

Article

Recognition, Disrespect, and the Rearticulation of Chinese National Identity

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Abstract: Throughout a wide realm of discourses in contemporary China, from official propaganda projects to online discussions amongst netizens, rearticulations of Chinese national identity are ubiquitous and conspicuous. Rather than depict these phenomena as simply manifestations of nationalism fomented by authoritarian rhetoric as is often the case in Western media, this paper will offer a more nuanced interpretation through the Hegelian notions of recognition and disrespect insofar as they operate in the construction of identity, in this case, Chinese national identity. The social theory of the struggle for recognition and identity formation as articulated by contemporary recognition theorist Axel Honneth will be used as a framework to explore 1) recognition and disrespect in the construction of identity, 2) the possibility of utilizing such a framework within international relations, and 3) how the contemporary rearticulation(s) of Chinese national identity can be understood through the notions of recognition and disrespect.

Keywords: Honneth, Chinese identity, recognition, disrespect

I. Recognition and Disrespect

There are a few other things that are emotionally as effective as our claims to identity and demands for its recognition by others, or as Charles Taylor put it “due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need.”¹ Why then should claims to national identity be treated differently? The utilization of an overly instrumental approach to understanding and reporting on international politics can often lead to

¹ Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in Amy Gutmann, *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 26.

incomplete, misleading, and often dangerous international conflicts as a result of questions of identity not being taken seriously. This is a glaring shortcoming in the reporting on China's domestic and international activity in major Western media outlets, or as it pertains to this paper, American media in particular. With the international relationship between these two countries being central for global stability yet increasingly strained, the need for mutual recognition on the international stage has also become increasingly urgent. The framework and vocabulary utilized for an exploration of some of the ways according to which we can understand some of China's actions functionally operating as a demand for recognition will be briefly outlined below.

Following the Hegelian and Meadian traditions, Axel Honneth's work emphasizes self-realization as a vital need achieved through social conditions of mutual recognition, a need which gives rise to individual and social struggles when its fulfillment is prevented or obstructed. Identity-formation takes place within a matrix of social conditions and intersubjective experiences, and it is precisely the refusal of these conditions, or 'disrespect,' which Honneth interprets as a major motivation for individual and social conflict. Francis Fukuyama likewise recognizes the emotional need for recognition more specifically amongst collectivities in what he refers to as "the politics of resentment":

In a wide variety of cases, a political leader has mobilized followers around the perception that the group's dignity had been affronted, disparaged, or otherwise disregarded. This resentment engenders demands for public recognition of the dignity of the group in question. A humiliated group seeking restitution of its dignity carries far more emotional weight than people simply pursuing their economic advantage.²

Honneth inherits and creates terminology to describe those conditions of mutual recognition which must be met for the possibility of social identity-formation, or 'practical relations-to-self,' as well as those forms of disrespect which incite sometimes violent conflict on behalf of those who are denied those conditions.

Three modes of intersubjective recognition which serve as the conditions for identity-formation are extrapolated upon in terms of the

² Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018), 7.

individual's practical relations-to-self. The most primary of these is 'basic self-confidence,' a mode which is generally limited to the initial stage of socialization between child and significant other, and the denial of which is referred to as 'abuse.' Beyond the realm of love and care, yet indeed a result of the basic self-confidence which emerges from it, Honneth describes the practical relation-to-self conditioned by the inclusion of individuals into the public realm through legal recognition as 'self-respect.' The extension of legal rights demonstrates to the individual that they are recognized as partners to interaction in the public sphere and thus "in the experience of legal recognition, one is able to view oneself as a person who shares with all other members of one's community the qualities that make participation in discursive will-formation possible."³ Disrespect in the form of a systematic denial of rights implies that the individual is marginalized from the political community and "signifies a violation of the intersubjective expectation to be recognized as a subject capable of forming moral judgements."⁴ Whereas this second mode of practical relation-to-self relies on being treated as equal partners to interaction *universally* according to laws applied to all members in *general*, the third mode, 'self-esteem,' relies on recognition of that which makes one unique, distinctive, or particular, implying a pluralistic or expanded social value-horizon such that a wide variety of contributions might resonate as valuable. This ideal set of social conditions is described as "solidarity," or a society in which "every member of a society is in a position to esteem himself or herself."⁵ As such, an individual who is denied recognition of their own particularity such that they feel that their potential contributions to the community as a unique individual would not be ascribed value is subject to the form of disrespect referred to as 'denigration of a way of life.'

II. The Nation as Subject and National Identity

In addition to the formation of individual identity, sociologists and philosophers also utilize recognition theory to interpret the ways in which social groups, movements, or smaller collective identities participate in the struggle for recognition. This is generally the case when collectivities are oriented around a relatively narrow set of interests, a set of interests which in many cases serves as the *raison d'être* for that collectivity as distinct from others in the first place. The Black Lives Matter movements and National Organization of Women are constructed around political, legal, and social

³ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 120

⁴ *Ibid.*, 134

⁵ *Ibid.*, 129

demands on behalf of specifically black people and women respectively who feel unrecognized or disrespected *as* black people and women. To what degree, then, can this discourse be extended to a nation as a subject with unified intention and will capable of mutual recognition? Honneth argues that applying the terminology of the struggle for recognition to interactions between nations can be inaccurate as “the psychological concepts we use when we speak of ‘strivings,’ ‘needs,’ and ‘feelings’ are inappropriate for describing international relations. State actors do not have mental attitudes but are authorities charged with carrying out politically determined tasks.”⁶ Mattias Iser likewise problematizes ascribing a psychological dimensions to the nation, pointing out that “such an account faces the problem that states cannot suffer psychologically the way persons do.”⁷ Ruth Wodak takes a different approach, claiming that “the primarily individual-related category of ‘selfhood’ cannot be applied to concepts such as ‘nation’... [because] the nominalisation ‘selfhood’ would create a substantialised entity from a construct of ideas.”⁸ Mistaking the nation, an imagined community,⁹ as a reified, unified, and often sanctified subject is not only intellectually problematic, but potentially turns the symbolic representation of the nation into a Lady Guinevere for whom many, enthused by odious forms of nationalism, are willing to die, oppress, or kill.

