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Reflexive Exceptionalism

On the Relevance of Tocqueville’s America for Modern China

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ABSTRACT In this paper I argue that a reflexive type of exceptionalism was articulated by the reformist elites in late imperial China as a cultural strategy to confront and appropriate the hegemonic representation of modern democratic power and Occidental civilization that was articulated on the basis of Tocqueville’s exceptionalist image of America and imposed by Western imperialism. By delineating the temporal and normative structure of this reflexive exceptionalism and reconstructing the quasi-religious meanings of its myths and rituals, I propose that the motif of ‘Confucian religion’ in the reformist study society movement should be understood in terms of its intent to produce and discipline a social power that could be mobilized for China’s ideological and political competition with the West. While the movement ended in failure with the rise of a fundamentalist reaction, the fate of Chinese exceptionalism under the changing power structure of contemporary world society can be properly understood with reference to its historical origin and transformation.

KEYWORDS China, civilization, Confucian religion, exceptionalism, power, reflexivity, study society movement, world society

Introduction: Tocqueville and the Problem of Chinese Exceptionalism

Whether and how America should be considered a unique and exceptional instance in Western and human history is one of the recurrent themes in social science discourse (see, for example, Shafer, 1991). In sociology proper, the idea of American exceptionalism assumes a special significance because it impinges upon the question whether the peculiar characteristics of American society should be...
taken as the basis of comparative investigation and theoretical construction, and its unique developmental trajectory schematized as the general conditions of order, progress, and modernity against which all societies are to be classified, positioned, and evaluated. This analytical strategy is exemplified above all by Talcott Parsons, whose theories of modernity (Parsons, 1971) and societal community (Parsons, 2007) are articulated with explicit reference to American experiences and values. Another notable example is Seymour Martin Lipset, who described his lifelong intellectual endeavor as an effort to analyze American uniqueness. Conceptualized in terms of the ‘American creed’ of freedom, equality, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire, America is compared and contrasted with societies as diverse as Canada and Japan (Lipset, 1996; see also Lockhart, 2003).

A major source of inspiration for Parsons and Lipset comes from Tocqueville’s (2003 [1835, 1840]) classic analysis of America, which remains pervasively influential in setting the terms of debate for relevant sociological inquiries, particularly concerning the conditions of civil society and democracy. In this vein, Bell (1975, 1989) largely follows Tocqueville in arguing that the distinctiveness of America resides in its vibrant civil society, which has been the exceptional outcome of a limited government and is threatened by an expansionist and interventionist state. On the other hand, Bellah’s (1970; Bellah et al., 1985) interpretation of American culture bears the strong stamp of Tocquevillean persuasion in its emphasis on the uniqueness of America as a liberal and religious nation and the diagnosis of individualism as its major dilemma. Finally, Tocqueville’s account of democracy in early modern America is being revived by Putnam and others as an associationalist theory of civil society, which postulates a causal linkage between democratic governance and the social capital generated by participation in voluntary associations, and thus constitutes an institutional account of American exceptionalism and its current crisis (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Edwards et al., 2001).

The relevance of Tocqueville for societies other than America, in particular China, is largely mediated by the analytic and comparative construct of civil society and democracy articulated by his contemporary disciples. In the first place, the associationalist paradigm has been explicitly or implicitly adopted by the studies of the local self-government and civic tradition of late imperial and early republican China (Brook and Frolic, 1997; Fogel and Zarrow, 1997; Lee, 1998) and the ‘associational revolution’ of non-governmental organizations in contemporary China (Wang and He, 2004; Chan et al., 2005). On the other hand, the significance of religion is duly acknowledged in Weller’s (1999) celebrated study of local temples and traditions as the bearers of an ‘alternate civility’ that emerges and consolidates at the rural level of Chinese societies. Finally, the role of politics is addressed in those studies seeking to demonstrate the instability and vulnerability of the authoritarian Chinese government on the basis of its supposedly analogous situation with France’s ancien régime as analyzed by Tocqueville (Chang, 2001; Pei, 1994).
As a contribution to the ongoing debate on exceptionalism from a Chinese perspective, this paper attempts to address a problem that is straightforward though by no means simple: Is there a Chinese exceptionalism? What would be its defining characteristics and steering dynamics? How would it stand in relation to its American counterpart? Instead of examining the applicability to China of the model of democracy and associationalism derived from the American experience, my approach is to consider how the idea of exceptionalism itself, which receives its fullest articulation in Tocqueville's account of America, constitutes the cultural background and horizon of meaning against which China has been positioning and reinventing itself in its evolving project of cultural and political modernity. In place of causal-analytic inquiry, this paper adopts a phenomenological approach in which the validity and adequacy of the exceptionalist model are bracketed in favor of a delineation of the general structure of exceptionalist consciousness and its associated practices.

