

# **China and International Relations**

The Chinese view and the contribution of  
Wang Gungwu

**Edited by Zheng Yongnian**

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### 3 Historians and Chinese world order

#### Fairbank, Wang, and the matter of 'indeterminate relevance'

*Paul Evans*

'On balance, after 150 years of interactions, the Chinese have integrated outside and inside views sufficiently to begin to make contributions to a future international order.'

Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian (eds),  
*China and the New International Order*  
(Routledge, 2008), p. 30

'Perhaps the Chinese have finally joined the great outside world just in time to participate in its collapse.'

John King Fairbank, *China: A new history*  
(Harvard University Press, 1991), p. xvii

#### Introduction

Wags muse that the great issues the world faces are too important to be left to historians and too difficult to be left to political scientists. Chinese conceptions of world order can now confidently be placed into the 'great issues' category. A decade ago Gerald Segal could pen, with a hint of bitterness but no irony, an essay entitled 'Does China Matter?'<sup>1</sup> The big issue of today is 'What Does China Think?' The topic has moved from a mainly academic concern to top-of-mind for government leaders, journalists and pundits around the world. When a Chinese Premier refers to China as a 'great power,' as Wen Jiabao did in London in the spring of 2009, it gets attention, adding a note of immediacy to the earlier debates in China and abroad about 'peaceful rise', 'peaceful development', 'harmonious society', and 'harmony without uniformity'.

The interest in Chinese thinking and attitudes tracks directly the rise of Chinese power and its global reach. China may be a 'fragile superpower,' to borrow Susan Shirk's term, not yet in the same class as the United States in many dimensions of national power. But a little more than a decade ago it emerged from the Asian financial crisis as a significant regional force; in the midst of the current economic crisis

it is a global force. Decisions of Chinese officials, citizens and consumers have immediate impact around the world. Is there any global issue – climate change, environmental degradation, pandemics, non-proliferation, human security – where the road to a solution does not run through Beijing? Ten years ago the discussion focused on China in regional institutions; three years ago on China in international forums like the G-8 or L-20. Now we are at a moment where many outside China and a few inside it are talking about not just China in the G-20 but the prospects of a G-2. While a G-2 scenario may be premature and even dangerous, it shows how far perceptions have shifted in a breathtakingly short period of time.

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

The questions are numerous and persuasive answers few. Can China be a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system? Does China want to dismantle, reform, or abide by the institutions and norms of the current international system? Is it a status quo or revisionist power? What are its views on sovereignty, territorial boundaries, and the use of force; on the future of the international financial system; on America's international role and military presence in Asia; on managing weapons of mass destruction? Are present international norms universal or the product of specific cultural, civilization and power interests? Who are the key thinkers in China and what shapes their thinking? Is a new pluralism developing in policy circles in Beijing? Is a liberal internationalist foreign policy compatible with China's illiberal domestic order? Are the patterns and influences from the Imperial, Republican and Maoist periods relevant to the needs and outlooks of global China? Is Middle Kingdomism finished forever or is China ready to reprise its ancient leading role?<sup>3</sup>

Lingering in the background is a nagging doubt and a new modesty about the capacity of current theories to make sense of this great power shift and its implications. The dozen thoughtful essays by leading political scientists in the US and Asia in a recent book edited by Robert Ross and Zhu Feng all address the complexity of explaining China's rise and predicting where it, and the international system, might be heading. They reject the two important theories of the 1990s, conflict inevitability and democratic peace, and come to the conclusion that a peaceful outcome to the current power transition is possible and even likely. In the blunt words of two authors, 'The policy choices of China cannot be adequately explained by any of the major international relations theories.'<sup>4</sup>

#### Fairbank and Wang

Can historians help? What can China's past tell us about contemporary Chinese views on world order? John Fairbank and Wang Gungwu are big-picture historians and natural comparators. They have written prolifically about the past and present

of Chinese thinking and addressed audiences much broader than professional historians. In selection of topics, British doctoral training, careers largely spent in universities, vaunted entrepreneurial and administrative talents, abiding fascination with the cultural and civilizational underpinnings of international relations, encyclopedic and synoptic grasp of the events, institutions and people of Chinese history, and intention to see China from both the inside and outside, they have much in common.

