

“Exceptionalism and Chinese National Identity:
How Dangerous is the Exceptionalism Narrative?”

Paper Presented by

Tom De Luca

Professor of Political Science

Director of International Studies Program

Fordham University

113 West 60th St.

New York, NY 10023

tdeluca@fordham.edu

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Introduction

Many people in the United States and China believe themselves to inhabit countries designated for a unique role in world history. The idea of applying the concept of “exceptionalism” to America is better known, going back to John Winthrop’s notion of building “a city upon a hill,” and captured, for example, by Seymour Martin Lipset’s claim that America was “the first new nation.” The notion in the U.S. has not been uniform, having more and less aggressive manifestations, from Jefferson’s “Empire of Liberty” to manifest destiny, from Lincoln’s idea that American democracy would lead by example to President Bush’s “coalition of the willing,” and President Trump’s “make America great again.”

In China almost four years ago, speaking shortly before the Fourth Plenum of the CCP’s 18th Central Committee, President Xi Jinping described how China was exceptional. According to Xi, China’s special character is derived from a combination of the Chinese communist revolution *and* China’s unique character and history: “Several thousand years ago, the Chinese nation trod a path that was different from other nations’ culture and development.” The unique ability to create “socialism with Chinese characteristics’... was decided by our country’s historical inheritance and cultural traditions.”¹ Xi has also famously spoken of the “China Dream,” which both appeals to the desire for a middle-class lifestyle and to desire for China’s return to international preeminence, “as an alternative to the West, with a unique political system and culture, and as a leader in areas including trade, inequality and climate change.”²

Both traditions are rooted in the idea that there is something unique and special about their countries. Each tradition believes this specialness has made it a model. Yet

they are also different. American exceptionalism is more missionary—it can and should be brought to the world. Born within evangelizing religion by immigrant people without deep roots, it presents itself as universalizable. In global terms—so far—it has been more aggressive. Chinese exceptionalism is more self-consciously cultural, tied to a particular people and place. It is a model for others, but a model in which they are likely to remain others. So far, it is relatively less aggressive globally. However, were it to go global it might well remain more obviously Sino-centric.

What is the dominant Chinese exceptionalism narrative? How does it compare with American exceptionalism narratives? What does its ascendance mean for the world?

How to Analyze Exceptionalism

Before turning to these questions let's ask the prior question: what kind of theoretical and political work do exceptionalism narratives play regarding political culture, ideology, and the state?

We often think that stable states are built on the foundation of well-defined nations or national communities. Moreover, we sometimes ignore the work that is being done below the surface to shore up the appearance of stability.

Some scholars make an important distinction between nation-states and national states. Where “nation-states,” in its literal sense, is a more or less perfect marriage between territory and a solid form of primary identification, national states include many that never achieve this degree of synonymy.³ The implication is that to create stable nations from national states such as the United States and China there is important consolidating work to do.

If a nation is an “imagined political community” that is performatively constructed, often by a “national state” that *precedes* the nation, as David Campbell has argued, states are “unavoidably paradoxical entities which do not possess prediscursive, stable identities.” To create an “imagined political community,” territorial borders, multiple identities and their boundaries, and variegated reasons for being must be aligned. But this constituting of the nation proceeds *as if* it is a response to an essential and centered ideal of an already existing nation. For Campbell, states are “never finished entities,” nor can such alignments completely succeed, for to do so would call into question the reason for the state’s being. One manifestation is that “The constant articulation of danger through foreign policy is thus not a threat to a state’s identity or existence: it is its condition of possibility.”⁴

More broadly are the grand narratives, such as “The China Dream,” “The American Dream” and American and Chinese exceptionalism. When Xi Jinping talks about the China Dream, when Donald Trump promise to “make America great again,” they are doing nation building. Such identity formation, however, creates the structural *temptation* to transform what is different into what is other, alien, or evil, and to double-down on this submission when what is different pokes sore spots in their imagined political communities. This temptation exists at both the level of micro politics and macro politics, at the level of individual/citizen and at the level of grand political narrative/state.⁵ The idea that evil lurks to upend the grand narrative of the “imagined political community” can be made palpable through the exercise of state power, as both Xi and Trump, in different ways and with different effect, have demonstrated.

Chinese Exceptionalism

American Exceptionalism has been around for a long time. China, of course, has been around a lot longer and throughout its long history has had its own variants of exceptionalist political culture. Is there a potential clash between Chinese and American exceptionalism?

There are reasons to believe we should take this question more seriously today than at any time since the establishment of the People's Republic. In early days the PRC was far weaker than it is now. Even though it managed to challenge U.S. power in the Korean War, the U.S. easily prevented it from incorporating Taiwan. Since rapprochement between President Nixon and Chairman Mao, and with the "opening up" of China under Deng Xiaoping, relations were easier to manage, especially since China seemed on a pragmatic course. The cat's color doesn't matter, Deng famously proclaimed, as long as it catches mice. There are reasons to believe now, however, that China is now undergoing an ideological revival. For example, Mao Zedong as symbol, used but not really celebrated for many years, is being rehabilitated. Unlike his predecessors, and especially the man he replaced, Hu Jintao, President Xi Jinping "has enthusiastically embraced Mao not only as the party's founding father, but also as a symbol of its commitment to nationalism and populism."⁶ Equally important for this study other figures from China's more distant past are getting another look, especially Confucius. According to President Xi: "to solve China's problems . . . [China needs] to fully make use of the great wisdom accumulated by the Chinese nation over the last 5,000 years."