My purpose in this paper is to probe into the process whereby the idea of ‘the West’ came to be adopted and transformed by China to constitute a corresponding idea and image of its own, and in this way to inaugurate a project of modernity at once articulated with and differentiated from the American and Western model. Here the notion of ‘the West’ is an essentially ambiguous cultural presupposition that entails above all the reduction and incorporation of Tocqueville’s exceptionalist model of America into the conventional (self-)understanding of the Occident concerning its extraordinary strength and moral superiority, or more specifically its unique blend of power and religiosity. My major argument is that a peculiar type of exceptionalism has been articulated as the reflexive response of China to this prevailing ‘model’ or ‘account’ (in a phenomenological, non-analytic sense) of American and more generally Western exceptionalism, the nature of which should be understood with reference to the power structure of a world society that has been significantly shaped by the rise of Occidental modernity.

In order to validate these claims, in the following I will (i) analyze the general structure of exceptionalism as a distinctive form of global and civilizational consciousness on the basis of Offe’s (2005) and Wolin’s (2001) interpretations of Tocqueville; (ii) delineate the nature and characteristics of Chinese exceptionalism as articulated in the late imperial study society movement, in which the Confucian tradition was creatively reconstructed as the symbolic and practical basis of a productive and disciplinary power that could be mobilized in the competition with Christianity and the West; and finally (iii) pinpoint the ways in which the sociopolitical setting of Western imperialism led to the demise of the study society movement and the reflexive exceptionalism it had inaugurated. In the concluding section I will outline the analytical implications of the new form of Chinese exceptionalism that arises when China began to emerge as an economic power in contemporary world society.
The Structure of (American) Exceptionalist Consciousness

At a generalized level, exceptionalism can be defined as a distinctively modern form of historical and moral consciousness, in which a given geopolitical and sociocultural entity, be it ‘America,’ ‘Europe,’ ‘the West,’ or ‘China,’ is conceptually constructed and positioned as a civilizational and institutional complex at once unified with, and differentiated from, other commensurable entities that are situated within the same globalizing context. In the first place, exceptionalist consciousness entails an indispensable reference to world society (Luhmann, 1982, 1997; Meyer et al., 1997) and its universal history as the context of cross-cultural comparison. America could be taken as exceptional only in contrast to a Europe conceived as an Old World, relative to which it was New:

... how is it that in America an order based on equal human freedom leads quite clearly to prosperity and stability, while in Europe even the first steps on the road to such an order end in war, civil war, continual instability, reactionary regression and constant fear of revolutionary uprising by the popular masses?

(Offé, 2005: 12)

Here the difference between America and Europe is seen in a global and universal light, for it concerns whether democracy, as a ‘providential fact’ or world-historical current sweeping across the Atlantic and eventually humankind as a whole, could be generally founded and sustained without the violent corollary of popular uprising, revolutionary terror, and conservative reaction. Hence a certain level of global ‘connectivity’ is presupposed in Tocqueville’s construct of exceptionalism, in which ‘America’ is defined in terms of its unity (as part of the same ‘World’ of Western Christendom and, by extension, of humanity as a whole) and difference (the ‘New’ and ‘Old’ constituents thereof) vis-à-vis ‘Europe.’ Exceptionalism thus entails what might be called a ‘vis-à-vis consciousness’ that arises under the ‘Age of Comparison’ (to paraphrase Nietzsche) characteristic of an emerging world society and an unfolding Occidental and global modernity.

The reference to world society as the relational context of exceptionalist claims can be further elaborated along the historical and the moral dimensions. In Offé’s reconstruction four possible answers to the American question could be yielded by crisscrossing two axes (cf. Offé, 2005: 5–6). While along the temporal axis America could be conceived either as an advance-guard or a latecomer society vis-à-vis Europe, along the normative axis the American experience could be evaluated either as a positive accomplishment of Western civilization or as a symptom of its decadence. For Tocqueville, the liberal democracy that arose in America constituted a positive and viable future to be strived for by Europe, despite the
inherent and universal tendency of democratic society to degenerate into the ‘tyranny of the majority.’ In this vein, America was exceptional because of an absence of ‘history’ – that is, its lack of feudal institutions; as well as a presence of free and civic institutions, in particular the religious sects that contributed to the moral cultivation of democratic habits and the moderation of those passions otherwise liberated and radicalized in the process of class-based revolution and modern state formation (Offe, 2005: 11–13, 28–32).

