arrogance, leaving only the most ghastly Machiavellianism (Xu 2010).

This presupposed enmity underlies the functioning of the critique of universal values as a wedge issue. While Xu Jilin does not use this term, it is clear that "universal" actually functions in the political arena as a disguised term for "foreign", "Western", and even, on occasion, "American".

Chinese vs. Universal Values and the Critique of Historicism

In early 2010, a book appeared in China's bookstores that made the "wedge" function explicit to an unprecedented degree. Bearing the title *Zhongguo zhanqilai* (中国站起来, *China Stands Up*), it was written by "Moluo". A transcription into Chinese of the Sanskrit *Mara,* Lord of the Underworld, this was a pen name with resonance: it figures in the title of one of the famous early essays of the exemplary writer Lu Xun, and today evokes the world of early twentieth-century Chinese radicalism.

Moluo is today the pen name of Wan Songsheng (万松生), a researcher in the Culture Research Institute at the Chinese Art Academy with a literary reputation established over the past decade and more, launching his career as a writer in the late 1990s with a popular essay collection entitled *Chiruzhe zhi shouji* (耻辱者手记, *Notes of the Humiliated*). In his early writings, Moluo identified with Lu Xun and other promoters of the early twentieth-century New Culture Movement, a movement that had criticised traditional Chinese institutions.

China Stands Up produced shock in cultural circles, evident in some of the commentary: "Moluo's new book: text of derangement?"; "'Humanist' China stands up, Moluo prostrates himself". As another article states, "Moluo's new book *China Stands Up* is published, many friends sever ties with him" (Moluo Critiques 2010). Among these friends was Yu Jie, later an exile to the United States.

Of course there was a corresponding set of titles supporting Moluo: "Moluo, a sincere friend misunderstood", and even "Ugly Chinese foreign-appeasers – feelings on reading Moluo's *China Stands Up*". In his first period of celebrity, Moluo had been praised by Beijing University Lu Xun scholar Qian Liqun as "a 'spiritual warrior' in the footsteps of Lu Xun". Qian now expressed embarrassment.

Moluo's book concentrates on certain themes: attacks on the New Culture and May Fourth Movements; rejection of Lu Xun's critiques of Chinese national character; his favourable references to the critical observations of the American missionary, Arthur O. Smith; and Lu Xun's own castigation of the lack, as he saw it, of "sincerity and love" in the Chinese psyche. These themes form a complex referred to in Chinese as *guominxing pipan* (国民性批判, critique of China's national character) or still worse, *liegen lun* (劣根论, theory of [national] depravity). They did not seem to belong on the hypernationalist bookshelf. The only sense one could make of the disjunction between Moluo and the new book was to suppose that he was cleverly subverting the "China fends off the world" genre, working in the "critique of national character" to serve its original function of consciousness-raising. All of these things made the book a must-buy. But it soon became clear that this was no subversion of the hypernationalist genre, but an earnest contribution to it. Moluo, the demon critic, had swung the tiller hard and was sailing with the nationalist tide.

The relevance of *China Stands Up* to our concerns rests on the critique published in mid-2010 by Xu Jilin and drawing out the central theme of "Chinese vs. universal values". The terms of the discussion have, however, shifted in the intervening time. Xu went on to complete three major studies of current intellectual trends in China – in his words, "three big intellectual critiques of 2010". His *Dushu* article on Moluo's "turnaround" is the shortest and most emotionally charged of these. Xu's second and third essays expand the terms of the discussion considerably beyond Moluo and *China Stands Up*, focused respectively on "universal vs. Chinese values" and "statism".

Widely regarded as a committed writer and thinker, Moluo owed his early fame to a combination of literary skill with a confessional impulse not unlike that of Rousseau. He has publicly denied that his "turn-around" is more than a figment of his opponents' prejudices – he had done no more than adjust his field of vision in accord with the changing times. Indeed, his turnaround seems to have predated *China Stands Up* itself. A major theme of that book, visceral opposition to the "critique of the national character", cropped up in a book review that appeared in 2008 (Moluo 2008). But this simply pushes the timing back: the turn-around might still have taken place, simply going unnoticed.

We may remain agnostic on this point. There is, however, no more cause to dismiss Xu Jilin's *Dushu* (读书) article, which is not agnostic, than Moluo's self-defence in interviews. For Xu, there was no question that Moluo had made an intellectual U-turn. While delving into the "spir-itual" motivations behind the turnaround, Xu is not arguing *ad hominem*. Moluo, always a confessional writer, has been at pains to publicise his inner conflicts – in other words, to invite the very type of inquiry mounted by Xu Jilin. He can hardly blame Xu for using evidence he has himself provided.