Is the party manipulating these symbols in order to shore up support during times of serious socioeconomic and political tension? Is it responding to serious ideological

challenges from educated elites, on the one hand an invigorated “New Left,” influential with the party, nationalist, deeply troubled by inequality, and calling for a “reconstruction of socialism,” and on the other neo-Confucianists, whose influence is growing, as indicated by the establishment of the Confucius Academy and Confucius institutes around the world. Is this President Xi’s effort to augment his already enormous power, as he endeavors to boldly put China into the forefront of world politics, eschewing Deng Xiaoping’s strategy of laying low, even as he aggressively wages an anti-corruption campaign, in part used to consolidate support at home?

While some of these movements would seem diametrically opposed to one another, there is now some convergence, especially regarding nationalism and turning to traditional culture as an alternative to Western thinking. This is in a sense an “intellectual backlash” to the emphasis from the 1980s and “opening up” into the 2000s by Chinese intellectuals, business leaders, and some government officials on ideas such as rule of law, free market reform and even democracy.⁷ This renewed nationalism laced with traditional Chinese and traditional Chinese socialist ideology is a site for invigoration of notions of Chinese exceptionalism that have not been overtly emphasized since the pragmatism of Deng took hold.

When Xi spoke ahead of the Fourth Plenum of the party’s 18th Central Committee, he discussed Chinese specialness as being derived from a combination of the 1949 revolution and China’s history. This public attitude toward China’s history is quite different, for example, from that of Mao Zedong. It allows China, somehow, to meld imperial tradition with Marx/Mao/Deng. “It is not a coincidence,” he said, “that we started up ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics.’ It was decided by our country’s

historical inheritance and cultural traditions.” While history is “created by the people” so too is “civilization.” He concluded: “We should be more respectful and mindful of 5,000 years of continuous Chinese culture.”⁸ So while the CCP is guided by Chinese communism, derived from Marx, Lenin, Mao and Deng (“socialism with Chinese characteristics”), he said, “we are not historical nihilists and are not cultural nihilists. We cannot be ignorant of the history of our own country, and we cannot belittle ourselves.” According to Kang Xiaoguang of Renmin University, Xi’s focus on merging historical and contemporary Chinese political culture makes sense: “As Chinese people have more engagement with the outside world, they have a deeper need for self-affirmation.”⁹

Taisu Zhang’s argument that there was an ideological war brewing between Leftist-Confucianism and Western Liberalism seems to be prescient. Under Xi’s leadership it seems those favoring liberalism are in retreat. In this context appeals to exceptionalism are quite powerful, especially if China is going through a period of anxiety and reflection associated with achieving middle income status, or worse, anxiety accompanying economic uncertainty. Moreover, if Susan Shirk is right, and China even before this ideological revival, was a “fragile superpower,” the consequences could be significant. Shirk’s point is that we in the West need to understand that the first priority of Chinese leaders is managing their power resources in their rapidly changing and therefore unstable nation. China may look the behemoth when westerners look in but viewed internally the fragility is more evident. Therefore, to understand why they do what they do in foreign affairs we have to understand their perspective.¹⁰ Perhaps Shirk gives us a way to understand the CPP’s reaction to the Hong Kong Occupy Central movement, putting aside advice to be somewhat conciliatory because of Hong Kong’s

financial importance, to protect mainland-Taiwan relations, and protect its international reputation. According to Zhang, “it soon became clear that the party was far more concerned with the domestic reaction to its Hong Kong strategy than with the international one.”¹¹ China’s “fragility,” economic uncertainties, and renewed ideological “struggle” are a recipe for various actors, especially those in the party-state, to seek re-enchantment of their rule through a modernized notion of why China is (still) “all under heaven.” Will it play a role deeper than simply one of benign “self-affirmation”? Will it become a way China justifies political behavior at home and abroad? What might the consequences for international affairs be? For example, are recent Chinese affirmations of maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea calculated moves for some combination of geostrategic, and domestic political reasons, or are they a Chinese version of a kind of Manifest Destiny with Chinese characteristics, a carving out of a special place for China to which others are expected to show obeisance—or are these really all part of the same thing?

To begin to answer these questions let’s briefly review China’s own versions of its exceptional qualities. Feng Zhang distinguishes three broad expressions of Chinese exceptionalism: the imperial period (221BC-AD1911), the revolutionary period of the PRC (1949-1979) and the contemporary period.

The most distinctive notion of the imperial period is Sinocentric Tianxiaism—the idea that China is at the center of the known world with preeminent Confucian moral authority. While there are differences with time, place, and dynasty (or competing “dynasties”), this view of the natural order of things included “benevolent pacifism in policy conduct, and magnanimous inclusionism in foreign relations.” While China was at

the center, the Chinese also saw themselves, as the first Ming emperor Hongwu wrote to Japan, “bringing mutual peace and calm to all countries far and near so that the good fortunes of peace may be enjoyed by all.” His son the Yongle emperor went further offering also hospitality and implying foreign polities could be part the family of Chinese civilization.

For Mao China naturally deserved a central place in world affairs, in the end, as Steven Levine argued, based on ontology rather than behavior. The grounding for the claim was that this once peaceful great power was a victim of imperialism and its policies were based on universal principles not expediency. Mao’s exceptionalism may be viewed as a kind of “great power entitlement and moral superiority,” according to Zhang, a revolutionary Tianxiaism as “Mao attempted to carve out a unique Chinese way of realizing worldwide communism.” In other words, tradition somehow melded with revolution combined into a Sinocentrism in which China was both a model for the oppressed and the center of revolutionary aspirations.