While Offe rightly analyzes the structure of American exceptionalism along the axes of temporal succession and normative evaluation, by focusing exclusively on the institutional level he fails to recognize that the scale of past and future, as well as that of advanced and backward, is not necessarily dichotomous, asymmetrical, and irreversible. These polarities are, rather, dialectically related to each other, insofar as we recognize that America represents for Tocqueville not only a liberal polity but also a democratic civilization.

According to Wolin’s (2001) interpretation of Tocqueville, American exceptionalism is essentially a conservative and pre-modern solution to the problem of modern democratic power. The stability and prosperity of democracy is possible not because America lacks history, but rather because it preserves and re instituted the feudal heritage embodied in the local township, which represents a revival of the aristocratic political culture (but not its status order) that could serve to forestall the excessive power produced out of the general will of equal and free individuals and at times concentrated in the hands of the sovereign nation-state (that is, the ‘tyranny of the majority’). For Tocqueville, democracy in America was successful not only because ‘America had no feudal past to eradicate,’ but also and more importantly because ‘America had a feudal present’ (Wolin, 2001: 232).

Accordingly, Wolin (2001: 328–9) highlights the strategic role of religion in taming democratic power, which involves the cultivation of moral and social discipline and the provision of a local platform for civic participation. By anchoring democratic political practices in spiritual doctrines and moral discipline, whilst shedding the anachronistic system of aristocratic inequalities, Wolin (2001: 236–7) argues that religion served as the functional equivalent to the feudal institutions that had shaped those habits and customs necessary for countering arbitrary power and sustaining communal liberty. Hence Puritanism was as much a political theory as a religious doctrine, for it brought the liberal ideas and communal practices of the Old World into the Promised Land of America and thereby reintroduced an element of historicity into the constitution of modern power, such that it could be produced and expanded without being overwhelmed by its revolutionary and destructive tendencies (Wolin, 2001: 234–7).

Far from being native and barbaric, the early settlers in America, in particular the Puritans in their ‘errand into the wilderness,’ were a civilized people who refashioned, but did not repudiate, their old European heritage along a
religious and egalitarian direction. The result was a modern civilization unique and exceptional in its blending of religion and liberty:

I have expressed enough to characterize Anglo-American civilization in its true colors. This civilization is the result . . . of two quite distinct ingredients which anywhere else have often ended in war but which Americans have succeeded somehow to meld together in wondrous harmony; namely the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty.

(Tocqueville, 2003 [1835]: 55)

America is thus European civilization rejuvenated, a compromised modernity that was underpinned as much by the liberal and civic institutions of Puritanism as by its religious and mythic meanings. In contrast to the abstract quality and disruptive tendency of modern democratic power, the Puritan religion served to resurrect, in both theory and practice, the connection between the immediate present and the remote past, such that an historical and civilizational continuity could be forged between the ‘Two Worlds’ (Wolin, 2001: 510–11). The democracy Tocqueville found in America thus entails a ‘theoretical’ constitution in the sense not so much of scientific observation as of impressionistic travel in time and space (between the ‘Two Worlds’) and an encounter with difference (Wolin, 2001: 5). Here the unity of and difference between the ‘Two Worlds’ is encapsulated in the ‘mytheoretical’ construct of ‘America,’ which embodies and realizes the egalitarian values and practices inherent in Christian civilization, and yet remained unfulfilled under the sociopolitical conditions of the ancien régime. In this way the various democratic institutions and practices of America acquired the meaning of rituals, which had supposedly served in the distant past to safeguard liberty and equality and could thus be revived in the present (Wolin, 2001: 517).