While denying subjectivity to the nation or state as a political entity, Wodak relocates the substantialized ‘nation’ into an element of the identity of individuals, or national identity, in the sense of a “complex of common or similar beliefs or opinions internalized in the course of socialization.”¹⁰ Stuart Hall likewise explores collective identities insofar as ‘identification *with*’ collectivities is “constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation.”¹¹ In order to establish solidarity and create the perception of common and shared origins and characteristics that are most often neither common nor shared, national identity is discursively constructed and

⁶ Axel Honneth, “Recognition Between States: On the Moral Substrate of International Relations,” in Thomas Lindemann and Erik Ringmar, *The International Politics of Recognition* (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 48.

⁷ Mattias Iser, “Recognition between States? Moving beyond Identity Politics” in Christopher Daase et al., *Recognition in international Relations: Rethinking a Political Concept in a Global Context* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2015), 28.

⁸ Ruth Wodak et al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 26.

⁹ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

¹⁰ Wodak, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 28.

¹¹ Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?,” in Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 2003), 2.

symbolically reproduced through highly selective historical narratives. Symbolic representations of a unified nation and what are presented as its 'essential' characteristics, values, and ideals, however inconsistent they may be with reality, are necessary for the formation of a sense of national identity. These serve as the conditions for solidarity on a wide scope by transforming that merely imagined community into an emotionally effective imagined community of individuals for whom "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."¹² The abstract idea of the nation thus serves as a repository of images, narratives, and relations which the citizen internalizes as an element of her own individual identity in the form of a national identity.

While nations may not be subjects or possess selfhood in the same way individual actors do, individual citizens' sense of national identity allows nations to be regarded as participating within the struggle for recognition, if not as actual intersubjective actors, as *functionally* intersubjective actors. Reinhard Wolf emphasizes how a sense of national identity within the citizenry and the concomitant desire on behalf of citizens for recognition or redress for perceived disrespect influences that nation's behavior on the international stage:

sooner or later, even ordinary citizens will be confronted with foreign views and actions that either confirm or challenge their own sense of their countries place in history or contemporary international affairs. When this happens, (dis)respect between nations and their states can become an important political issue, sometimes as important as recognition between closely interacting individuals.¹³

In terms of *nations* as partners to interaction these interactions occur on the international stage through, for example, national media, individual artists, or more directly through state or national political representatives. Honneth makes the case that the need for recognition on behalf of the citizens underlies how political actors perform their state tasks on the international level:

because political representatives must preserve legitimacy by acting as interpreters of the experiences and desires of their own respective citizenries, all encounters and relationships between states stand under

¹² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

¹³ Reinhard Wolf, "Prickly States? Recognition and Disrespect," in Lindemann and Ringmar, *The International Politics of Recognition*, 48.

moral pressure generated by a conflict over recognition.¹⁴

As a result of individuals and social groups' reactions to disrespect targeted towards the nation with which they identify and the pressure hence exerted on leaders, nations can be said to at least functionally "care" about receiving social recognition and reacting against perceived acts of disrespect.

As such, it is reasonable to propose that the nation, a mere abstract idea symbolically representative both of and for its constituent population of individuals, might also develop practical relations-to-self through the international struggle for recognition insofar as it is internalized by its citizenry and that on behalf of which state leaders fight to gain recognition. The development of the nation's practical relation-to-self in this case always refers, not to a construct of abstract ideas substantialized and reified into a singular 'nation,' but to the individual's own demand for recognition on behalf of their national identity and that of their compatriots. Individuals have a wide range of emotional stances towards their nation, from a strong identification with and internalization of official or hegemonic historical narratives to low levels of identification or even antipathy in the case of minority groups who feel marginalized, disrespected, or oppressed. The dissemination of dominant narratives in the service of constructing national identity is perhaps most notably conspicuous in the case of China. The following will provide a brief overview of China's official historical narrative of the process of becoming a modern state and this historical narrative's relation to the Chinese struggle for international recognition.

III. Historical Narrative(s) and Chinese National Identity

The primary historical narrative used in the service of constructing a modern Chinese national identity begins with the circumstances surrounding the First Opium War in 1839 during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). Before the events of the First Opium War, China had developed an awareness of Western countries "opening markets" in East Asia, but this did not significantly influence their sinocentric model of the world, or *tianxia guan* (天下觀, View of all under Heaven).¹⁵ After the Qing emperor demanded the British cease selling opium to Chinese traders, the British military captured fortresses from Hong Kong to Nanjing enforcing its will until the Chinese agreed to accept all terms for surrender. Such an act of disrespect can be said to correspond to, at least metaphorically, "violation of the body" and, like the

¹⁴ Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 31.