Regarding the present, Zhang points to three exceptionalist components: “great power reformism, benevolent pacifism, and harmonious inclusionism.” Great power reformism is the idea China will break from the violent paths of other rising powers, working for mutual development with other countries, and “reform world politics through the development and practice of its unique international relations principles and ideals.” This claim is in a sense made possible by that of benevolent pacifism grounded, so the thinking goes, in Chinese culture and earlier imperial practice, which also assimilated other cultures rather than oppressing them, and in Chinese suffering at the hands of the west and Japan. The result is a peaceful foreign policy, that doesn’t threaten others in

order to rise; quite the contrary—whose development helps ensure peace. Harmonious inclusionism is different from the imperial variety because it is, so far, less Sinocentric, stressing accommodation with others rather than Chinese magnanimity. Harmonious inclusionism itself has several sources: the Confucian idea from the *Analects* of “harmony with difference” emphasizing mutual understanding and respect; this creates a philosophy and logic that leads to a “great harmony” or “harmonious world;” finally neo-Tianxiaism, which includes all cultures as independent equals, and thereby creates universal values.¹²

As with American Exceptionalism, much can be said to demythologize aspects of these Chinese narratives. Clearly, they are based on selective readings and interpretations of Chinese history. For one thing Chinese history has multiple traditions, including *realpolitik*. Moreover, many who articulate ideas such as Chinese pacifism and inclusionism essentialize both the West as well as China: “certain aspects of history and culture are selected to fit exceptionalist narratives, and in the process create myths.”¹³

As with American varieties, Chinese notions of exceptionalism also serve purposes at different points in Chinese history. For example, as pacifist discourse has endeavored to put contemporary Chinese leaders on a higher moral ground, it eases fear about a rising China, creating a favorable international reception for that rise. It will be interesting to see how China’s recent maritime bellicosity is understood in light of the central tenet of Chinese pacifism.

William Callahan goes further than Zhang identifying versions of exceptionalism he calls “Sino-speak”— “the emerging dialect for the new orientalism.” He writes that it is of consequence because it is promoted by government, media, and official academia. It

proposes not a post-hegemonic world, but a new form of hegemony: “Sino-speak asserts China as the center of Asia not as a nation-state, but as a civilization-state, a military-state, an empire-state, and a party-state.” Some promote Chinese superior civilization, some even see China as the “yellow race” competing with the “white race.” Some try to reverse history, making a modern “neo-tributary” system challenge Westphalia “to rewrite the wrongs of China’s Century of National Humiliation (1840-1949).” In the end, Callahan writes, “Euro-centrism is replaced by Sino-centrism, Westernization is replaced by Easternization, and American exceptionalism is replaced by Chinese exceptionalism.”¹⁴

Benjamin Ho also sees a claim to exceptionalism on the part of China in world affairs. He argues that, unlike the American version, it is not missionary, intended to remake the world, but rather to have greater influence, consolidate its growing interests for the purpose of ensuring its own prosperity, and to present itself as a global, credible, and moral stakeholder. Ho sees this effort going back at least as far as 2005, when then President Hu Jintao spoke of a “harmonious world” “as a new concept of world order” during a UN speech.¹⁵ According to Ho, following Callahan, this signaled that Deng Xiaoping’s strategy of laying low was coming to an end. Even before that Yan Xuetong had argued that “[Their] history of superpower status makes the Chinese people very proud of their country on the one hand, and on the other hand very sad about China’s current international status. They believe China’s decline is a historical mistake which they should correct.”¹⁶ Ho argues that Chinese exceptionalism in world affairs is meeting this need.

Chinese exceptionalism has other clear ideological uses. The three components of Chinese exceptionalism that Feng Zhang points to—great power reformism, harmonious inclusionism and, of course, benevolent pacifism—all seek to present China as a “peaceful power.” Zhang argues, such

pacifist discourse also has important political and ideological functions for the current government. In addition to elevating China to the moral high ground, it is also meant to dissipate the fear and suspicion about a rising China and to create a friendly regional and international environment for its re-emergence. . . In this sense exceptionalism is in part a product of the ideological discourse to facilitate China’s rise—and an example of the use of history and culture to discursively counter structural pressures from the international system.¹⁷

In fact, Chinese at various levels have gone out of their way to highlight its defensive character, even in terms of military strategy, and that Chinese political culture honors peace, as former Premier Wen Jiabao said in 2003: “Peace loving has been a time-honoured quality of the Chinese nation.”¹⁸ Even some western scholars have pointed to Chinese Confucian culture and its “pacifist bias.”¹⁹

Ho argues that more important than the truth of any of these claims is how China “views its present position in the globe vis-à-vis other global powers and the interests that it intends to preserve.” These narratives undoubtedly have some geostrategic purposes on how China can maximize assets and minimize liabilities. For Ho, the key question “concerning how the Chinese view themselves—both at the upper echelons and within the rank-and-file—remains largely unanswered. Without understanding the lens by which China sees itself and the world, it would be difficult to reconcile competing claims—

benign or belligerent—over Beijing’s intentions and the future that is charted in China’s relations with the rest of the globe.”²⁰ One possible clue is that

the historical argument concerning Chinese rights masks a larger issue at stake, which is, the sense of entitlement that China ought to receive from the rest of the world if it had not been subjected to Western intrusion for the most part of the past two hundred years. As such, Chinese leaders view the country’s rise as providing an opportunity to claim an existential right to react against a Western-dominated international order which have in the past resulted in Chinese misfortunes.²¹