To recapitulate, exceptionalism consists of the following general elements: (i) connectivity, which refers to the construction of unity and difference of the exceptionalist case vis-à-vis other entities within a world-societal context; (ii) temporality, in which the categories of past, present, and future are invoked for positioning the exceptionalist case along a world-historical scale; (iii) normativity, the evaluation of this temporal positioning in terms of its realization, revival, and institutionalization of value complexes such as liberty and equality; and finally (iv) reflexivity, a (my)theoretical consciousness that links the various institutional and moral practices of the exceptionalist case to an overarching civilizational complex. Specifically, the institutional production and disciplining of power is meaningfully oriented by the quasi-religious myths and rituals of equality, liberty, and any other core values attributable to a civilization.

For our analytical purposes the element of reflexivity in exceptionalist consciousness cannot be overemphasized, since it implies that a second-order exceptionalism is possible. It follows from the reflexive or ‘mytheoretical’ quality of exceptionalism that it could be articulated with reference to an existing exceptionalist claim,
such that a political-cultural entity could identify itself as exceptional by constructing its temporal and normative connections with another supposedly exceptionalist case. By appropriating and transforming the institutional and civilizational practices of a given exceptionalist complex, second-order or reflexive exceptionalism furnishes one of the cultural and political strategies for latecomer societies to counteract and compete with those hegemonic powers proclaiming themselves as exceptional and hence superior and dominant. This is exactly what China attempted to do in its modern encounter with America in particular and the West in general.

**Reflexive Exceptionalism in China: The Late Imperial Study Society Movement**

In this study, ‘reflexive exceptionalism’ is understood as a specific type of exceptionalism that is theoretically and practically oriented to existing and often hegemonic accounts of exceptionalism, with the latter’s truth claims and power techniques problematized. No matter how these claims and techniques are adopted and transformed, the temporal and normative structure of exceptionalism *per se* is replicated by its reflexive offspring, which is likewise comparative in scope, global in repercussion, and conservative in implication. Reflexive exceptionalism is especially relevant for the non-West, since it concerns the very possibility of producing and regulating modern democratic power in a way analogous with the exceptionalist case of America and the West. The identification and reproduction of those ‘exceptional’ qualities that supposedly constitute their key to success is all the more urgent as it impinges upon national survival and revival, which demands nothing less than a fundamental reinvention of tradition and remaking of civilizational order on the part of the non-West.

In the Chinese context, reflexive exceptionalism was first articulated in the study society movement of the late imperial era. Following the ignominious defeat of the Qing dynasty in the Sino-Japanese War in 1894, study societies (*xuehui*) proliferated across China from 1895 to 1898, a period known as the ‘Wuxu Reform’ era. These societies were founded by reformist elites to rebuild the cultural and institutional foundation of a modernizing Chinese state that could be comparable in strength and power to the Western imperialist states. While study societies sought to promote Western learning by means of public lectures and newspapers, their broader purpose was to serve as a platform to imbue the elites and the common people with *civility* and *civilization*, that is, with the collective attributes and normative principles that were held to be constitutive of the strong nations of the West.

The study society movement thus arose at the moment when China was forcibly incorporated into a world society shaped by Western imperialism. To counteract and compete with the West in both power and civility, study societies intended to refurbish Chinese civilization on the basis of those of its characteristics that were comparable to *Christianity*. In this regard the reformist elites of the study society movement vaguely presumed that there must be a single, unified
foundation underlying the tremendous strength and civilized qualities of the Western people. They held that this basis of unity resided in the religious and institutional force of Christianity, which alone could serve to integrate the kings, the elites, and the commoners into one and the same associational fabric and upon which not only national states but also the entire civilization was built.

According to the non-rational and mytheoretical account advanced by the study societies, religion or more generally religiosity was identified as the single most important source of the extraordinary power and civility of the West. In the process, the material and military conditions of its progress as well as the manifold differences between Europe and America that had been thematized by Tocqueville and others were ignored and reduced to one and the same spiritual basis: Christianity. However untenable such a position might seem from a rationalist perspective, its reductionism (or reduction of complexity à la Luhmann) was phenomenologically indispensable for the self-construction of ‘China’ out of its unity with and difference from the presumably self-identical entity of ‘the West.’ Accordingly, the eclectic notion of Confucian religion was proposed as a repertoire of beliefs and practices that sought to represent and reconstruct ‘China’ as a universal and global civilization at once comparable in religiosity and spirituality, and yet distinctive in its Confucian tradition and identity, vis-à-vis its Christian counterpart. In the manner of Puritanism as Tocqueville (and Weber) understood it, Confucianism was a political practice as well as a religious doctrine.