I should underline that I am much better versed in Fairbank than in Wang. I spent a decade reading Fairbank's publications, examining his private papers and speaking with his students, colleagues and critics while writing a biography of him, published in 1988. Fairbank wrote a full autobiography a few years earlier and there is a fairly robust secondary literature looking at aspects of his life and views.<sup>5</sup> There is not yet a biography of Wang, nor a full memoir.<sup>6</sup>

While some of Fairbank's ideas live on, he is not producing any new ones. He died in the fall of 1991 at the age of 84, at about the time that Deng Xiaoping's Open Door began to produce transformative economic results. He wrote in his final years about the power of a billion Chinese consumers bursting into life under Deng's leadership and a restructured Chinese economy. Yet the contemporary for Fairbank was the Maoist period and its immediate legacy. He adjusted his views of China on many occasions as times changed and scholarship produced new evidence and interpretations. He died as global China was being born.

A focus on Wang offers the advantage of observing China's new global era, or what he sometimes calls 'China's fourth rise.'<sup>7</sup> He is a generation younger than Fairbank and the product of a different continent. Alive and well and living in Singapore, his sense of China's past resembles Fairbank's in many ways, but his contemporary is our contemporary, real time.

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

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

Wang's personal story is rather different. Born in Southeast Asia, he is a product of the overseas Chinese that was the topic of his early scholarship, and

a professional career outside China but in its hemisphere and most often in its immediate neighbourhood.<sup>8</sup> Fairbank spoke of looking at China from the inside out but Wang has lived it. For the latter part of his career he has operated in the political and social contexts of Hong Kong and Singapore, on the edge of China and its gravitational field of power and ideas. His world differs from Fairbank's in basic attitudes about the role of intellectuals, freedom and autonomy, as well as political inclinations on matters of democracy, human rights, individualism, exceptionalism, universalism, and triumphalism. The very fact that Fairbank repeatedly challenged the universality and soundness of all of these basic pillars of the American perspective was testament to their tenacious hold in America. He perceived his role as vigorously challenging some of his country's most cherished cultural predispositions. China was a foil, not a target. 'Our American way,' he argued in the successive editions of *The United States and China*, 'is not the only way, nor even the majority way for man's and woman's future.'<sup>9</sup>

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

Despite these different starting points, their views of history and historiography have some striking similarities. Both are sceptical about the existence of universal values, Western supremacy, the transferability of Western institutions and norms to Asia, and the prospect of a deep convergence of the West and Asia on Western terms. As historians both have been modest about their own impact and comfortable with the idea that theories, including their own, will come and go. In Fairbank's framing, even academic progress is relative, 'Each generation learns that its final role is to be the doormat for the coming generation to step on.'<sup>10</sup> And they see good scholarship as an antidote to ethnocentrism and a necessary foundation for effective policy. Cultural conflict can lay the powder train to international conflict, but knowledge of the other makes management of differences possible. Both devoted a great deal of time to addressing public audiences and generating a strong following in policy circles in their respective domains.

The differences are also revealing. While both doubted that societal convergence was likely, Wang sees greater prospects for Chinese adaptation to outside influences, what he sometimes describes as the blending of heritage with modernity. On the key issue of democracy and human rights, Fairbank, the American, appears more sceptical of their adoption in China, having spent much of his career both observing Chinese autocracy and authoritarianism and arguing that they are at the heart of Chinese civilization and political institutions, past and present. Wang also identifies the autocratic streak in Chinese political culture but sees it as more malleable. Fairbank regularly chastised Americans for failing to understand China on its own terms and for policy errors; Wang is usually more circumspect in directly criticizing Asian officialdom and publics.

## China's world order: Fairbank and China's response to the West

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

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

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, in some fifteen books and fifty essays, he painted a picture of the traditional Chinese world order as sophisticated, durable, and based on a sense of superiority and hierarchy without the concepts of sovereignty, territorially bounded nation-states, or a balance of power. Rather, it was given order and unity by the universal presence of the Son of Heaven. The internal order was reflected in the external one, power commingled with culture.

In the mid-1960s he organized a series of meetings and commissioned a set of papers that eventually led to the edited volume *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*.<sup>11</sup> Its fourteen essays, two by Fairbank and the remainder by scholars from Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the United States, proved to have a seminal impact. Though the book sold only a few hundred copies, forty years later it may be the most cited of his thirty books. Fairbank's own essay, 'The Early Treaty System in the Chinese World Order', drew on *Trade and Diplomacy* and an essay he had written in 1957, 'Synarchy Under the Treaties'.<sup>12</sup> The treaty system, he argued, was an outgrowth of the earlier tribute system, functioning as both a mechanism for managing trade and diplomatic relations and a ritual reaffirming the universality of the Confucian order.