Does China eschew a missionary role as Robert Kaplan argues, instead focused on securing strategic resources? In that case, exceptionalism rhetoric would play a largely symbolic role to shore up domestic support and calm down international interlocutors. Or is it emblematic of a desire, as Ho puts it, especially given distrust of the U.S., to “defend its interests on its own terms without being overly restricted by the international system which is perceived to be Western-biased.” Or is it emblematic, as interviews with leaders seem to indicate, of four guiding principles of Chinese political thought: “(i) a sense of pride in Chinese ancient civilisation; (ii) the need for social stability; (iii) a sense of responsibility to the Chinese people and; (iv) a vision of a peaceful development and harmonious world.” Or as Feng Zhang says, does it reflect these various principles, historical grievances, historical pride, and strategic and political needs, as “creation of the complex interplay between contemporary political needs (both domestic and foreign), international structural constraints, and the exploitability of China’s vast historical and cultural resources.” In any case, Ho worries that China’s distrust of other actors could

lead to dangerous tensions, becoming “a self-fulfilling prophecy in which a paranoid China adopts an increasingly confrontational regional posture” undercutting Chinese exceptionalism’s potential to be a force for goodwill.²²

One major way in which Chinese exceptionalism is expressed is through the idea of the Chinese Dream that has particularly been popularized by President Xi Jinping. As he put it in his October 18, 2017 speech to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China: to “*work tirelessly to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.*”²³ Many of the relevant themes are captured in his perception of China’s contribution to global governance, peace and development. They are worth quoting at length:

China champions the development of a community with a shared future for mankind, and has encouraged the evolution of the global governance system. With this we have seen a further rise in China’s international influence, ability to inspire, and power to shape; and China has made great new contributions to global peace and development. . .

With decades of hard work, socialism with Chinese characteristics has crossed the threshold into a new era. This is a new historic juncture in China’s development.

This is what socialism with Chinese characteristics entering a new era means:

The Chinese nation, which since modern times began had endured so much for so long, has achieved a tremendous transformation: it has stood up, grown rich, and is becoming strong; it has come to embrace the brilliant prospects of rejuvenation. It means that scientific socialism is full of vitality in 21st century China, and that the banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics is now flying high and proud for all to see. It means that the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics have kept developing, blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind.²⁴

As Xi put it, China is entering into a new era in the development of the People's Republic, whose project is one of "national rejuvenation," which "has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since modern times began." This project will require "full confidence in our culture." And as it rejuvenates itself, he claims, China will "continue to hold high the banner of peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit and uphold its fundamental foreign policy goal of preserving world peace and promoting common development." While always defending its interests it will never pursue its own development at the expense of others, and "never seek hegemony or engage in expansion."²⁵

Xi's speech is, of course, also noteworthy in that he has managed to propel himself into the top tier of historic Chinese leaders in the Communist Party Era, alongside Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. According to Elizabeth Economy, he is a

transformative leader who “believes that in order to reclaim China’s historic greatness, its centrality in the world, that China needs a strong leader—and he is the person for the job.” According to Economy, “Xi Jinping sits on top of the Communist party, the Communist party sits on top of China, and China sits on top of the world.”²⁶

It’s hard to know to what degree the vision of the China Dream and the broader idea of Chinese exceptionalism is precious to the Chinese people. Many commentators, both Chinese and foreign, have noted the rise in nationalism in China. Moreover, since 2010, annual surveys taken by the Pew Research Center “show more than 80% of Chinese are satisfied with the direction of their country. Three-quarters of the Chinese surveyed by Pew last year see China playing a bigger role in global affairs than 10 years ago, and 60% view China's involvement in the global economy as positive.”²⁷ Given a series of problems in the West, and the U.S., from the financial crisis, terrorism, Brexit, to the election of Donald Trump, Xi and his program may have greater appeal than during Deng’s “opening up” era. According to Orville Schell, “What people are starting to feel is pride. It's the pride of being listened to, or forcing people to listen to you.” He concludes. “The idea of greatness for China—because they've experienced weakness—gravitates around the idea of power.”²⁸

Callahan argues that ideas such as the China Dream or the American Dream are never simply jingoistic calls to patriotism. Emerging during times of crisis, “the normative politics of national belonging,” embodied by these dreams, “involve a combination of celebration and lamentation that mixes aspirations and anxieties[:]” “Alongside the celebration, there is always a lamentation about missed opportunities and

lost greatness.”²⁹ Such “dreams” can have a critical edge, even though it may be one of a conservative looking back nostalgically to (sometimes imagined) better times or institutions than those of the present. For a rapidly changing China, becoming increasingly a society focused on money, the China Dream has in the past provided the pivot for a debate over what the new (or renewed old) moral center should be. As Callahan suggests such dreams of nation “are exemplary sites of the normative politics of national belonging.”³⁰ And before Xi’s adoption of the idea a robust debate did take place, for example, between nativists, internationalists, and others. However, with Xi’s cooptation of the idea—back in November of 2012, that “the ‘China Dream’ is for the ‘great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’³¹—turning it essentially into state policy, it has also become clearly disciplinary—not just a site of imagining what might be, but also what shall not be, for example, not dreams of constitutionalism or human rights, “primarily employed by the party-state to mobilise support for the Xi’s narrow vision of national belonging in the PRC.” Trump’s dream strives, without similar success, so far, for similar effect.