The unity and difference of Confucian religion vis-à-vis Christianity were above all conceived in terms of the temporal (and spatial) unfolding of universal principles. For the study societies, the world society that had taken shape in the imperialist context was structured not only along the power dimension; the various states and nations were further ranked along a universal scale of ‘civility’ and ‘civilization.’ While equality and mutual respect were reserved for the strong, and hence ‘civilized,’ nations, those weak states like China were classified as ‘semi-civilized’ and even ‘barbaric’ peoples who were accordingly susceptible to the deliberate and justifiable intrusions of their civilized counterparts:

The European nations presume the importance of ‘universal principles,’ for which the barbaric states should be treated differently from their civilized counterparts. It would not be brutal to kill their peoples, and not unjust to occupy their territories.

(The Twelfth Public Lecture of the Hunan Study Society, June 6, 1898)

For the study societies, therefore, the notion of ‘civilization’ connoted a universal normative standard that could be somewhat freely invoked by the Western states as an account of their exceptional accomplishment in combining power and strength with moral and religious superiority, and hence a legitimation of their expansionist offensives against the non-West.
But this rhetoric of hegemonic power was taken over by the study societies in such a way that the universal principles of civilization were held to have originated from Confucian religion in the distant past. Here a fundamental unity was posited between Confucianism and Christianity as parts of one and the same religion and civilization. The study societies contended that while different religions were common in embracing the love of humanity as a universal principle and authentic sentiment endowed by Heaven, Christianity stopped at this and failed to grasp, as Confucian religion did, the metaphysical Way of ‘benevolence’ that transcends and governs ‘Everything under the Heavens’ (tianxia). Broad and profound as it is, the principle of benevolence inaugurated by Confucius and followed by the ancient sages and rulers was nevertheless repudiated in the ensuing history of China and yet partially adopted and developed by Christianity.

As the ‘dialectics’ of civilization unfolded, the prospect for a strong and civilized state was held out despite or precisely because of China’s current weakness, such that the imperialist attacks of the West served nothing but the quasi-providential plan of ‘returning’ the religious and moral teachings of Confucius to their origin in China. This mythical account thus presupposed a difference in the level of civility and civilization: while the Westerners had been cultivated as robust, righteous and reliable, the contrary had been true of the Chinese. But with the origin of universal civilization attributed to Confucian religion, the normative order of this difference was reversed, such that the West rather than China should be taken as a latecomer that was only ‘semi-civilized’ or even ‘barbaric’ as measured against the religious and moral status of Confucius. If the partial realization of ‘civility’ and ‘civilization’ in the West could render it so strong, their eventual return to and complete realization in Confucian religion must restore the long-subdued strength and honor of China as the most civilized people and state in the world.

In this counter-rhetoric, the exceptionalist stance of the West was ‘appropriated’ by China: insofar as religion was identified as the constitutive principle of modern sociopolitical power, thanks to the temporal ordering and reordering of unity and difference, China could be related and connected to the West in much the same way as the New and the Old Worlds stood to each other as the successive developmental stages of Occidental civilization. While America was European and Christian civilization rejuvenated, the forced inclusion of China as a non-Western latecomer into world society represented the revival of the universal and global civilization of humanity as a whole. With the revival of Confucian religion in the study society movement of the late imperial period, China could be set apart from the rest of ‘semi-civilized’ and ‘barbaric’ peoples since its present defeat and humiliation in the hands of the West were nothing but a signpost on the road to the future redemption of its past glory, in which the religiosity, civility, and power of China and indeed of all humankind could be revitalized. China was thus exceptional in that it was the only non-Western and non-imperialist state/cultural formation that bore the mission and held out the prospect of realizing a genuinely human civilization that originated from itself as ‘Confucian religion’ and was incompletely realized by Christianity.
But how were the universal principles of Confucian religion and civilization related to the Tocquevillean problem of democracy? Above all this concerned the principles of equality and association supposedly intrinsic to Confucian religion and that had been forfeited to Christianity. The notion of qun or ‘association’ was taken as a metaphysical and moral principle connoting the universal presence of mutuality and association. It was held that this associational principle had been put into practice for two thousand years by the intellectual circles in imperial China, with Confucius and his group of disciples being the exemplar. Yet this tradition was then virtually extinguished in the late imperial period, and the Chinese people were accordingly scattered, disempowered, and vulnerable to the attacks from the civilized West. The strengthening of China thus hinged upon the revival of the study society tradition and the associationalism of Confucian religion.