¹⁵ Yao Dali 姚大力. "華夏邊緣'是怎樣被蠻夷化的" [How the 'Frontiers of the Huaxia' Were Barbarized] in *sixiang zhanxian*, 44, no. 1 (2018), 1.

denial of autonomy over one's own physical body "causes a degree of humiliation that impacts more destructively than other forms of respect on a person's practical relation-to-self."¹⁶ Within China's historical consciousness the events following the First Opium War until the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 is referred to as "the century of humiliation" (*bainian guochi* 百年國恥) and to this day carry a strong emotional weight.

The treaty of Nanjing (1842) inflicted further disrespect. Erik Ringmar describes the lack of recognition afforded to the Chinese with this treaty such that

China did not want to be a part of the European international system, but this was unacceptable to the Europeans who demanded access to Chinese markets. The Treaty of Nanjing stipulated the conditions on which this access would take place: mutual recognition was henceforth to be granted on Europe's terms... for China it meant that the country had to transform itself according to Europe's directions.¹⁷

This treaty and the subsequent Treaty of Tianjin (1858) corresponds to the second form of disrespect described by Honneth, that of "denial of rights" or "exclusion." The British, insofar as they unilaterally dictated the terms of the treaties withheld recognition of China as an intersubjective partner to interaction in legal relations, denying them "qualities that make participation in discursive will-formation possible" and the corresponding practical relation-to-self "self-respect." In future generations the Treaty of Nanjing would exist in the Chinese historical consciousness as the first of many "unequal treaties" which would symbolize the disrespect China was forced to endure and the injury to the Chinese people's identity. China was again forced to sue for peace after a modernized and nationalistic Japan invaded Manchuria and Shandong province in 1894-1895, signing yet another "unequal treaty."

After the Opium Wars and the first Sino-Japanese War a generation of progressive intellectuals such as Hu Shi 胡適 and Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, motivated by both a sense of inferiority and resentment, would engage in formulating a national identity symbolized by the "New Culture Movement" (*xin wenhua yundong* 新文化運動). An inferiority complex regarding traditional Chinese culture manifested in accusations of the Confucian socio-political framework as one of the reasons for China's cultural, political, and

¹⁶ Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 133.

¹⁷ Erik Ringmar "China's Place in Four Recognition Regimes," in *The International Politics of Recognition*, 12.

technological stagnation, with reformist figures like Yi Baisha 易白沙 and a young Liang Qichao 梁啟超 advocating adopting Western models of governance and education to replace the traditional Chinese models. In his journal *New Citizen* (*Xinmin congbao* 新民叢報) Liang proposed the idea of “destructionism” (*pohuai zhuyi* 破壞主意) in order to clear away the “thousands of years of corrupt and gentle doctrines”¹⁸ for a ‘new citizen,’ which “included a strategy to criticize old traditional thought and absorb ideas of Western civilization.”¹⁹ The idea of the “new citizen” represented an attempt on behalf of this collection of intrepid thinkers to transform the consciousness of the Chinese people and establish a new form of national identity.

The humiliation endured by China led intellectuals and political leaders “to abandon the high culture of the *tianxia* system for the base survival-driven nation-state worldview” and also fueled “the all-consuming fire needed for China to rise like a phoenix from the ashes and overcome the West on its quest for glory.”²⁰ Resentment toward the aforementioned “unequal treaties” was a particularly important driving force in the establishment of a modern nation-state, the Republic of China (ROC), and a newfound national identity. With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the disrespect represented by events of the previous hundred years would be utilized in the construction of national identity primarily articulated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Perhaps the most symbolic and frequently utilized representation of the sense of disrespect and demand for recognition internalized within Chinese national identity is the phrase “never forget national humiliation” (*wu wang guochi* 勿忘國恥).

Through the discourse of the struggle for recognition, the CCP’s official historical narrative can be interpreted as constructed primarily around resentment and disrespect. The denial of the first mode of recognition (violation to the body) is represented by the rulership of the non-Chinese Qing dynasty, the widescale opium addiction resulting from British opium trade, and Western and Japanese colonization and atrocities. Denial of the second mode of recognition (legal relations) is represented by the “unequal treaties” China was forced to sign by foreign powers and the United Nations not recognizing the PRC until 1971. Denial of the third mode of recognition (community of value) is symbolically represented by denigrating terms like

¹⁸ Liang Qichao, *Drinking Ice Room Collection Yinbing shi heji* 飲冰室合集, volume 4.

¹⁹ Xi Zhiwu 席志武, “Destructionism: Liang Qichao’s Early Strategy for the New Citizen (破壞主意：梁啟超早期的新民策略)” *Dongfang luntan*, no. 2 (2014), 22.

²⁰ Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 77.

“the sick man of Asia”²¹ (*dongya bingfu* 東亞病夫)²² and accusations of human rights abuses by Western media and intergovernmental political organizations like the G7. The latter are widely seen within China as hypocritical and politically motivated attacks meant to subvert China’s moral standing on the international stage, and thus within the process of national identity formation, they serve as forms of misrecognition and denials of China’s potential contributions to the world community by marginalizing them outside of the dominant Western liberal democratic international system.