These were vital additions to the Chinese intellectual scene. Without Moluo's confessional impulse and literary skill, it would have been a duller place. Without Xu Jilin's reaction to it, we would know less about the attraction and currency of some problematic ideas. But Xu would likely face difficulty in getting the same degree of exposure for his views as can Moluo. As we shall see, he works by placing the latter's ideas in a deep historical context. To fully appreciate his point requires time and exposure to academic language.

China Model and Chinese Values

"Chinese values" and the "China Model" have become attractive to writers, both Chinese and Western, who promote them as an alternative source of global norms. Writers like Martin Jacques seek to remind the West of its own arrogance and incompetence; similar desires exist in China. Addi-tionally, a stress on Chinese values intensifies the claim of the party-state to embody the fundamental national identity and its interests. It also helps to support favoured party ideological themes of collective truth and collective freedom.

"The West" may well need to be brought before the bar of world opinion. There are, however, problems with doing this by advancing a China Model, incorporating Chinese values with a view to displacing Western models and values. There are fundamental conceptual issues, summed up by the observation that so doing reifies or essentialises both these sets of models and their supporting values. Furthermore, it reifies their disjunction – "China versus the West" is perceived as underlying virtually everything of interest in modern history. Does "the West" constitute a coherent entity, as opposed to a mere label under which systems as diverse as Norway, Italy and the United States are placed for convenience? Even if it does, does this entity really have a coherent set of values found nowhere else and admit of no admixture of exotic elements from hither and yon? Surely both Marxism and Christianity embrace certain "Western values". Do they then come down to the same thing? There is no reasonable end to this argument. Is the death penalty, abandoned in many Western jurisdictions, an expression of the same value system in the United States and China, which both practice it? If not, can the "Chinese values" that presumably explain the Chinese practice be identified without reference to general human cognitive and behavioural attributes?

Chinese resistance to the essentialising of Chinese values is hard to dismiss. Xu Jilin's argument, using the resources of intellectual history, turns on the undeclared interest of the essentialists. His framing concepts of nihilism, historicism and statism place these value systems in a coherent historical context. Nihilism, a hallmark of the "sons" generation of nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals, was marked by "indecisiveness about values with nothing to fall back on following the death of God". Xu speaks of Lu Xun's "active nihilism". Moluo, in the face of national and personal darkness, proved, says Xu, incapable of such stoicism. Instead, a nihilist crisis led Moluo first to religion; on the rebound from his failure of this attempt to find spiritual moorings he finally succumbed to statism:

> When the state became the first principle for dividing human societies, the criterion of hero and criminal, saint and demon, completely unrelated to personal qualities, only look at which country's interests he serves, and which country's life he damages. In simple matter of fact terms, this criterion is "patriotism" (Moluo 2010).

To subscribe to historicism is to become a historicist, to statism a statist. Of these two terms, historicism is the better known internationally. It is a

broad intellectual current starting as a reaction to the extreme emphasis on universal reason of the High Enlightenment. It is not necessarily opposed to liberal values like individualism. Indeed it began its career stressing the romantic individual, who stood out against dry all-encompassing reason. But before long, historicism tends to decay. In one influential form, the heroic individual was replaced by the nation, and later by the state itself – a power organisation above the nation, acting in its name but not truly answerable to it.

Xu Jilin begins by recapitulating the views of Meinecke and Isaiah Berlin, who saw historicism as part of a backlash against the Enlightenment (Xu 2010). As generally understood, it holds that there is no objective law, transcendent will or universal human nature behind history. All values belong to specific historical worlds, given cultures, civilisations or national spirits. Value is justified and can be measured only from the perspective of nations and latterly nation states, which are "individuals writ large".

For Xu, the claim that Chinese values can and should oppose and displace Western values is a form of historicism. By the early twenty-first century, historicists directly opposed Chinese tradition to universal values, the object of their resistance was no longer the "really existing West" hated by the anti-Westernism of the 1990s, but the "conceptual West" – that is, the universal values embodied in the Enlightenment; the critique of the "really existing West" was escalated to a theoretical resistance to the "conceptual West".