One can also read Xi’s China Dream as suggesting China’s World Dream. Perhaps beginning with an “Asia-Pacific Dream” integrating the Eurasian-Pacific region, through the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Silk Road Fund, and Xi’s criticism of the structure of Asian security, with U.S. alliances at the center—“Xi’s Asia-Pacific Dream is more continental, state-centric and Sinocentric.”³² It’s an “Asia for Asians” narrative with the strategic goal of excluding the U.S. while complementing Xi’s (China Dream) rejection of so-called “western values” such as civil society, constitutionalism and liberal democracy. In Callahan’s view:

The way that the China Dream has been expanded into the Asia-Pacific Dream and the World Dream shows that the battle over values in the PRC is being won by those who promote an exceptionalist view of 'China'. The normative politics of national belonging here does not simply invoke a nativistic version of the Chinese nation; it also looks to belonging to an Asia, and perhaps a world, that is informed by a globalisation of China's national values.³³

If this argument is correct, then perhaps Chinese exceptionalism may have more similarity with American exceptionalism than is often acknowledged.

Chinese and American Exceptionalism Compared

The first question many would ask of each exceptionalist narrative is whether it is true or not. While the truth of these narratives is of course of great importance, here it is not really the point. Rather we are concerned with the influence they might or might not have on behavior. Callahan, for example, addresses the point this way: the exceptionalist narratives on each side of the Pacific "mobilize hard-core activists in both Beijing and Washington to defend their respective national identities, interests, and security against new threats and age-old others."³⁴ His comment seems best positioned to address the harder or more offensively oriented versions of exceptionalism within each country. However, even in the softer or more defensive versions it would make sense to say that such narratives create sets of expectations about questions with implications for policy and behavior: what does my country look like compared to others? What is really at our national core and when is it being violated? What role should our country play in its part

of the world, and in the world in general? And ultimately: who are we? And, thereby, who are they?

As we answer these questions, and in the way we answer them, we are constructing a nation. In the beginning of this essay we discussed the role states can play in nation construction. Ideas about exceptionalism can provide road maps for state actors to use the levers of state power, with which they can then mold the ideas. In doing so they help create the parameters for legitimate conceptions of the nation.

This is reminiscent of debates over the meaning of key political ideas such as “freedom,” “liberty,” “equality,” “justice,” and democracy—what have been called essentially contested concepts. There is a core to each idea but the articulation of it in different hands can come to radically different conclusions as to what the ideal should really mean.³⁵

Some scholars believe that one important difference between American and Chinese exceptionalism is that the basic outline of American exceptionalism has been well established for many years and is stable, while ideas about Chinese exceptionalism are unstable and evolving as China has undergone rapid changes. However, as Chinese more than before embrace exceptionalist rhetoric, they may be filling in an ideological gap left due to Deng’s move away from Maoist socialism. The need for its articulation may be commensurately greater than it is in the U.S.

There are a number of ways the core ideas of American or Chinese exceptionalism can be distilled. In the American case religion played an early and continuing role, especially the idea of Americans as a people chosen to be a counter-example to Europe’s corruption, perhaps to lead others away from it; so too did key ideas

of political liberalism and later democracy that led in the same direction. The idea of America as a land blessed has connotations of abundance given to a worthy people, with the “frontier” as a figurative and literal site of infinite possibility, with one of those blessings being physical separation from the old, corrupt world. These ideas work together. Physical separation allows pure development. Being “chosen” suggests superior ideas of political formation. Abundance allows room for freedom. And so on. Again, we have to stay tuned to the mythic quality of some of these notions as much as to their factual basis. America was abundant but it was also dangerous, and its abundance had to be won by violent conquest. This danger and conquest undoubtedly fed the exceptionalist narrative of being chosen and uncorrupted, as the violence of conquest and settlement was projected outward onto the “savage” others contesting the newcomers for the land and resources and over how to organize life, and justifying the violence in part by the notion that conquered others were irresponsible shepherds of the land.

Different notions of American exceptionalism will play up different qualities. Some would emphasize the religious nature of America’s inheritance, others would point to the superiority and rationality of its political and economic institutions. Some would see the two going hand in hand. In formulating these ideas different conceptions would give different foundational reasons as to why America deserved its riches. From the point of view of relations with China (and other nations) a central question is, whatever admixture of exceptionalism you come up with, what will you do with it? Evangelize with the force of arms if need be? Isolate and remain a model but only a model for others to choose? Others have put it this way: is American exceptionalism offensive or defensive in character? Related to these questions is a deeper one: are other nations (other

peoples) of the world really capable of being like America (like Americans)? Are its principles, its character, really universalizable? Samuel Huntington, for one, famously said no in his famous work *Clash of Civilizations*.³⁶ But I think he thought America exceptional.

How can we distill Chinese exceptionalism? At its core perhaps it is cultural, and the key cultural conflict is that between civilization and barbarism, where “Chinese civilisation thus was seen as uniquely superior to everything else, and China as the natural centre of Asia, if not the world.”³⁷ Is this the sense of China that has reemerged in neo-socialist China and the values crisis China is experiencing?

Sinocentrism has always been at the heart of Chinese exceptionalism and remains so today. Where the imperial period emphasized alleged pacifism and inclusionism, these revolved around the Middle Kingdom as the special civilization distinguished by moral worth. Mao’s China saw itself as morally superior, both entitled to be a great power again, and specially qualified by character to lead the world’s oppressed. In today’s China the core ideas of China as a different kind of great power, one that eschews power politics, rises peacefully, and “provide[s] a new ideal for the common development of all countries in the world.”³⁸ Concomitantly its foreign policy will be peaceful (Chinese culture is inherently peaceful) and benevolent, and its policy and attitude toward others inclusive and accommodating. One way to encapsulate similarity and differences between these three periods might be imperial tianxiaism, revolutionary tianxiaism, and neotianxiaism. But in each case China is “under heaven” (*tian xia*). In what particular sense is China at the center of the world in each of these narratives?