Reactions to each of these cases of disrespect can likewise be interpreted as demands for recognition, demands which are not only directed towards partners to interaction on the international stage, but also to the Chinese citizenry, affirming China’s rights and thereby affirming Chinese national identity. The PRC’s national anthem, for example, officially adopted in 1949, puts the previous one hundred years of invasion by foreign powers and the future of the Chinese people in terms of a life-and-death struggle: “when the Chinese people reach the most dangerous period, each person is compelled to give a final roar. Rise up, all the people with one mind face the artillery barrage of the enemy.” Such language can easily be interpreted in terms of the struggle for recognition as representing a resolve to fight for national self-determination, to engage in “a struggle, into which the attacked subject forces its partner to interaction, in order to demonstrate to the other the unconditionality of its will and thereby to prove that it is a person worthy of recognition.”²³ In the last two decades, the rearticulation of Chinese national identity has shifted significantly from narratives that are *primarily* oriented around victimization and resentment to those which project and affirm those qualities that make Chinese national identity unique and valuable. This new articulation of Chinese national identity can be interpreted according to recognition theory insofar as is at once much more forceful in its demands to not be disrespected and also promotes those characteristics which make Chinese national identity unique and valuable to the international community.

²¹ See Zhou Yingjie 周英傑. “The Misreading of “Sick Man of Asia” 被誤讀的“東亞病夫”, in *Da lishi de xiao qiemin- zhongguo jindai shi de linglei guancha, Small Cross-sections of Big History- An Alternative Examination of Modern Chinese History* (Guangxi Shifan daxue Chubanshe, 2011).

²² The term “sick man of Asia” is misremembered by many within in China today as having been used by Westerners to mock the health and physical stature of Chinese people, and despite this not being historically accurate, is nevertheless still maintained within the Chinese historical memory as a great insult which thereby has effective power.

²³ Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 47

IV. The Demand of Recognition and the Rearticulation of Chinese National Identity

Representations of Demands for Recognition in the Media

Although nations may ultimately be “imagined communities,” they nevertheless possess effective power to the extent that individuals internalize what the nation signifies to them in the form of national identity. What informs one’s national identity may be a sense of shared culture, values, or historical consciousness, and thus when a nation is publicly disrespected, denied recognition, it can arouse a sense of both individual and *shared* hurt, anger, and urge for retribution. In a globalized world connected by the immediacy of the internet negotiating the struggle for recognition increasingly occurs in the public sphere, oriented around the indignation of citizens rather than by national leaders and politicians behind closed doors. Mass media thus serves as a battlefield of contestation, be it through news outlets, social media, or popular culture. The following will explore three examples of the contemporary rearticulation of Chinese national identity as it manifests in mass media.

A. Biden Administration First Meeting with Chinese Officials

From March 16th to 18th of 2021 Chinese officials met for the first time with officials from the newly elected Biden administration in Anchorage, Alaska. The preliminary meeting between the two administrations quickly became contentious as the American delegation made comments regarding a number of politically, culturally, and historically sensitive topics, such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South China Sea.²⁴ Central Committee Politburo member and director of foreign affairs Yang Jiechi 楊潔篪 responded,

The United States has no right to speak to China condescendingly and the Chinese people will not eat this set. Interacting with China must be conducted on the basis of mutual respect. History will prove that those who adopt the method of squeezing the throat of China will in the end be the ones who suffer.”

²⁴ Matthew Lee and Mark Thiessen, “US, China spar in first face-to-face meeting under Biden,” in *APNews.com* (March 19, 2021), <<https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-alaska-antony-blinken-yang-jiechi-wang-yi-fc23cd2b23332fa8dd2d781bd3f7c178>>.

China's response represents an example of China's international strategy having changed from Deng Xiaoping's method of "keep a low profile and bide our time" (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光養晦) to a new era described by Xi Jinping as "an era in which China is getting closer to the center of the world stage, ceaselessly making contributions for humankind."²⁵ Rather than meekly accepting unequal agreements as during the 'hundred years of humiliation' or completely removing oneself from the Western- and Soviet-dominated international economic systems as during the Maoist years, China would now assert itself as a partner-to-interaction within the international legal/political community under the conditions of mutual respect and recognition

From state-run news outlets to netizens throughout China, what was perceived as America's disrespectful attitude was met with hostility and Yang Jiechi became somewhat of a national hero, portrayed as standing up for China's sovereignty and dignity. The phrase "the Chinese people will not eat this set" (*zhongguoren buchi zhe yi tao* 中國人不吃這一套) quickly became a meme, emblazoned on t-shirts, tote bags, phone covers, and cars in a wave of nationalistic pride. In direct relation to the unequal treaties, memes spread through the Chinese internet comparing China of one hundred years ago to China today in various forms. Many news outlets and blogs, for example, contrasted a photograph of the Qing government alongside foreign diplomats signing the 1901 "Final Protocol for the Settlement of the Disturbances" alongside a photograph of the 2021 Anchorage meeting with the headline "China is already not the China from one hundred years ago."²⁶ Wolf describes such cases of outrage and resentment from perceived disrespect on behalf of national identity as

Whoever disparages my group's values, achievements, or features calls into question my own feeling of self-worth to the extent that I share and take pride in those values, achievements, or features... Fervent nationalists, both within political elites and the public at large, will often react with outrage if other nationals insult their nation.²⁷

Jiechi's acerbic response is a testament to the role national leaders play as representatives for the general population's demands for recognition.

²⁵ "习近平在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告" in *people.cn*, (October 28, 2017), <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1028/c64094-29613660-2.html>>.

²⁶ 蘭琳宗 Lan Linzong, 两个辛丑年的对比刷屏背后：底气在这, in *thepaper.cn*, (March 20, 2021), <https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_11802935>.

²⁷ Wolf, "Prickly States?," 46.

What might be considered as ‘touchy overreactions’ by the Chinese state often surround perceived disrespect regarding sensitive elements of Chinese national identity which in large part relates to historical consciousness.