This volume began with a Delphic suggestion about its significance and context:

This book is about China's relations with non-Chinese states before the present century, mainly during the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1912). The authors look at the Chinese empire and its world order partly through its own eyes and partly

as seen by half a dozen outside people ... The result, I think, opens the door a bit further on a system that handled the interstate relations of a large part of mankind throughout most of recorded history. This chapter of man's political experience even has some *indeterminate relevance* to the world's China problem of today.<sup>13</sup>

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

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

In considering the impact of the Imperial world order on Communist China, Fairbank and his co-authors took pains to indicate that the treaty and tribute systems were from a different world that was shaken in the mid-nineteenth century and dead by 1911 when the Imperial system disintegrated. He wrote later that 'Six decades of change in the nineteenth century and six in the twentieth have destroyed China's inherited order and created an unprecedentedly new one.'<sup>14</sup>

In the final essay in *The Chinese World Order*, Benjamin Schwartz sharply observed: 'When the empire was weak, the Chinese perception of the world had little effect on the course of events. The ultimate fact is the fact of power.' However real the system was over a long period of time, he was sceptical that it had 'great causal weight in explaining present or future Chinese policies.' Elements of Confucianism live on, but Chinese survival depended upon responding to new realities, chief among them that the centre of world order lay elsewhere and that China had inferior status within it. 'In the end,' concluded Schwartz, 'the Western system of international order may prove as transient as the Chinese traditional perception of world order ... As of the present, however, it seems to conform more closely to the realities of world politics than anything derived out of the Chinese past.'<sup>15</sup>

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

Despite the caveats that the old Imperial order was dead and that the Chinese Communists came to power equipped with a different ideology, Fairbank identified recurring patterns in foreign policy attitudes and behaviour. He frequently observed that it is impossible to understand American foreign policy without looking at past

practices and attitudes: Washington's farewell address, the Monroe Doctrine and the Open Door formed part of 'the historical matrix of our thinking'. Though dangerous to suggest that 'tradition governs Peking's foreign policy today (however much it may seem at times to govern ours) ... to imagine Peking acting completely free of history would be the height of unrealism.'<sup>16</sup>

When looking for examples of recurring continuities, he most often pointed to the strategic primacy of Inner Asia, the disesteem of sea power, the doctrine of Chinese superiority, and the idea of hierarchy.

In explaining Mao's foreign policy he noted that though Mao's emphasized egalitarian struggle rather than hierarchic harmony, revolutionary militancy rather than the civility and etiquette of the Imperial era, 'the ancient idea of China's central superiority flourishes under his care. As in former times, the doctrine can be used to abet power abroad or equally well to substitute for it.'<sup>17</sup>

In foreseeing the Sino-Soviet split he argued that China was more nationalist and Chinese than Communist and that there was no single Communist monolith. In explaining Chinese support for people's wars of national liberation and the slogan 'surrounding the cities from the countryside', he emphasized that this was not a 'Hitlerite blueprint for conquest' but advocacy of self-reliance such that 'China could point the way and offer aid but not itself achieve the world revolution by its own expansion. (One is reminded of the ancient theory of tributary relations: China was a model which other countries should follow but on their own initiative).'<sup>18</sup>

He repeatedly described why Chinese leaders felt so strongly about China's territorial integrity and the One China policy. 'It [*t'ien hsia*] cannot be expunged from the Chinese language or from the minds of the Chinese people. This is not only an idea, but a sentiment, a feeling habituated by millennia of conduct. It attaches the highest importance to Chinese civilization, which consists of all those people who live in a Chinese way ... and springs for a sense of culturalism, something a good deal stronger than a mere Western-style nationalism.'<sup>19</sup>

In 1969, and subsequently, he stated that the sense of superiority, humiliation, and the tough pursuit of national interest would not make China's introduction into international organizations an easy one. 'We may at times have to meet righteous vituperation, arrogant incivility. In the end, we outsiders will probably have to make many more adjustments to China's demands than we now contemplate.' Chinese diplomacy would not seek territorial expansion but nor would it be friendly in multilateral institutions.<sup>20</sup>

### Wang: inside and outside Chinese world order

On many issues and in general approach Fairbank and Wang are on the same wavelength about the sources, content and implications of traditional cultural and civilizational views of *tian xia*. This even as Wang writes with not just the benefit of hindsight on the Maoist period but from a deeper knowledge of Chinese language, a finer-grained perspective on Chinese culture, closer personal contact with post-Mao China, and the powerful concepts of identity, heritage and what he calls 'economic global'.