With regard to the principle of equality, it was widely prescribed among the study societies that their various staffs must be publicly elected by their members, and administrative matters had to be conducted in accordance with the public interest. The origin of this egalitarian spirit and practice was again attributed to the Chinese tradition itself, specifically the ‘village covenant’ that had been devised and implemented by gentry elites to reassert moral and political control over the populace in local villages, and could be accordingly revived as the cultural and institutional equivalent to the local township of the West.

The quasi-religious tone of the study societies was revealed in the significance they attributed to myths and rituals in the constitution of egalitarian and associational community and the production of democratic power. The extraordinary power and civilization of the West was taken to be the result of the involvement of Christian churches and missionaries in the European exploration and conquest of the world. By contrast, the decline of Confucian religion and the imperial state had largely to do with the underdevelopment of study societies as Confucian ‘churches.’ If study societies could be as successful as the Christian churches in promoting their own religion all over the world, China must be able not only to strip itself of the condescending labels of semi-civilization and barbarism, but also to spread the fame of the Confucian civilization to ‘Everything under the Heavens,’ in much the same way as the mission of the early Puritans in America sought to establish the ‘Kingdom of God on Earth.’

At a practical level, public lecturing was explicitly identified as the Confucian way of preaching (chuanjiao). As the core activities of study societies, public lectures entailed not only the acquisition of Western knowledge, but also the quasi-religious rituals that sought to collectively reaffirm the meaning of equality and association. As a token of their publicly elected status, the speakers had to offer their lectures in the middle of the circle of participants, whose seats were thus non-hierarchically arranged. When the lectures concluded, the
speakers would sit among the participants, despite their superior status as recognized intellectuals and prestigious officials.

Apart from representing and producing democratic power, the myths and rituals of Confucian religion were also intended to cultivate the moral and social discipline necessary for curbing the unconstrained passion of the people, and in this way to constitute an egalitarian and associational community in a stable and non-violent fashion. In this vein one of the major concerns of the study society movement was the so-called ‘religious cases’ (jiaoan 教案) proliferating across China during the nineteenth century, which involved the destruction of churches and other ecclesiastical properties, as well as the bullying, expulsion, and killing of missionaries and followers. The violent conflicts were largely a product of the extraterritorial right of Christian missionary preaching conceded to the West by the defeated Qing, which in turn gave rise to the illegitimate intrusion of the Christian churches into local customs and thereby to widespread popular resentment against Christianity.

For the study societies, the religious cases were irrational, irresponsible, and barbaric. The fundamental doctrine of Confucian religion prescribed that a civilized state like China should never treat alien races with violence. Confucius and other sages in antiquity always treated the barbarians with respect and reciprocity. With the passage of time, the Chinese people became so extravagant that they glorified China as the ‘Middle Kingdom’ and derogated all non-Chinese as barbarians. In the contemporary encounter with the West, China eventually recognized that the Earth was round, and that there were no center and periphery as such. If the Chinese remained blind to this ‘providential fact’ and continued to indulge in arrogance and violence against foreigners, they were shamelessly violating Confucius’s religious doctrine. Confucian missionary activity and preaching should be substituted for popular violence as the legitimate means of resistance to Christianity.

More generally, the beliefs and practices of Confucian religion should be taken as the strategy of study societies to contain the potentially destructive forces that were generated from the encounter between peoples. While for Tocqueville the American question was bound up with the moral and social discipline of a demos, in the case of Chinese exceptionalism there was a second-order problem concerning the control of an ethnos, understood as antagonistic toward other peoples (for the distinction between demos and ethnos, see Mann, 2005). If left untamed, such a democratic and ethnic power would posit a serious threat to state survival, not only by engendering the possibility of revolutionary upheaval, but also by inducing imperialist attacks and retaliations, as in the religious cases. Despite its apparent idealism, implicit in the notion of Confucian religion were real pressures – generated by the unequal power setting of imperialism – which imposed upon China the general need to denounce violence in favor of a tighter control of aggressive emotions on the part of its people.
Reflexive Exceptionalism Rejected: The Clash of the Study Society Movement with Confucian Fundamentalism

The study societies originated as a cultural and political intervention when China was forcibly incorporated into a world society that was structured along the conflated dimensions of power and civility. The reflexively exceptionalist construct of Confucian religion, in particular its constitutive principles of civilization, equality, and association, was set forth as a strategy to compete with Christianity and Western imperialism within a global context of power inequalities. While the condition of possibility of China’s reflexive exceptionalism thus resided in its encounter with the West, the imperialist setting at the same time contributed to the failure of this program of political and cultural modernity, which had to do with the rise of Confucian fundamentalism as the enemy of the study societies.