B. Wall Street Journal and the ‘Sick Man of Asia’

Whereas the vocal reaction from Chinese political representatives in the above example was in the context of preliminary political negotiations, and thus might be interpreted as political and rhetorical one-upmanship in the service of practical instrumental ends, there are occasions in which acts of misrecognition incite strong reactions with less concern for pragmatic or utilitarian interests. Being largely informed by historical consciousness and narratives, national identities are particularly sensitive to perceived insults that carry reminders of periods of national insecurity, weakness, or humiliation. An article published by the Wallstreet Journal soon after the Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan entitled “China is the Real Sick Man of Asia”²⁸ prompted the Chinese government to revoke the press credentials of three Wallstreet Journal journalists and expel them from China. References to the “sick man of Asia” is not taken as an ordinary insult in China but is a reminder of what is considered by many Chinese as the bleakest period of their history, a period during which they were unable to defend themselves from foreign military incursions, had no voice in the international community and were forced to replace their Chinese cultural norms and traditions with those of the Manchus, West, and Japan. To use the vocabulary of the struggle for recognition, they were denied certain modes of recognition which prevented the development of practical relations-to-self in the forms of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem respectively. Furthermore, as this was an article in a foreign publication that cast aspersions on China’s handling of the epidemic and promoted global companies to “de-Sinicize” supply chains, it replicated the sense of being publicly disrespected, of being excluded from the international community of potential partners-to-interaction.

The Wall Street Journal editorial board expressed incredulity, responding to the Chinese government’s reaction “President Xi Jinping says China deserves to be treated as a great power, but on Wednesday his country expelled three Wall Street Journal reporters over a headline. Yes, a headline.”²⁹ Beyond the fact that a similar response to a racist or anti-Semitic

²⁸ Walter Russel Mead, “China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia,” in *The Wall Street Journal* (February 3, 2020), <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-the-real-sick-man-of-asia-11580773677>>.

²⁹ WJS Editorial Board, “Banished in Beijing,” in *The Wall Street Journal* (February 19, 2020), <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/banished-in-beijing-11582157934>>.

joke (“it was just a joke”) would be completely unacceptable in any serious American publication, their response and defense of the headline is testament to the unwillingness of much of Western media to recognize China according to any horizon of value, narrative, or terms of mutual recognition other than that of the Western liberal democratic variety. While China’s reaction was certainly that of a ‘prickly state,’ it is also precisely this unwillingness to engage with China as intersubjective partners-to-interaction that engenders much resentment within China and will likely perpetuate hostilities between China and the Western liberal democratic world.

C. China’s Demand for Recognition of Particularity: My People, My Country

The struggle for recognition is most apparent in the form of conflicts in which resentment is expressed. A less obvious, yet equally important element of the struggle for recognition is also found in the expectation or demand that unique or particular characteristics, achievements, or abilities be recognized as valuable. The possibility of esteem or value being conferred onto that which makes one’s national culture particular or unique is likewise central in the construction of national identity. Yet along with affirmations of the value of that which is particularly Chinese by foreign nationals, those national ‘narratives of the self’ must also be validated internally for any rearticulation of Chinese national identity to resonate, and thus the Chinese citizenry must be convinced of their own value afforded to them on the basis of their national identity.

A shift from the articulation of Chinese national identity through the utilization of historical resentment toward that which places greater emphasis on positive and valuable achievements made by China as a modern nation-state has been particularly evident since China’s international “coming out” at the 2008 Olympics. The celebration of uniquely Chinese modern stories is used in this sense in the well-received movie “My People, My Country” (*wo he wode zuguo* 我和我的祖國), released in 2019 commemorating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. The film is comprised of seven short stories taking place between 1949 and 2015 which provoke national pride rather than resentment, or as Haiyan Huang notes, “in recent years, Chinese intellectuals and elites have freed themselves from decades-long focus on humiliation and start to acknowledge the achievements China has attained.”³⁰ While this film is an example of the way in which “Chinese national identity and nationalism propagated in the

³⁰ Haiyan Huang, “How My People My Country Reconstructs Chinese National Identity,” in *Diggit Magazine* (October 20, 2020), <<https://www.diggitmagazine.com/academic-papers/my-people-my-country>>.

current age have shifted from traditional victimization and humiliation towards pride and happiness,"³¹ these stories and the demands for recognition they represent all make both narrative and emotional sense only in the context of China's relationships with the international community. This occurs either directly, such as Shanghainese neighbors watching the Chinese women's volleyball team win gold at the 1984 Olympics and the handover of Hong Kong by the British to the PRC in 1997, or indirectly, such as the story of the sacrifices made by a scientist who worked on China's first atomic bomb.

The narrative of pride and achievement represents the mirror image of the victimization narrative within the formation of national identity. The latter constructs a Chinese national identity in contradistinction to the 'other' who denied recognition to China, thereby establishing a kind of negative identity, a "we who are against *them*" identity. The former, on the other hand, constructs a positive identity, a "we who represent these achievements and values" identity, but one which is also nevertheless always informed by the other insofar as those achievements and values are contextualized by those of the international community. Indeed, this articulation of a 'positive' national identity by ascribing virtues and values that were previously left unspecified in the phrase "socialism with Chinese characteristics" has been a central part of the "China Dream" (*zhongguo meng* 中國夢) project.