Wang's contribution to Fairbank's 1968 volume on China's world order concluded with observations about the idea of Chinese superiority that was increasingly important as Chinese leaders began to look more closely at their own history. Where some saw this leading to Chinese aggression and others to a China that was superior and arrogant but peacefully indifferent, he argued that the tributary system demonstrated China's 'majesty and power' as well as the Chinese capacity for adapting their myths to reality, something that might be described as flexible hierarchy.<sup>21</sup>

He shared Fairbank's view that China was not territorially expansionist. He noted that 'No armies marched out of the traditional Middle Kingdom (*Zhougguo*) lands',<sup>22</sup> and that Chinese rulers were hesitant about foreign military adventures.

On the matter of the *tian xia* legacy in foreign relations, Wang has stressed, like Fairbank, that with the coming of the West, China was forced to enter a new era that involved law, order and the principle of equality. It abandoned isolationist and Sino-centric attitudes. But not completely. 'Communist Chinese,' he noted in 2000, 'still will not play the game and show many signs of continuing China centrism', including arrogance and cynical use of international institutions to dominate the world. Based on a study of the observations of Chinese traditional historians up to the Tang dynasty, including Ch'ien Ssu-ma and Pan Ku, Fan Yeh and Wei Ching, he demonstrates that diplomatic practice did not always conform with Confucian theory. Emperors and ministers acted on the basis of survival and gain. 'It was the historians who decided which policy or attitude towards foreign countries was the correct one.' He concludes that Confucian theory was 'developed from pragmatic observations and had little directly to do with the philosophic conception of China as the middle of the world.' The fusion of moral and physical power, the ability to triumph over invasion and catastrophe, determined China's relations with other countries. The theory of the historians became myth that was first shaken by the Mongol conquest and then undermined by the Western incursion.<sup>23</sup>

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

He made his argument by comparing European and Asian conceptions of the total experience of war. Europeans wrote about their wartime experiences, made films about them, and produced official histories. The people of Southeast and East Asia had vivid experiences of war but left no significant writings. Chinese history is littered with wars but only recalled in official histories, without personal heroism or feelings of the protagonists, or books on broad strategy. War was a matter for

emperors, not soldiers or civilians. 'Modernization may mean that armies learn the same tactics, use the same equipment, organize the same military units to march, sing, train and fight in similar ways. But it need not necessarily mean that there will concomitant change in attitudes towards soldiers and war, to the way political power is shared, or to the mindset about the proper of government and defence policy-making.'<sup>24</sup>

These observations built on the foundation prepared in a short book he wrote five years earlier based on a series of lectures in Norway. Wang did not dispute that human rights and democracy were acknowledged by Chinese leaders as 'universally agreed among civilized peoples'. The real issue is how they are to be defined and applied. 'We can only hope it is not long before they receive the priority that they deserve. But it will be surprising if the form of democracy that eventually emerges and the legal and administrative framework established for the support of human rights will be the same as that those that have evolved in a Judaeo-Christian and Greco-Roman cultural context.' Ideas needed to be institutionalized in 'the Chinese way' and foreign pressure is likely to be counterproductive in smoothing their adoption.<sup>25</sup>

His May 2000 essay, 'Joining the Modern World,' examines Chinese efforts to be modern over a 140-year period. Where Fairbank emphasized interaction and accommodation, Wang pays more attention to the Chinese desire not merely to cope with outside pressures, but to align with them. There is an undercurrent of both a Confucian identity and a cosmopolitan one. He mockingly refers to 'supposedly universal ideals', and echoes Fairbank's argument about the sense of territorial integrity and Chinese unity that, despite 'hostile calls for self-determination', mean that 'No leader in China can afford to let any land go'. He makes the case for mutual respect in US-China relations, 'not because the Chinese now know how to behave like Americans, but because they are accepted as people who really want a peaceful environment for their country's development'. And he sees increasing pluralism in the Chinese elite.<sup>26</sup>

Wang is most persuasive when looking at current Chinese thinking on world order and contemporary foreign policy. Where Fairbank was writing about a time when China was weak, in turmoil or belligerent, at most a power to be integrated peacefully into the international system, Wang's essays address the period when China is strong, getting stronger, and a recognized influence on international norms and practices. Power, as Schwartz noted, matters. 'If China were not rising,' Wang writes, 'China's cultural problems would only have been of interest to the Chinese themselves.'<sup>27</sup>