Where American exceptionalism is defined by the idea that it was the “first new nation,” the “city on a hill,” shining a beacon for all to follow, Chinese exceptionalism looks back to its long, continuing “first ancient civilization.” Where Americans focus on freedom and democracy, “Chinese exceptionalists see their country as a peaceful [in spite a violent imperial history] and harmonious alternative to American ‘hegemony.’”

If China, as Callahan argues, is in reality, locating “the correct formula for Asia’s future in China’s imperial past,” such a Sino-centric view is troubling indeed. According to Callahan:

Among Chinese public intellectuals, there is much talk about the ‘Under-Heaven’ system (Tianxia) as the model for the twenty-first century (Zhao 2011). This switches from the UN model of an international system of legally equal nation-states to a hierarchical tributary system that is centred on Beijing. The goal of the China Dream is to restore China’s ‘natural position’ at the centre of the world – as it was before the Industrial Revolution. This new interpretation of Confucianism’s hierarchical system values order over freedom, ethics over law and elite governance over democracy and human rights (see Zhao 2011).³⁹

Although Chinese exceptionalism today resonates with classical notions about China’s special place in the world, some contemporary Chinese thinkers see China as a mirror image of the west, essentializing each in the process. This would seem to be a potent recipe for conflict with the United States. However, as we look at each country it is also important to remember that different elements of the exceptionalist narratives that develop are themselves related to the realities of different times and places.

Revolutionary America did carve out a frontier (a border between conquest and future conquest) and push it west. China was the largest power in its known world and dominated, usually, countries at its periphery. China had been humiliated and Mao came to the fore as European colonialism was coming to an end, questioning European and American power. And there was a pool of newly liberated countries as possible adherents or supplicants. To succeed economically, post-Maoist China had no choice but to “peacefully rise” or it would have been shut out of the world’s liberal economic system. In short, international (and domestic) realities affect the aspects of exceptionalism embraced. As China has become more powerful we see the state exceptionalism narrative employed by President Xi, in part, to undergird political stability. However, if its power stagnates, and becomes less stable at home in the way Shirk cautions about, how will that circumstance affect its notions of exceptionalism and internal nationalist debates? Certainly to counter delegitimization of the party-state an even more strident version of exceptionalism could be a useful ideological tool, especially if it focuses even more blame on foreigners or internal dissenters for China’s troubles.

Similarly in America, if its relative power declines how will that affect America’s sense of its specialness? For to hold onto belief in the exceptional character of Americaness, it may have to find others to blame for decline. Some of those others will be domestic, others foreign. Donald Trump has promoted China as America’s number one enemy, at least economically, along with our incompetent leaders—how else to explain our great country’s economic doldrums? If Bonnie Honig is right in her assessment of the ambivalent relationship Americans have to foreignness,⁴⁰ will exceptionalism turn its ire inward against immigrants to protect its core assumptions, or

outward toward others, such as China? Or will the exceptionalist story of America as a nation of immigrants who pull together will out?

As we review the core ideas of American and Chinese exceptionalism, then, we are struck by how historically rooted the narratives are, and how while each has certain core assumptions the overall trajectory of the ideas, and where they lead, has never been completely fixed. That's why there is both some truth and some reason for skepticism in looking at Henry Kissinger's comparison between American and Chinese exceptionalism in his book *On China*. According to Kissinger:

Like the United States, China thought of itself as playing a special role. But it never espoused the American notion of universalism to spread its values around the world. It confined itself to controlling the barbarians immediately at its doorstep. It strove for tributary states like Korea to recognize China's special status, and in return, it conferred benefits such as trading rights. As for the remote barbarians such as Europeans about whom they knew little, the Chinese maintained a friendly, if condescending, aloofness. They had little interest in converting them to Chinese ways.

For the Chinese, he thinks, it was “impractical to contemplate influencing countries that nature had given the misfortune of locating at such a great distance from China. In the Chinese version of exceptionalism, China did not export its ideas but let others come to seek them. Those who did not defer to China were considered “barbarians.”⁴¹ Or as Roger Cohen, a columnist for the *New York Times*, wrote, China sees itself “as a uniquely non-expansionist power over millennia of history, bringing harmony in a Confucian expression of its benevolence—a China standing in contrast to the predatory West.”⁴²

These accounts have at their basis different core ideas of each national character, with each convinced of its greatness in different ways. The Chinese as more passive, inward, exclusionary, peaceful. The Americans as active, outward, inclusionary, aggressive.

But this standard comparison may miss important elements that at least need consideration. There has always been in the United States a strong isolationist streak, and also an attitude that country (and people) should (only) lead by example. There are also those, Huntington is one example, who don't think the American model is really universal, exportable everywhere, and certainly not to China. The implications of the version of exceptionalism embraced by Lincoln are different than that embraced by Wilson, and both are different from George W. Bush's, whose is different from Obama's, and Trump's.