The China Dream

The phrase "China Dream" began appearing in China around 2006 in blogs, television shows, and in printed state media, spurred on by the question "if America has the American Dream, what is the China Dream?"³² General Secretary Xi Jinping 習近平 adopted this term to frame a long-term policy, using it in a 2012 speech entitled "Realizing the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation in the Coming Years is the Greatest Dream for the Chinese People."³³ Like Jiang Zemin 江澤民 and Hu Jintao 胡錦濤 before him, he used the term "rejuvenation" (*fuxing* 復興) to imply a sense of returning to the preeminent position of power and wealth China had when it sat at the center of *tianxia*, a memory consistently reproduced within Chinese historical consciousness. General Secretary Xi juxtaposed the current period of

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² See 南之默 Nan Zhimo, "meiguomeng yu zhongguomeng 美国梦与中国梦, in *China Daily* (July 16, 2010), <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/jjzg/2006-11/29/content_745731.htm>.

³³ Xi Jinping 習近平, "實現中華民族偉大復興是中華民族近代以來最偉大的夢想," in *CPC News* (November 29, 2012), <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/0717/c397563-27322292.html>>.

rejuvenation with the historical humiliation and bullying of the recent past to frame the China Dream:

The severe suffering and great sacrifices made by the Chinese people has rarely been seen in history, but the Chinese people never surrendered and continuously resisted and fought, finally taking hold of our own destiny and beginning the great process of building our own nation... After more than 170 years of continuous struggle since the Opium War, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has shown bright prospects.

The continual reminders of the bleakness of China's recent past, the achievements of today, and promises of the future is a powerful method of arousing triumphal nationalistic emotions, creating ever stronger shared bonds of national identity amongst the Chinese citizenry and the citizenry with the CCP. A sense of resentment engendered by negative experiences with the outside world being utilized internally to strengthen national identity, or in the case of the CCP to legitimate their position, is emphasized by Wang Zheng, who argues that Chinese leaders "utilize China's past history of humiliation to awaken people's historical consciousness and build cohesion"³⁴ "for the glorification of the party, for the consolidation of national identity, and for the justification of the political system of the CCP's one-party rule."³⁵

The 'other' is certainly an important element within the construction of any identity, yet interpreting the function of the 'other' within the development of national identity as exclusively oriented around internal political needs disregards the importance of the *intersubjective* struggle for recognition within the formation of identity. Identity is not constructed in a vacuum, and the China Dream narrative which informs the new articulation of Chinese national identity likewise requires recognition by external or foreign actors to have currency. The interplay between bestowing recognition and the demand for recognition is present in the conceptual life of "China Dream" itself. As noted, it was originally formulated in reaction to the notion of the American Dream, indicating China's recognition of some positive characteristic of another nation, an equivalent of which it sought in itself. Books adopting 'the Chinese dream' in their titles were published by foreign

³⁴ Wang Zheng, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 117.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

publishing houses from 2008 onwards³⁶ and the term was adopted by American journalist Thomas Friedman in 2012.³⁷ This element of Chinese national identity being publicly recognized by a high profile foreigner led the Chinese media to proudly celebrate, presenting it as “from [within China] to abroad... the ‘China dream’ has become a hot topic.”³⁸ A month later General Secretary Xi Jinping gave his 2012 speech formally establishing the China Dream within Chinese national identity and the ideological landscape. The celebration within China of foreigners recognizing Chinese achievements is not merely a form of vanity or pride in the nation’s accomplishments but is necessary for self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem regarding national identity. These acts of recognition serve as a precondition for a sense that one’s nation has something to contribute, and more importantly is *able* to contribute on the international level rather than being silenced or ignored.

The China Dream phenomenon not only expresses itself in passively waiting for other’s esteem but insofar as misrecognition or denial of recognition for particular claims to identity is destructive to practical relations-to-self, it “can provide the motivational impetus for social resistance and conflict, indeed, for a struggle for recognition.”³⁹ Like Hegel’s Master-Slave analogy, that violent conflict may ensue if a subject’s demands go unmet hold particularly true for those who have been denigrated in the past. In a speech at the centennial anniversary of the founding of the CCP in July 2021 Xi reiterated the “rejuvenation” of China and historical memory:

After the Opium War in 1840 China progressively became semi-colonial and semi-feudal. The country was deceived, the people met with disaster, and its civilization was turned to dust... Since then realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has become the greatest dream of the Chinese people.⁴⁰

Distinguishing this speech from that of 2012, however, was an even stronger emphasis on China’s relation to the international community in the

³⁶ See Neville Mars and Adrian Hornsby, *The Chinese Dream – A Society under Construction* (Rotterdam: Nai010 Publishers, 2008) and Helen H. Wang, *The Chinese Dream: The Rise of the World’s Largest Middle Class and What It Means to You* (Bestseller Press, 2010).

³⁷ Thomas Friedman, “China Needs Its Own Dream,” in *The New York Times* (October 2, 2012), <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/opinion/friedman-china-needs-its-own-dream.html>>.

³⁸ Ye Zaichun 葉再春, “Thoughts on the China Dream” 中國夢“隨想”, *qianxian*, no. 1 (2013), 58.

³⁹ Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 132.

⁴⁰ Xi Jinping, 在庆祝中国共产党成立100周年大会上的讲话, in gov.cn, (July 1, 2021), <http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-07/01/content_5621847.htm>.

form of a more forceful demand for recognition and declarations of its unique contributions, that is, demands to be respected within a community of values, or solidarity. Examples of this within Xi's speech include:

The Communist Party of China and the Chinese people solemnly declare to the world with brave and tenacious struggle that the Chinese people have stood up and the era of the Chinese nation being slaughtered and bullied is gone forever!