In an era of China's fourth rise defined by its manufacturing and financial power, what he calls 'economic global', China has turned a corner. 'For the first time in its history,' Wang wrote in 2009, 'China is reaching across the waves and shooting for the stars.' The long-distance trade of the tribute system never challenged the Chinese imperial system but now China is transforming and being transformed by its economic connections with the world in unprecedented ways.<sup>28</sup>

In a 2005 chapter positively assessing China's role in Southeast Asian affairs, he refers to a 'hard headed realism, free from outdated rhetoric, is necessary until

China feels secure and confident enough to redefine itself distinctively in ways that the modern world would respect.'<sup>29</sup> Four years later he portrays China as having adapted very effectively to the UN and other institutions devised by the US and its allies after World War II. As representatives of a 'status quo' power in the UN system and other multilateral institutions, Chinese diplomats have mastered quickly their operations, not just obeying the rules but often more purist in traditional interpretations of matters of territoriality and national sovereignty.

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

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

The essay identifies three strands in the existing world order that China seeks to strengthen: a balanced and restraining multi-polar system; a rule-based global market economy; and a world of modern, rational and secular civilizations. The secularism it has in mind is based on a humanistic rationality compatible with the enlightenment histories experienced by the other members of the P5. And it is grafted onto communitarian and family-based values.<sup>30</sup>

Wang and Zheng Yongnian develop the argument further in the introduction to the volume, claiming that the hegemonic understanding of the international order is quickly corroding. In looking at the domestic sources of Chinese views, they stress the erosion of ideological legitimacy and the rise of nationalism. Referring to Fairbank's *China's World Order*, they emphasize the need for outside-in and inside-out interpretations of how views of world order reflect domestic order, especially in the areas of nationalism, sovereignty and civil-military relations. And they reinforce the argument that China wants 'a balanced multi-polar world order capable of restraining the United States, but does not want to challenge the US itself'. Chinese officials are generally comfortable with the world's principal international institutions while being unhappy with US dominance and an alliance system that they see will unravel in due course.<sup>31</sup>

Coeval with this long-term view is a self-confidence born of economic success and expanding political influence. China has a long way to go before its views on world order can be seen as credible or inspiring when compared with the values

(if not the practice) espoused by the United States and the West. China's communitarianism does not seriously challenge the American dream. However, it has already been successful in challenging some of the ideals that only a few years ago were seen by many Americans as universal. Fred Bergsten and his co-authors recently acknowledged this point when they wrote that 'China's rise in influence can be viewed as a prism through which the United States might look afresh at its own international principles and priorities, reaffirming many and reassessing others'.<sup>32</sup> Wang notes that while China may be responding to Western demands, it is doing so in its own way and at its own speed, 'whatever is necessary to sustain civilized living and integrate modern ideas with the best of its own heritage'.<sup>33</sup>

Wang understands that China's role is viewed with scepticism and hostility by many, partly because of its military modernization programme but more importantly because it is not obeying 'universal norms' that include individual freedom, democracy and human rights protected by the rule of law. 'Until the nation does so,' he states, 'critics see China's dramatic economic achievements as measures to strengthen an authoritarian state capitalism that keeps the regime indefinitely in power.'<sup>34</sup> And he has taken on directly the concerns about 'the China threat,' particularly as portrayed by China's neighbours in South East Asia where memories of China's history as the dominant empire in Asia combine with concerns about its comparative wealth and power and the fear that the Middle Kingdom will restore an updated version of its traditional tributary system. He acknowledges the legitimacy of complaints about Chinese claims in the South China Sea, but argues that the worries about resurgent Middle Kingdomism and territorial expansionism are misplaced. Though a latecomer to regional multilateralism, China has proven particularly adept at soothing regional sensitivities and building trust and confidence. It has been 'flexible and pragmatic' in dealing with its neighbours and has paid 'great attention to international niceties'.<sup>35</sup>

### Elusive universalisms: democracy and human rights

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

Fairbank saw in the episode the 'bankruptcy of the heritage left by the Imperial Confucianism of the Neo-Confucian establishment' and the suppression of even the modest pluralism required for civil society. The movement toward civil society in China may be a historical trend but was very unlikely to lead to the Western type of democracy 'with free elections, representative government, and human rights guaranteed by law'. In one of the last sentences he would write, he stated 'We outsiders can offer China advice about the overriding need for human rights, but until we can set an example by curbing our own media violence and the drug and gun industries, we can hardly urge China to be more like us.'<sup>36</sup>