We noted that the encroachments of Christianity and imperialism into the lives of the local populace had led to the numerous ‘religious cases’ in China. What has been left out is the active role of local gentry in articulating and elevating popular discontents into the uncompromising clash of Confucian and Christian civilizations. The fervent and violent defense of Confucianism against Christianity in the religious cases received its classic formulation at the end of the Common Declaration of the Whole Hunan Province that was drafted by local gentry scholars in 1861:

Alas! The doctrines of Jesus prevail, while the teachings of Confucius perish. . . . Every single member of the intellectuals, the peasants, the artisans and the merchants should unite against the common enemy. With us or against us!

(Quoted in Wang, 1984: 6, emphasis added)

The study society members would readily agree with the above statement, with the notable exception of the last sentence. While study societies likewise conceived their confrontation with Western imperialism in terms of the quasi-religious battle between Christianity and Confucianism, they nevertheless called for the ‘civilization’ or discipline of popular power rather than open conflicts and violence. The conservative orientation of local elites and people was therefore symptomatic of an idiosyncratic attitude that could be characterized as fundamentalist in its pointed contrast to the non-violent approach of the study societies in defending Confucian civilization.

Since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when the Qing state was beset by imperialist attacks and internal rebellions, the self-organization of rural communities into local defense associations was no longer prohibited but was rather approved and encouraged. From then on, Chinese society underwent a process of local militarization that culminated in the repression of the Taiping
Rebellion in 1864 (Kuhn, 1970). What was distinctive about the Rebellion, however, was its Christian outlook and programme, which represented in the eyes of the local people the extension of imperialist intrusions into Chinese tradition and customs. In this way the local militia identified themselves not only as a repressive force against internal unrest, but also as a conservative defense of Confucian ethics and the imperial state order against Christian depredations.

The conservative culture as cultivated in the process of local militarization was disseminated with the disbanding of the militias, whose members were rewarded with official titles and thereby elevated into the gentry. By exploiting their local power and political leverage, these conservative gentry launched relentless attacks on the study societies, which were likened to the Taiping rebels in their quasi-Christian outlook. The gentry in Hunan province, for instance, accused a local study society of breaching the orthodox teachings of Confucius in its adoption of equal, non-hierarchical seating during a public lecture. But the most notable case consisted in the expulsion of the founder of a regional study society in Hunan, who was accused of spreading the ‘heretical’ thoughts of Christianity (Su, 2002 [1898]).

The repressive and at times violent measures of the conservative gentry thus brought about the decline of the reformist study society movement. It was followed by a radical reorientation of the movement itself, in which the exceptionalist idea of Confucian religion was rejected, along with its fundamentalist opponent, as traditionalistic, conservative, and reactionary. To this the post-reformist study societies counterposed a nationalist agenda in which organized, revolutionary violence against the declining imperial state was justified and at times glorified. It paved the way for the 1911 revolution, and the instability and turmoil that plagued China for the whole ensuing Republican era (ca. 1911–49).

**Conclusion: Towards a New Exceptionalism?**

In this paper I have attempted to pinpoint the ways in which American exceptionalism, as a global, civilizational consciousness thematizing the universal significance of Puritan religion as the theoretical and practical foundation of modern democratic power, came to be adopted and transformed by the late imperial Chinese study society movement to inaugurate an exceptionalism of its own. In this reflexive exceptionalism, an image of America consistent with that portrayed by Tocqueville was incorporated into a simplified and reductionist account of Western civilization as a whole, against which the principles and practices of Confucian religiosity were constructed as the basis of China’s unity and difference with Christianity and thereby with the imperialist West. Apart from legitimizing the revival of the universal principles of equality and association supposedly inherent in Confucianism, various myths and rituals were practically invoked for the production and discipline of a power that was not only democratic but also ethnic in nature.