The late Qing dynasty, as mentioned earlier, saw the elite seek to arrive at the "universal modernity" represented by the West. This was set aside by Mao Zedong, who, deeply rebellious against Western universal civilisation, experimented with an "alternative modernity" that not only subverted American and European capitalist civilisation, but also departed from the Soviet Union's socialist orthodoxy. It cherished *tianxia zhuyi* (天下主义, imperial dynastic) ambitions of taking a uniquely Chinese road to the communist ideal of saving mankind. These ambitions were unsustainable due to the "cruel utopian practices" of the Mao era. Deng Xiaoping helped return China to a secular path and "made a second entrance into globalised universal civilisation" (Xu 2010).

This was followed in the 1980s by a "second intellectual Enlightenment" (the first being the New Culture/ May Fourth movement), returning from communism's transcendent world to the universal reason of

philosophy and anthropology, from a special Chinese road back to universal history:

> The legitimacy of modernity derived from universal human principles, not the special interests of the nation state, or historical and cultural traditions. In the 80's, the world's yardstick was the nation's standard as well, the world's reality was China's future (Xu 2010: 3).

Patriots in the 1980s were generally concerned not with "losing China", but "losing global membership". "China" stood for something closed and backward, a particularistic tradition that impeded modernisation, whereas "the world" stood for what was advanced, the future, and universal values and norms. This "world" had a replicable model: Western modernity.

Major splits took place in the New Enlightenment camp in the mid-1990s. Universal rationality is for Xu Jilin the core zone of contention. Liberal and radical leftist, humanist spirit and market secularism, cosmopolitanism and nationalism, opposing parties that had been in one camp, broke with the banner of the Enlightenment one by one, set up on their own, forming the intense ideological debates of the 1990s (Xu 2007). Each of these debates removed some of the foundations on which the Enlightenment rested. In the 1980s, the West was the paradigm of modernity for the world. By the mid 1990s, it had become something that needed to be superseded.

The West no longer represented idealistic universal values, but had turned into a monster repressing China. Cultural conservatism and calls for "localised" (本土化, *bentuhua*) knowledge had long been part of the mix, but, argues Xu, these had generally affirmed basic Enlightenment goals, above all recognising the legitimacy of democratic and scientific values. The focal question was how to develop the "new outer kingliness" (democracy and science) from the "old inner sageliness" (Confucian moral principles). They sought to reconcile Eastern and Western civilisations, to realise a universal modern civilisation with Chinese characteristics (Xu 2010).

At the same time, the mainstream of Enlightenment thought received a strong check from postmodernism:

> The value foundations of universalism were shaken, and what was left was a spiritual wasteland of relativism and nihilism. To fill the huge void created by the loss of universalism, so "Chinese values", the "China Model", "Chinese subjectivity" and other narratives of nationalist authenticity began to emerge, and, after the brief 1990's transition

> to the 21st century, the historicist thought trend made a grand debut in Chinese thought (Xu 2010).

When Chinese historicism challenges universal values – no longer believing that modernity has any universal values of humanity behind it, or that human nature has any absolute good and evil – the crisis of values of contemporary China is, as Xu Jilin sees it, indirectly confirmed. The direct expression of this crisis is the death of various universalities, leaving only a value vacuum, a "vast expanse of blankness". A variety of new and beautiful pictures can be drawn, and Chinese brands of alternative modernity of all kinds created on this sheet of blank white paper.

Contemporary Chinese historicists, says Xu, respond to universal global civilisation with a shout of "No! I did not believe!" His only belief is in himself, in the superman's will to create his own values. In Xu's words:

> this value-creating individual, is not only a dynamic person, but also a dynamic nation, is the nation as a whole creating China's miraculous rise.
>
> When all miracles of the narrative of universality have been called into question, the body of the nation, i.e., China, becomes the receptacle for the only values with any certainty. The question, however, then becomes, what is China? Behind the various national narratives of "Chinese values", "China Models", "Chinese subjectivity", there is an unconscious default duality, namely the totalised China and the West. This dual structure of Chinese/ Western is just an abstract symbol of a mutual "other": the West defines a totalised China as a signifier, while a homogenised West is likewise assumed by China. Behind the symbolic existence is a false ideology that simplifies the common dilemmas of modernity facing different civilisations in the process of globalisation into a clash of civilisations.
>
> After an opening that has lasted half a century, there is in fact no such thing as a transparent China that can be sharply distinguished from the West. Various traditions of Western civilisation, from capitalist rationality, liberal ideas and values, to Marx's socialism, are now deeply embedded in contemporary Chinese reality, and internalised into China's own modern discourse and historical practice. Contemporary China has already become a hybrid of foreign and local cultures. In order to obtain a national community free of Western pollution, some extreme nationalists deliberately enlarge the binary opposition between China and the West, seeking to eliminate the alien West through resistance, and extract a pure, clear China.