Wang took a slightly different position. In a lecture a few months after Tiananmen, 'Outside the Chinese Revolution', he drew a portrait of two characters in contemporary Chinese history: 'Mr. Science' and 'Mr. Democracy', noting the heavy emphasis in China at that time on the former. He suggested that the two are inseparable: 'Mr. Science needs freedom, to be free to think, to innovate, to challenge and criticize, free from obscurant bureaucrats and rigid authoritarian systems, no less than Mr. Democracy does.' Without calling for democracy now, he pointed to China's need for 'the democratic spirit' in a fair legal system, free speech, checks and balances to counter corruption and mal-administration; and making lawful the right to criticize those in power.<sup>37</sup>

A year later he pointed to the steady rise of China's influence and international reputation in the decade after the Open Door of 1979 and how this was wounded by the outrage and disappointment that Tiananmen produced. Like Fairbank, he saw it as a reversion back to the practice of one voice that brooks no challenge. But unlike Fairbank, he expected more. 'So long as China remains fearful of political change and insists on the constraints it has so far imposed on itself, it will not be able to allow its scientists, technologists, and other intellectuals, let alone all its people, to be free and creative to utilize the rich resources of the country efficiently ... What could they not achieve if they became partners in the running of their own country instead of remaining submissive subjects?'<sup>38</sup>

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

And for Wang it is still uncertain whether China can adjust its culture state to the nation-state model of the West. One possibility is that China will indeed accept the norms and rules of the present international system as 'practicable ideals' for the creation of a new world order, conceiving of them as 'not Western but merely modern, with the possibility of becoming universal'. Alternatively, there is the possibility that China will emerge as a 'countervailing force' that rejects an international system that is seen as Western rather than modern. In response to the Huntington 'clash of civilizations' thesis, he rejects the view that the West is in decline but states that 'for the first time in two centuries there is convincing evidence of a relative decline of the West'.

His civilizational take on the cultural underpinnings of political contestation leads him to conclude not only that China's long-term response to the state system



is uncertain, but also that it depends on whether those in the West take a defensive approach to defending their values through alliances and encirclement, or whether they try to find common cultural threads.<sup>39</sup>

### From history and historians to international theory and policy practice

In the capstone essay to a journal edition focused on American historians, political scientists and policy analysts, Harry Harding usefully identifies five ways in which history affects China's contemporary foreign relations: as an inherited set of unresolved problems from earlier times; as the images that China holds of others and that others hold of China; as contentious issue in bilateral relations; as broad narratives; and as lessons with positive and negative examples from past strategies and policies.<sup>40</sup>

Between history and policy sit historians, like Fairbank and Wang, who try to give meaning to past events and evaluate national claims about these issues, images, narratives and lessons. The strongest thread that links Fairbank and Wang is the view not only that cultural differences and history matter, but that they need hard and careful study, and that they are a necessary part of an effective path to managing international problems. Their mutual conviction is that the West and China can live together even without complete convergence; that engagement is the best general strategy; and that deeper knowledge and empathy are the key to mutual survival.

History and historians are only one part of understanding and shaping policy outcomes. The amalgam of heritage and modernity, continuity and change, is inherently fluid and infinitely complex. And in contemporary China, the force of globalization and the structure of China's market economy make it increasingly difficult for Chinese leaders to escape the liberal ideology that accompanies capitalism. As Wang has noted, China's past, however skillfully dissected, does not stand still. And in Harding's words, history is important but 'its influence may not be consistent or decisive ... The narratives of the past, and the lessons drawn from them, may be decreasingly relevant in a world that has changed so radically and for a China that has developed so far.'

In light of China's history and contemporary weight, there is increased discussion, especially in Asia, about the need for a distinctive theory of international relations reflective of Chinese experience, material circumstances and vantage point. Is a Chinese school of international affairs needed?

John Fairbank, despite his epistemological pluralism, never made the case for a distinctively or exclusively Chinese theory of international relations. Nor has Wang Gungwu. Whatever their reservations about the universalism of the American experience, they also believe in what we now might call a trans-national society or epistemic community of China scholars. Fairbank, for example, lived in the hope of meeting every China specialist in the world and he found ways to connect many of them to his Harvard enterprise. That said, he rejected the idea of an objective social science or a single theory. He believed in multiple realities and proximate progress. And he valued the differences in opinion, methods and conclusions that came from scholars in different parts of the world. For his part,

Wang has encouraged theoretical speculation and emphasized that the purveyors of one approach should be as aware as possible of the purveyors of others.