Furthermore, these differences play out in historical context. It is instructive for example to read President Trump's 2017 national security strategy document next to George W. Bush's from 2002. Both evince American exceptionalism, and both speak of U.S.-Chinese relations. Bush's document talks as if China had seen the light of full economic liberalization, believing it would lead China to political liberalization as well. He writes in his introductory letter: "Chinese leaders are discovering that economic freedom is the only source of national wealth. In time, they will find that social and political freedom is the only source of national greatness. America will encourage the advancement of democracy and economic openness in both nations, because these are the best foundations for domestic stability and international order."⁴³ Trump's document is quite different:

China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence.⁴⁴

Therefore, rather than developing ideas that each nation has a single, if imagined, national identity, even ideas about exceptionalism in each country, according to Callahan, can grow “out of vigorous normative debates about national belonging.” As we see above, these arguments and debates can shift with time and circumstance, including how they are applied to external actors. They may also, internally, have common poles of debate, for example, surrounding tensions in the U.S. between freedom and equality, and in China between the individual and the collective: “More generally, they highlight the tension between longing for the true nation, belonging in the actual nation.” More ominously, however, these arguments are now “going global in the soft power politics of a rewarmed Cold War battle between the China Dream and the American Dream.”⁴⁵

China was at times in its history a very powerful empire. But when it was the states it dealt with were usually its tributaries and some of them at least adopted aspects of Chinese culture. For the first time in its history, now, Chinese reach may be global. Will the pacific, inclusive, and consultative outlook based on equality of national sovereignty, and noninterference in the affairs of other states, its leaders espouse (and the resonances some of these ideas have from imperial and revolutionary China) be the best way for the CCP to fulfill its aspirations for China while also holding on to power? Who will win or what bargains will be made in the ideological struggle within China to win the heart and soul of this part of the (end of the?) reform era, and what will be the

implications for thinking about Chinese exceptionalism? And if the Chinese economy stagnates or has serious difficulty, how will exceptionalist rhetoric develop? Who will be blamed for keeping China from its rightful place? How will that rightful place be conceived? In the unlikely event that there is a full-scale trade war between the U.S. and China we may get a quick preview.

In the United States, in which direction will the deep polarization we have witnessed, growing for many years, now take us? In our own political and culture wars will one side prevail or will compromises and bargains be struck, and with what implications for the style of exceptionalism that becomes more dominant. Or will a substantial body of the public actually move away from the standard accounts of American exceptionalism, particularly as the country continues to become more diverse, with more people retaining ties and roots elsewhere? In a 2011 poll Pew found that 46% of Americans disagreed with the statement, "our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others." Forty-nine percent agreed--a drop from 60% in 2002.⁴⁶ Is exceptionalism less gripping than before?

Conclusion

Americans and Chinese are different in many ways and the broad-brush strokes with which each country's exceptionalism is painted are not without some value. However, they sweep too broadly and often too ahistorically. So, to think through the potential danger for the relations between China and the U.S. that exceptionalist ideology poses we might think of which aspect of Chinese or American exceptionalism is ascendant at a given moment. And how much are its aspirations in tension with those of

the other. For a very imperfect analogy, consider that when gears in a machine are properly aligned they mesh; when they are not they clash. Thus, are American and Chinese exceptionalism narratives sufficiently different to mesh? But history is not like a set of gears. It is a shape changer, sometimes unexpectedly and unpredictably. A mortgage crisis in the United States can upend a world economy, in the process undermining the presumed superiority of American economics as a model for China's peaceful rise, thereby weakening economic liberals in China in their contest with the new left there. This propels a certain kind of Chinese exceptionalism narrative. Events like these can set off chains of others that create the context in which certain versions of Chinese or American exceptionalism, offensive or defensive, missionary or not, are more likely to thrive, and others wilt.

The danger in all exceptionalism narratives is that their tendency is to look back to idealized pasts—often focused on conservative values of a fixed social order—that have been lost, usually through some kind of treachery. For the Chinese it was 100 years of humiliation. For the U.S., as Trump tells it, is through weak and incompetent leadership that cares more about (the) “others” than about real Americans.

In either case, as Callahan puts it, the goal is “national perfection”—or perhaps better, *re*-perfection—rather than human liberation. It is a distinctly non-cosmopolitan, non-pluralistic politics of “national belonging.” Yet, these dreams themselves can have emancipatory moments, even if they may be evinced as “patriotic worrying,” on the Chinese side, or Jeremiads, on the American that is, if these dreams aren't essentialized, and, regarding China, for example, the World Dream doesn't become “the China Dream writ large.”⁴⁷

Some have argued that if we look into the American past we can find more and less “capacious” uses of variations within the American dream. Perhaps the same can be said for the China Dream and American and Chinese exceptionalism. This is just a way of underscoring the contingent natures of these ideas and how they are rooted in, and respond to, history, circumstances, and debate. Even if we look to what became of Puritanism in America, what James Morone has called “hellfire nation,” we see competing ideas springing from a common well. On the one hand Victorianism, and on the other the Social Gospel—in turn impulses toward punishing behavior and thinking, and communalism and love of others.⁴⁸ Which of these is the Puritanism that was so central to the ideal of creating a “city on a hill” at the center of most renditions of American exceptionalism? In a sense, both are.

Exceptionalism narratives in the U.S. and China need to be taken seriously for at least two reasons. They help socialize and create the ideological parameters of two very powerful nations. And they both have “gone global.” But they are also more than simple retrograde nationalisms. Perhaps as Callahan says, “both dreams can be used as discursive tools to critically evaluate the nation and the world” because they are both “familiar expressions of nationalism and national belonging” and at the same time “ongoing self/Other coherence-producing performances that help us to question received notions of nationalism and national belonging.”⁴⁹ Perhaps. The proof will be in the political struggles in each country to make them so. In China that has gotten much more difficult in the last five years. In America it is being engaged.