The impact of post-modernism gives historicising writers some added strategic advantage. Xu Jilin summarises their position as follows: "Universal civilisation" is simply the self-proclamation of a particular civilisation, the self-consciousness of an over-inflated particular civilisation. When universal civilisation is restored to the specific European historical context, it is but a particular expression of Western civilisation, an artificial historical mythology erected in the process of the global expansion of Western civilisation.

Opposing the West is taken by *China Is Unhappy* (another best-selling polemic from the authors of *China Can Say No*) as the only proper way to form "us". After this book's success as a best-seller, there has been a series of best-selling "China" books (*China Has No Role Models, What Is China To Do?, China Stands Up*) that have made a stand, forming a spectacular "China chorus". Xu writes:

> However, this widely chorused "China" is so ambiguous, that it actually depends, as the reality of "us" as a national community, on this "other", the West.

Worse still, dialogue with the "other" entails the loss of China's status as subject (rather than object) given that our identity as "us" is realised only through confrontation with an enemy. Jiang Shigong, a deputy director at the School of Law at Peking University, divides the world into two parts (self and enemy) in accordance with attitudes to China:

> The whole world either stands with us as a friend, supporting China and its peaceful rise, or as the enemy, in favour of containing and dismembering China (Jiang 2008):
>
> In dealing with the issue of Western civilisation, Chinese historicism has adopted double standards: On the one hand it criticises the West as a particular civilisation masquerading as universal, while deeming its own civilisation to be endowed with universality. This pragmatic double standard was no doubt a "clash of civilisations" that subconsciously "distinguished us from the enemy". Is civilisation ultimately universal or particular? This obviously cannot be decided with the approach of "distinguishing us from the enemy". All the world's advanced civilisations have a dual nature: From the point of view of historical occurrence, they are all related to particular social and cultural traditions, and with this as the historical condition of their production and development, all civilisations are special. From the point of view of comparative civilisational content, whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Confucian, or humanised Confucian civilisation, none have a

> particular national character, but put forward the problems of all humanity from universal perspectives of God, the universe, nature and society, hence advanced civilisation always intrinsically possesses universal values.

Historicism in its Chinese form leads elsewhere, towards what Xu Jilin terms "contending for universality":

> Between different civilisations and cultures, the concern of civilisation is "what is good?", while the concern of culture is "what is ours?" What concerns China's historicists is the difference between "us" and the "other", how to use "Chinese" value to replace "good" values, thinking that so long as something is "Chinese" it is necessarily "good" as a value. This closed "distinction between self and enemy" cannot constitute an effective legitimacy of values, because neither in terms of logic or history can it be inferred that "our" values must be equated with "good" or "desirable" values.

Freedom and Enlightenment

How does Xu Jilin's defence of the New Enlightenment of the early reform era (1978–1989) relate to our earlier discussion of freedom as a cardinal member of the universal values? Qin Hui among many others demonstrates that freedom was undoubtedly an intrinsic aspect of this time. We noted above the tribute Qin has paid to Marx for his own focus on "freedom as a value". This turns out to be a lasting importance. One of the foremost proponents of the New Enlightenment was Wang Ruoshui (Kelly 1985). Wang was once the editor of the *People's Daily* theory page and had been flattered as a "good young philosopher" by Mao himself. A true believer who had converted to Marxism before 1949 when it was still a badge of courage to do so, Wang had in the course of the Cultural Revolution moved to a deep and sustained critical position, run afoul of the conservative establishment and had in 1987 been expelled from the Party as an agent of "bourgeois liberalisation" (Brugger and Kelly 1990).

Like other Marxist humanists, he engaged in a fierce battle to safeguard a sociopolitical definition of freedom – Patterson's "civic freedom" – within Marxism. This battle:

> came to a head in a 1986 debate over freedom, instigated by Wang Ruoshui in an article entitled "Freedom of literature and the literature of freedom". Wang's antagonist Hu Qiaomu (1912–1992), a high-

ranking conservative Party authority, had invoked Hegelian and Marxist definitions of "freedom as the knowledge of necessity" to propound the line that since the Party knows what is necessary, it is the sole dispenser of freedom (Kelly 1998: 105).