The question is more difficult if we shift the frame of reference from the academic to the policy world. Analysts like Barry Desker already discern a distinctive Chinese approach to contemporary world order that they label the 'Beijing consensus'. The preceding 'Washington Consensus' has emphasized elected democracies, sanctity of individual political and civil rights, support for human rights, the promotion of free rights and open markets, recognition of the doctrine of humanitarian intervention. By contrast, the Beijing Consensus centres on the leadership role of the authoritarian party state, good governance rather than electoral democracy, technocratic approaches to government, emphasis on social rights and obligations, reassertion of the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, coupled with support for freer markets coupled with stronger regional and international institutions. Desker is not triumphalist in proclaiming the inevitability or desirability of the Beijing Consensus, nor does he see it as premised on the decline of the West and the rise of the East. He rejects the idea of an inevitable conflict with a rising China and instead sees a possible emergence of shared values reflecting alternative philosophical traditions on individual and state rights.<sup>41</sup>

Desker's perspective has vitality because it resonates with a great deal of thinking in Asia, including in academic circles in China, and draws upon some of the fundamental insights of historians like Fairbank and Wang. For a China that itself was the upholder of a universalism for two thousand years, its confrontation with the current international order puts universalism on a new intellectual and political footing. If we begin from the premise that the current international order is the creation of dominant powers and is neither natural nor perfect, when Robert Zoellick and others ask whether China is a 'responsible stakeholder', the inevitable questions are 'who defines responsible?' and 'on what authority?'

Going further, if the growth of Chinese capacity and power can be compared to that of the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, isn't it reasonable to postulate that every rising power not only shapes international order to meet its interests but injects its values and perspectives into the mix? Sixty years ago Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, Walter Lippman and others grafted a new brand of realism onto the American traditions of idealism, isolationism and exceptionalism. They produced a set of ideas, guiding principles, and an entire intellectual movement that transformed not only US policy but also the study and practice of international relations around the world.

The great strategic issue of our times is not just China's rising power but whether its worldview and applied theory will reproduce, converge with, or take a separate path from the world order and ideas produced in the era of trans-Atlantic dominance. For political scientists and historians alike, it seems inevitable that a distinctive Chinese theory or school are in the making.

### Notes

1 *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 1999).

- 2 See, for example, David M. Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, money and minds* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2008); C. Fred Bergsten, Charles Freeman, Nicholas R. Lardy and Derek J. Mitchell, *China's Rise: Challenges and opportunities* (Peterson Institute for International Economics; Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008); James Kynge, *China Shakes the World: A Titan's breakneck rise and troubled future and the challenge for America* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's soft power is transforming the world* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007); and Robert Ross and Zhu Feng (eds), *China's Ascent: Power, security and the future of international politics* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).
- 3 See, for example, 'How China sees the world', *The Economist* (21 March 2009); Pei Minxin, 'Beijing's closed politics hinder "new diplomacy"', *Financial Times* (12 September 2004); Bates Gill and Michael Schiffer, 'A rising China's rising responsibilities', Working Paper, The Stanley Foundation (November 2008); Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's grand strategy and international security* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).
- 4 Qin Yaqing and Wei Lang, 'Structures, processes, and the socialization of power: East Asia community building and the rise of China', in Ross and Zhu, *China's Ascent*, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
- 5 Paul Evans, *John Fairbank and the American Understanding of Modern China* (Basil Blackwell, 1988); John K. Fairbank, *Chinabound: A fifty-year memoir* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982); and, more recently, John E. Wills, 'How many asymmetries?: Continuities, transformations, and puzzles in the study of Chinese foreign relations', *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, 16(1–2) (Spring–Summer 2009): 23–39.
- 6 There are fragments of auto-biography attached to some of the publications. See, for example, 'The author about himself', in Wang Gungwu, *The Chinese Way: China's position in international relations* (Stockholm: Scandinavian University Press, 1995, as part of the Norwegian Nobel Institute Lecture Series), pp. 79–86.
- 7 Wang Gungwu, 'The fourth rise of China: cultural implications', *China: An International Journal* (September 2004).
- 8 Here I use the Gareth Evans' idea of an 'East Asian hemisphere' that conveniently includes Australia.
- 9 John K. Fairbank, *The United States and China* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 4th rev. and enlarged edition, 1983), p. 477.
- 10 John K. Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800–1985* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p. ix.
- 11 John K. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's foreign relations* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).
- 12 In John K. Fairbank (ed.), *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 204–31.
- 13 Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order*, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Italics added.
- 14 John K. Fairbank, 'China's foreign policy in historical perspective', originally published in *Foreign Affairs* (April 1969) and republished in his collection of essays, *China Perceived: Images and policies in Chinese-American relations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 55.
- 15 Benjamin Schwartz, 'The Chinese perception of world order, past and present', in Fairbank, *Chinese World Order*, *op. cit.*, pp. 278 and 288.
- 16 Fairbank, 'China's foreign policy in historical perspective,' *op. cit.*, in *Foreign Affairs* (April 1969): 42 and 43.
- 17 *Ibid.*: 45.
- 18 Fairbank, *US and China*, *op. cit.*, p. 425.
- 19 *Ibid.* p. 463.
- 20 Fairbank, 'Chinese foreign policy in historical perspective', *op. cit.*: 57. Throughout the 1960s he made the case for 'contact' with China (what we would now call engagement)