China has always been a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development, and a defender of international order!

The Chinese people are people who uphold justice and are not afraid of violence. The Chinese nation is a nation with a strong sense of national pride and self-confidence. The Chinese people have never bullied, oppressed, or enslaved people of other countries... At the same time, the Chinese people will never allow any foreign forces to bully, oppress, or enslave us.

The influence of problematic relationships with the West, Japan, the USSR, and other states can be seen quite clearly in the development of China and Chinese national identity from the Opium wars onward. To treat this as a one-sided process, however, is to disregard how the formation of identity and self-realization is preconditioned by the establishment of relations of mutual recognition. If we are to gain any insight or benefit by the use of this Hegelian framework, the phenomena surrounding China's rearticulation of national identity must be understood as also a need and a demand that China be recognized on the international stage, no longer by the legal, financial, and political institutions devised and enforced by the West, but by institutions in which they have a say, no longer misrecognized by the outdated stereotypes which humiliate and denigrate like "sick man," "backwards," or "despotic," but by those particular "Chinese characteristics" which can make contributions to the world.

Tianxia system

The struggle for recognition is in part defined by the demand for equal participation within a community of partners to interaction, a common field within which intersubjective recognition in the form of legal relations is

contested, conferred, and claimed, and an increasingly unified horizon of values is formed between subjects. China having been historically denied equal participation in the international community is symbolized most strikingly by the “unequal treaties” and the UN refusing membership to the PRC until 1971. The world order dominated by the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R (first world nations) was criticized by Mao Zedong 毛澤東 in his “Three World Theory” (*sange shijie de lilun* 三個世界的理論) and China reacted by participating Non-Aligned Movement as an alternative to the UN. With China’s diplomatic strategy oriented around fostering relationships with developing nations, “it was easier for China to gain recognition under this alternative description. When Prime Minister Zhou Enlai presented himself at the first meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in Bandung in April 1955, he was treated as a figure of world-historical significance.”⁴¹ While today China is a permanent member of the UN’s security council and enjoys a great deal of power within the international community, the resentment toward a system that is seen as favoring one part of the world (the West) and its allies and disregards much of the rest maintains a strong presence within the national ideology. The desire to transform the international system of legal relations such that recognition be conferred more equitably can be found perhaps most directly in the form of the popular “*tianxia* system.”

The notion of *tianxia*, or “all under Heaven” which served as the ancient Sino-centric model of the world for millennia has enjoyed a renaissance in recent decades since Zhao Tingyang’s 趙汀陽 publications on the subject. Unlike the traditional notion, however, Zhao describes *tianxia* as not only a socio-political worldview and ideology, but a framework for international relations intended to provide an overarching identity beyond that of national or even civilizational, but a “world” identity. Zhao says of *tianxia*:

Tianxia defines the “world” in a categorical framework and an irreducible unit of reflection used to think about and explain political-cultural life and institutions. It implies a methodology that is completely distinct from Western methodology.⁴²

With this concept, Zhao proposes a new way of thinking about the international community and its individual nations in which identity does not go beyond national borders. As such it represents a way of thinking about international order insofar as “its importance is expressed in the way this

⁴¹ Ringmar, “China’s Place in Four Recognition Regimes,” 54.

⁴² Zhao Tingyang 趙汀陽, 天下體系：世界制度哲學導論 *The System of Tianxia: A Philosophical Introduction to a World Institution* (Jiangsu: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005), 46.

philosophical concept creates a 'yardstick for the world' and creates the possibility to measure large scale problems that cannot be measured using the concepts of nation of country."⁴³

Such themes of collective world identity, a reformulation of more equal legal relations, and a unified horizon of values can also be found in the teleological model for international relations proposed by Alexander Wendt, the endpoint of which he refers to as the "World State." Whereas Hegel limits the formation of overarching collective identities produced through the struggle for recognition between individuals within a state, Wendt argues that this does not go far enough, and that "the struggle for recognition between states will have the same outcome as that between individuals, collective identity formation and eventually a state."⁴⁴ There are several important similarities between Wendt's description of a world state achieved through the struggle for recognition and Zhao's notion of *tianxia*. In the interest of creating equal legal relations between the world state's member nations, Wendt proposes the establishment of institutions similar to those found in Western models. Zhao, on the other hand, proposes establishing equal legal relations through traditional Confucian concepts and authority figures like the Duke of Zhou, who advocated a system of relations between the states such that "*tianxia* is viewed as shared property and that *tianxia* functions as the guarantor of the security and benefits for every state and household."⁴⁵ According to Wendt, achieving a world state would require global sovereignty in the form of a 'universal supranational authority,' thereby providing a Weberian 'monopoly of legitimate force.' Zhao again uses an ancient Chinese idea in the form of "the Son of Heaven" (*tianzi* 天子), which is related to *tianxia* insofar as "they both form the theoretical foundation for *tianxia*/empire, *tianxia* being primarily a world institution concept and the Son of Heaven being primarily a world government concept."⁴⁶ Perhaps most important for both thinkers, however, is the emphasis on a global collective identity. For Wendt an overarching collective identity and the world state which conditions it is the inevitable outcome of the teleologically dialectic struggle for recognition, while for Zhao an overarching world identity is presented not as inevitable, but as a practical curative to the central problem of "how do we develop from a place of universal conflict to that of universal cooperation?"⁴⁷

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Alexander Wendt, "Why a World State is Inevitable," in *European Journal of International Relations*, 9, no. 4 (2003), 493.