Wang demanded that these philosophical usages be kept distinct from the sociopolitical sense of freedom. Otherwise, the Marxian notion of freedom as working within objective laws would simply be a cover for political repression.

Struggling now against Party orthodoxy, Wang heavily emphasised the "liberatory" themes of the young Marx. Party doctrine customarily stifled calls for political reform by invoking the Hegelian doctrine (adapted by Engels) that "freedom is the knowledge of necessity" (the locus classicus being Chapter XI, Part I of Engels' *Anti-Dühring*: "Morality and Law; Freedom and Necessity"). The public had to live within the limits of freedom set by the Party, which were in practice exceptionally narrow. Servility – a quality detested by Marx – was transmitted on a massive scale in such manufactured moral exemplars as Lei Feng, who sought only to be a "docile tool" of the Party.

Wang Ruoshui's clear defence of freedom as a universal value has continuing resonance. Key to a version of liberatory Marxism and resisting its reinvention as the polar opposite of liberalism, freedom was in many ways the arch-value of New Enlightenment values. Without a breakthrough to freedom, other values like democracy and human rights would on this view be unattainable. Also, the freedom claimed by and grudgingly accorded to producers to work outside the strictures of the state-ordained economy had an immense impact on economic life.

Such ideas were – along with much else – implicit in the popular movement of 1989, and the official reaction against this upsurge forms a backdrop to a series of ideological campaigns, of which the critique of universal values is among recent examples. Rather than relying on Marxist orthodoxy as in the past, this critique functions as a wedge issue, displacing discussion of major issues of governance and reform with preemptive appeals to national identity and loyalty.

This is taken to its rhetorical extreme by Moluo, whose hypernationalism depends critically on fixating on another, opposite system, to fill a deficit of one's own. Moluo's riposte to challenges to his integrity was that they missed the point, there was no evil national character. Yet an evil national character, a *liegenxing* (劣根性) or depravity is what he repeatedly attributes to "the West". Historicism enables the reduction of

a vast theatre of contention to a standardised set of issues. It also renders its followers blind to the fact that "modernity" is not a free-floating signifier, that there is a minimum definable set of items – lacking which, a social system is archaic medieval or pre-modern. Modernity has always drawn a line under slavery for instance, despite its reappearance in various times and places.

It was primarily Europe that really saw at close hand how hypernationalism cleared the way for fascism. This linkage is less appreciated in other parts of the world, not least China. In his recent work, Michael Dutton has shown the uncanny resemblance of Mao's formulation of the driving force necessary to carry the revolution through to Carl Schmitt's paradigm of the political as the relationship between friend and enemy (Dutton 2005, 2009). Why then should prominent scholars find Schmitt so enticing, in such need of scholarly explication and introduction to Chinese audiences? Why not simply advance Mao's "Who are enemies, and who are our friends?".

Historicism takes a stance of setting China apart, complete with its own independent value system, but tacitly looks to and borrows from foreign value systems to formulate this. We who originate from the lands of those foreign systems do not find looking to and borrowing our values from others particularly strange; "culture" is marked by this very capacity for forms of life to be de-indigenised and transferred to new contexts. It is not the fact of drawing on alien thought and value systems to set one's course that is objectionable, but doing this in disingenuous ways – that is, seeking to have the cake of indigenisation while eating it with doses of foreign intellectual authority.

Our earlier description of the critique of universal values as a wedge issue returns here. It is not necessary to have serious intellectual objections to freedom to seek to use it to win other arguments. The basis of the China Model advanced by Pan Wei and others after the "Great Financial Crisis" was "the continuity of Chinese civilisation" (Pan 2009). On this basis, the model defended the state-owned economy and its vested interests as advanced economic management without the constraints of the Western value package; the implicit argument is: "Given that we spurn the deceitful West, we are opposed to its values; so the state owned economy and the one-party autocracy must be good".

Neither Qin nor Xu pay much attention to this aspect of the critique of universal values. It is perhaps easy to assume their critics are genuine "true believers" rather than cynical manipulators. This may re-

flect the constraints under which they work and write. On the other hand, their fundamental position is not to presuppose enemies, but rather to hold open a common ethical baseline as a platform for political consensus. Our discussion should not pre-empt this, but simply clear the air of wedge issues, leaving China's potential contribution to global social theory as a very live and fruitful field of inquiry.

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