In conclusion, I will briefly outline the implications of this analysis for the shifting fortunes of Chinese exceptionalism in the contemporary global
order. In his recent book, Giovanni Arrighi (2007) argues that the post-9/11 era and indeed the twenty-first century as a whole are witnessing the demise of America and its replacement by China as the world’s economic giant. While the Chinese economy is caught up in the ‘global over-accumulation crisis’ (Hung, 2008), beyond doubt the idea of a rising China is in vogue. Apart from the Beijing Olympics, which constituted the formal staging of China before the world, in recent years the notions of ‘rise,’ ‘revival,’ and the like, never fail to captivate the political and cultural imagination of the Chinese people themselves.

But the world society to which China is presenting itself differs fundamentally from where it stood in the late nineteenth century. While imperialism and colonialism, at least in their overt political forms, have long been superseded by a global interdependence unprecedented in human history, the profusion of terms such as neo-imperialism, neo-liberalism, and neo-authoritarianism suggests that new tides of growing sociopolitical inequalities are washing ashore. The paradoxical character of contemporary world society – its monopolizing and democratizing tendencies – finds its most succinct expression in the cynical belief that democracy could be pursued and enforced with non-democratic means, as exemplified by America’s military offensives in Iraq.

The desperate efforts of the United States to reassert its power and forestall its decline lead to the global reconstruction of competing civilizational identities and a growing mistrust of democracy as a viable ideal. While the former trend is manifest in the soul-searching and contentious redefinition of the very ideas of ‘America’ (à la Huntington’s Who Are We? [2004]) and ‘Europe’ (à la Habermas and Derrida’s [2005] ‘core Europe’), the latter is most pervasive in emerging economies like Venezuela and Vietnam, for which China potentially represents a notable and exceptional case of a non-Occidental and non-democratic civilization that could nevertheless sustain outstanding economic performance whilst enjoying a political stability that would never be attainable with an uncritical adherence to the American model.

The change in the power configuration of contemporary world society thus gives rise to a corresponding restructuring of civilizational order, in which American and Western exceptionalism increasingly confronts challenges from alternative civilizational models. In the case of China, the notion of a ‘harmonious society’ has taken the place of Confucian religion as the guiding motif of state building and moral reconstruction. In contrast to the eclectic construct of Confucian religion, which was formulated at a time when the predominance of Christianity and its democratic principle was taken for granted as a ‘providential fact,’ ‘harmony’ is a secular ethical maxim connoting not only benevolence and reciprocity but also hierarchy and deference. The direct adoption of this term from the classical Confucian canon reflects a sense of enhanced power and status honor vis-à-vis the West, such that it is the difference rather than the unity of China with Occidental civilization that is being emphasized.
But it should not mislead us to presume that the idea of harmony implies a total rejection of democracy and egalitarianism in favor of a parochial ideal of authoritarian rule. Non-democratic though it may be, the quest for social harmony is nevertheless held to be a sublation of the democratic ideal. It is said that the Chinese characters of ‘harmony’ 和谐 convey the meaning of ‘every mouth fed’ 饥 and ‘every word spoken’ 言皆. At the official level, the rights to subsistence and of expression figure preeminently in the current political program of the Chinese Communist Party.

The allusions to ‘democracy’ and ‘rights,’ however distorted their meanings would appear to the Western political tradition, indicate that the idea of harmony is intended to subsume and transcend these ideals with a civilizational model no less universal in ambition than the previous articulations of American, Western, and late imperial Chinese exceptionalisms. Granted that the struggles for democracy and human rights by local and global civil society are generally repressed by the Chinese state in the name of pre-empting foreign interventions into its internal affairs, at the same time it is argued that the equal right of human beings to subsistence is the prerequisite of their meaningful participation in civic and political community, such that the pursuit of social stability and harmony should always be assigned an overwhelming priority over (but not against) the pursuit of civil, social, political, and cultural rights. Reinventing itself as a harmonious society and civilization, China is at once differentiated from and unified with the democratic civilization of the West, with the basis of unity now residing in the definition of and negotiation over what constitutes the most basic and fundamental human right.

On the basis of these considerations, I argue that we are witnessing in China the rise of a third-order exceptionalism that is articulated as a reflexive response to its first-order and second-order predecessors. Under the shifting power configuration of contemporary world society, the principles and practices of democracy that have been hegemonically represented and imposed by America and the West and uncritically cherished and adopted by the study societies of late imperial China, among other latecomers, are subjected to global reconstructions in accordance with distinctive but mutually implicating civilizational identities.

References


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