- despite Beijing's hostility towards the US. See his 'How to deal with the Chinese revolution', *New York Review of Books* (17 February 1966), reprinted in *China: The people's middle kingdom and the U.S.A.* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).
- 21 Wang Gungwu, 'Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia: A background essay', in Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
- 22 Wang, *The Chinese Way*, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
- 23 Wang Gungwu, 'Historians and early foreign relations', originally published in *The Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* and then republished in *To Act is to Know: Chinese dilemmas* (Singapore: Times Media, Eastern University Press, 2003), pp. 127, 142, 143.
- 24 Wang Gungwu, 'Chinese values and memories of modern war,' a lecture delivered on 17 December 1998 and published in his *Joining the Modern World: Inside and outside China* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2000), pp. 108 and 126.
- 25 Wang, *The Chinese Way*, *op. cit.*, pp. 67 and 68.
- 26 Wang Gungwu, 'Joining the modern world', a lecture delivered on 9 May 2000 and published in his *Joining the Modern World*, *op. cit.*, pp. 6 and 11.
- 27 Wang, 'The fourth rise of China', *op. cit.*: 311.
- 28 Wang Gungwu, 'China rises again,' *Yale Global* (25 March 2009): 2.
- 29 Wang Gungwu, 'China and Southeast Asia: The context of a new beginning', in David Shambaugh (ed.), *Power Shift: China and Asia's new dynamics* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 198.
- 30 Wang Gungwu, 'China and the international order: some historical perspectives', in Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian (eds), *China and the New International Order* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 22, 23, 26 and 29.
- 31 Wang and Zheng, 'Introduction', in *China and the New International Order*, *op. cit.*
- 32 Fred Bergsten *et al.*, *China's Rise: Challenges and opportunities* (Peter Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2008), p. 226.
- 33 Wang, 'China arises again,' *op. cit.*: 4.
- 34 *Ibid.*: 5.
- 35 Wang Gungwu, *China and Southeast Asia: Myths, threats and culture*, East Asia Institute Paper No. 13 (Singapore: World Scientific Press, 1999), p. 47.
- 36 John K. Fairbank, *China: A new history* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 403, 423, 425, 432.
- 37 Wang Gungwu, 'Outside the Chinese revolution', a lecture delivered on 15 May 1989, published in the *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* in 1990 and re-published in his *The Chineseness of China: Selected essays* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 257.
- 38 Wang Gungwu, '1989 and Chinese history', first published as 'China: 1989 in perspective' in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1990* and then republished in his *To Act is to Know*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
- 39 Wang, *China and Southeast Asia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 66–7.
- 40 Harry Harding, 'How the past shapes the present: five ways in which history affects contemporary foreign relations', *The Journal of American East-Asian Relations*, 16(1–2) (Spring–Summer 2009): 133–4.
- 41 Barry Desker, 'Why war is unlikely in Asia', *RSIS Commentaries 71/2008* (27 June 2008); and his earlier lecture on the same topic at the University of Sydney in July 2007, available online at: [http://ciss.econ.usyd.edu.au/events/2007/Desker\\_Hintze\\_Lecture\\_07.pdf](http://ciss.econ.usyd.edu.au/events/2007/Desker_Hintze_Lecture_07.pdf). See also Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2004).