⁴⁵ Zhao Tingyang, *All Under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, trans. by Joseph E. Haroff (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 68.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, iii.

While the notion of establishing an overarching world collective identity is admirably sanguine and optimistic, it is also highly problematic. This, however, is perhaps not such a problem for Zhao, for it appears the formulation of a new institution for public relations and “world identity” may not be the primary intention of the *tianxia* system. While it does provide a framework for international legal relations and global security, it, more importantly, offers a vision for Chinese national identity, both of which correspond to the resentment felt within China’s historical consciousness due to having been denied equal legal relations within the international system and community of values. In proposing a new way of thinking about world order according to traditional Chinese concepts it is an attempt to replace or at least influence Western modes of thinking about international relations with those particular to China. Furthermore, adopting traditional concepts and expressions of a Chinese vision of world order is important for the rearticulation of Chinese identity because

the historical significance of ‘rethinking about China’ lies in attempting to recover China’s ability to think, allowing China to start thinking again, reconstruct our own thinking framework and fundamental notions, recreate our own worldview, value set, and methodology, reconsider ourselves and the world, and to consider ideas about China’s prospects and future and our use and duties in the world.⁴⁸

The *tianxia* system represents a need to reconsider China’s role in the international community and, as it pertains to recognition theory, it also reflects the demand for greater recognition of Chinese national identity on the international stage. As Zhang Feng 張鋒 notes “from Zhao’s works one can also glimpse the rising intellectual tide among Chinese scholars in rethinking China’s international role. Zhao’s project itself remains incomplete. But it has at least succeeded in stirring up a Chinese imagining of the future world order.”⁴⁹

V. Conclusion

The articulation of any national identity must always be done in relation to the international community or particular members within it as

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁹ Zhang Feng 張鋒, “The Tianxia system: World Order in a Chinese Utopia,” in *Global Asia*, 4, no. 4 (2010), <https://www.globalasia.org/v4no4/book/the-tianxia-system-world-order-in-a-chinese-utopia_zhang-feng>.

identity must always be constructed against an ‘other.’ Likewise, the China Dream, examples from the Chinese media, and the *tianxia* system mentioned above might be more coherently interpreted as not *only* attempts to enhance China’s international influence but also as manifestations of the struggle for recognition insofar as it orients the rearticulation of Chinese national identity. Not only is national identity constructed around historical narratives as Wodak and others argue, but these narratives themselves are conditioned upon and operate within the continuous struggle for recognition in contradistinction, comparison, and community with an ‘other.’ Understanding these conditions upon which national identity is constructed may help to both alleviate pathological tendencies as well as appreciate the solidarity and community that comes with being a part and product of a nation, an aspect of our identity which is both constructed and thus ‘imaginary,’ yet emotionally effective and thus ‘real.’ Identification with the constellation of meaning or values represented by the idea of one’s nation is a part of national identity construction, yet a lack of critical awareness of these meanings and values internalized through the socialization process can lead to *over*-identification. This often expresses itself in pathological tendencies like nationalism and xenophobia, such as the 2012 anti-Japanese protests throughout China after an incident involving the contested the Diaoyu Islands 釣魚島, the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea justified by Russia according to historical and ethnic nationalistic claims, and the 2021 storming of the Capital in Washington D.C. during which American nationals regarded other American nationals as the ‘enemy other.’ Unhealthy relationships with national identity stemming from *over*-identification can also express themselves in very different, yet equally unhealthy pathological tendencies, such as inferiority complexes or oikophobia.

Such an inferiority complex is to this day present in China, evident in the existence of phrases used to derisively describe Chinese nationals who, for example, “revere foreign things and pander to foreigners” (*chongyang meiwai* 崇洋媚外) and for whom “the moon in foreign countries is rounder than in China” (*waiguo de yueliang bi zhongguo yuan* 外國的月亮比中國圓). This in part stems from the Qing dynasty during which the Chinese attitude towards Western “barbarians” went from contempt, to fear, and eventually, as Lu Xun wrote in his 1934 essay “we no longer boast of ourselves nor believe in the League of Nations... we have nostalgia for the past and suffer in the present.”⁵⁰ Scholars and officials like Guo Songtao’s 郭嵩燾⁵¹ portrayal of

⁵⁰ Lu Xun 魯迅, “Have the Chinese people Lost Their Self-Confidence” 中国人失掉自信力了吗.

⁵¹ See Guo Songtao 郭嵩燾, *lundun yu bali riji* 倫敦與巴黎日記 (Diaries From London and Paris) in which Guo bemoans what he perceives as the loss of Chinese moral principles.

traditional culture as degraded and Liang Qichao's claims that "Confucian autocracy" has led China to its current state are expressions of the lack of basic self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem resulting from their abuse, exclusion, and denigration during the 'century of humiliation.' After the reform movement of the 1980's and China's "economic miracle," pride in China's history and uniquely "Chinese" heritage has led to a stronger sense of basic self-confidence, respect, and esteem, and therefore a healthier national identity. It certainly may be true that the CCP is encouraging historical resentment towards the West and Japan, dangerously flirting with unleashing a widespread nationalistic frenzy to bolster its own legitimacy. It is also the case, however, that the current rearticulation of Chinese national identity is in a sense resolving an equally pathological inferiority complex caused by the denial of that "vital human need," recognition.

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