It is impossible in the abstract to answer the question of whether the exceptionalisms of each country will lead to conflict between the U.S. and China, or even

make it more likely. It is possible to say that in and of themselves the logic of each does not *necessarily* lead to conflict. While there are significant differences between the two in ways that potentially are in deep tension with one another, they each have their contending strands, and they each are articulated and change in the context of the real world of ideas, power, and interest. If conflict comes, it will have multiple causes, and if the ideas of exceptionalism are to play an important role, it will be because the most aggressive varieties of each thrive at the same—and just the wrong—time.

NOTES

¹ Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “Xi Jinping on Exceptionalism With Chinese Characteristics,” *New York Times*, October 14 2014, at: http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/14/xi-jinping-on-exceptionalism-with-chinese-characteristics/?_r=0.

² Te-Ping Chen and Josh Chin, “New Challenge to U.S. Power: Chinese Exceptionalism: Once-reticent citizens now see their country as ascendant—and America in decline,” July 25, 2017, *Wall Street Journal*, at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-challenge-to-u-s-power-chinese-exceptionalism-1500993643>.

³ On the distinction between nation-state and national-state see Charles Tilly, *Capital, Coercion, and European States, A.D. 990-1990* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

⁴ Campbell, David, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1992), 11.

⁵ William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 5-6.

⁶ Taisu Zhang, “China’s Coming Ideological Wars,” *Foreign Policy*, March 1, 2016, at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/01/chinas-coming-ideological-wars-new-left-confucius-mao-xi/>

⁷ Taisu Zhang.

⁸ Tatlow. She writes: “Whereas Mao conducted campaigns against Chinese history by opposing Confucian thought, Mr. Xi has exalted it. But not just Confucius. The philosophers Mengzi and Xunzi, the Han dynasty political philosopher Dong Zhongshu, and the Tang dynasty historian Wu Jing all figured heavily in his remarks. Previously, Mr. Xi has drawn on the teachings of Han Fei, the Legalist philosopher who advocated rule with an iron fist. He intimated that drawing on the past was a form of self-confidence and not doing so a form of low self-esteem.”

⁹ Quoted in Tatlow.

¹⁰ Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Taisu Zhang, 6.

¹² Feng Zhang, “The rise of Chinese exceptionalism in international relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 19, October, 2011, pp. 1-10.

¹³ Feng Zhang, 13.

¹⁴ Willam A. Callahan, “Sino-speak: Chinese Exceptionalism and the Politics of History,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 71, February, 2012, pp. 49-51.

¹⁵ Hu Jintao, “努力建设持久和平共同繁荣的和谐世界” [Making an effort to build a sustainable, peaceful, and united prosperous harmonious world, speech at the UN 60th celebration], *People’s Daily*, 16 September 2005. Quoted in Benjamin Ho Tze Ern, “The Rising Chorus of Chinese Exceptionalism,” RSIS Working Paper #256, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Singapore, April 15, 2013.

¹⁶ Yan Xuetong, “The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 10, 2001, pp. 33.

¹⁷ Feng Zhang, “The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 19, October, 2011, p. 13.

¹⁸ “Remarks of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao: Turning Your Eyes to China,” Harvard University, 10 December 2003, accessed on 7 Nov 2012 at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/zt/wfm/t56090.htm>. Quoted in Ho, 3.

¹⁹ Quoted in Ho, 3. See John K. Fairbank, “Varieties of the Chinese Military Experience,” in *Chinese Ways in Warfare*, ed. Frank A. Kierman Jr. and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 7-9; and also Daniel Bell, *China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 35. Ho, 3.

²¹ Ho, 12.

²² Ho, 18.

²³ Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China October 18, 2017. At: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf. Italics in the original. For a similar, albeit much shorter version of some of these themes, see Xi Jinping’s “Speech delivered at the First Session of the 13th National People’s Congress” March 20, 2018 at: <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/articles/184/187/127/1521628772832.html>

²⁴ Xi, 6, 9.

²⁵ Xi, 11, 36, 52, 53.

²⁶ Tom Phillips, “Xi Jinping heralds 'new era' of Chinese power at Communist party congress,” *The Guardian*, October 18, 2017, at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/18/xi-jinping-speech-new-era-chinese-power-party-congress>

²⁷ Te-Ping Chen and Josh Chin, “New Challenge to U.S. Power: Chinese Exceptionalism,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 2017, p. 1, at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-challenge-to-u-s-power-chinese-exceptionalism-1500993643>

²⁸ Quoted in Chen and Chin, op. cit., p. 2.

²⁹ William Callahan, “Dreaming as a critical discourse of national belonging: China Dream, American Dream and world dream,” *Nations and Nationalism*, 23, 2017, pp. 253-263.

³⁰ Callahan, 265.

³¹ Quoted in Callahan, 251.

³² Callahan, 262.

³³ Callahan, 263.

³⁴ Callahan, “Sino-speak,” 51-52.

³⁵ W. B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 1955-1956, reprinted in *The Importance of Language*, ed. Max Black (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962), pp. 121-146.

³⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

³⁷ Callahan, “Dreaming,” 261.

³⁸ Feng Zhang, 7.

³⁹ Callahan, 261-2.

⁴⁰ Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), chapter 4.

⁴¹ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011),

⁴² Roger Cohen, "China Versus America," *The New York Times*, October 20, 2014, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/21/opinion/roger-cohen-china-versus-america.html>

⁴³ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002.

⁴⁴ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Callahan, 252.

⁴⁶ The American-Western European Values Gap: *American Exceptionalism Subsides*, "Cultural Superiority," Pew Research Center, November 17, 2011, at: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/11/17/the-american-western-european-values-gap/>

⁴⁷ Callahan, 253, 264.

⁴⁸ James Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁴⁹ Callahan, 264-6.