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## **China vs. America: Culture without Civilization against Civilization without Culture?**

### **Introduction**

This is a book on Chinese and American hyperrealism and its effect on the self-perceptions and cultural identities of both countries. Hyperreality represents an exalted or idealized reality. More precisely, it is the state in which it is impossible to distinguish reality from fantasy not because the fantasy is such a good imitation of reality, but because the images of things produced by hyperreality never existed in the first place. Hyperreality creates its own standards of reality, independently of any outside “real” condition. Hyperreality appears when the media coverage of an event becomes more important than the event itself, a phenomenon with which we have become acquainted in the coverage of some court cases. Hyperreality is also concerned with large scale phenomena: economies of entire countries can be liquidated because the economical system existed only as an act of simulation without being backed by anything material, letting its inhabitants one day discover with surprise that their country’s economy functioned only as a hyperreal satellite of a virtual finance world.

According to Jean Baudrillard, our contemporary world has been replaced by the world’s copy within which we are fed stimuli and in which questions of “reality” or authenticity have become redundant. The semiologist Umberto Eco, whose ideas on hyperreality will also be used in this book, designed a very similar concept of hyperreality as “false authenticity.” The state of hyperreality is very common in technologically advanced cultures where virtual reality has made the endless reproductions of fundamentally empty appearances possible. However, it is also possible to speak of hyperreality in terms of cultures or civilizations. During the last three decades, scholars from many fields have accepted the approach of Eric Hobsbawm (1990) and Benedict Anderson (1983) of viewing nations as “imagined” phenomena. While Hobsbawm declares that nations, since they are largely products of social engineering, owe much to “invented traditions,” Anderson postulates, in an even more radical fashion, that nations or all

communities larger than primordial villages are “imagined political communities” (6). If the “imagined” nation is generally accepted as a nation, that is, if a nation begins to exist where nothing used to exist “in reality” (in terms of *real* common features, historical experiences, etc.), it is possible to speak of a nation or a community as a hyperreal phenomenon.

## **Culture and Civilization**

In spite of its provocative title, the aim of this study is not to denigrate either America or China. The author has no ambition to participate in the almost industrial output of contemporary writings reveling in either “America bashing” or in the marketing of the China threat. The difference between the present project and anti-Americanism or Orientalism is made clear at various places within the chapters. This book’s objective is rather to examine the two countries and their relationships through the lens of a half-forgotten though classical philosophical debate: what are the distinctions between culture and civilization? Is it possible to derive a unique scheme from the ‘culture vs. civilization’ debates of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot in France and by Johan Gottfried von Herder in Germany while viewing it within a contemporary global context where the United States of America and China appear as opposing forces? Is it possible to establish the concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ as intellectual tools able to clarify and analyze an opposition that Peter Gries has identified as the confrontation of American arrogance and Chinese vanity? It is possible, especially when one links the culture-civilization debate to the theme of hyperreality whereby China has developed a hyperreal *culture* and America has developed a hyperreal *civilization*. In the end, it turns out that American *civilization* can be perceived as an uncanny conceptual mirror image of Chinese *culture*.

It is clear that this contrasts with the most common view that tends to present China and the U.S. as incompatible entities, as does, for example, Martin Jacques who writes: “The Chinese sense of cultural self-confidence and superiority, rooted in their long and rich history as a civilization-state, is utterly different from the U.S., which has no such legacy to draw on, and contrasts with Europe too, if less strongly” (Jacques 2009: 270). Comparisons establishing parallels between China and America are highly unusual and might have been delivered for the last time by a major author through Alexandre Kojève in the 1960s on some pages of his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Kojève meditates upon the “socialist” character of

American civilization drawing daring parallels between America and communist countries such as China and the USSR: “Now, several voyages of comparison made (between 1948 and 1958) to the United States and the USSR gave me the impression that if the Americans give the appearance of rich Sino-Soviets, it is because the Russians and the Chinese are only Americans who are still poor but are rapidly proceeding to get richer” (Kojève 1969: 161). Kojève concludes that, from a certain point of view, the United States has *already* attained the final stage of Marxist “communism,” because here practically all the members of a “classless society” can appropriate for themselves everything that seems good to them.

The present study is not an exercise in ideology and not even in political theory, but rather a non-pragmatic analysis of certain concepts. I intend to philosophically question elements that are otherwise taken for granted. The first introductory chapter describes the current political situation that opposes America and China. In the second chapter, the subtle and very much contested distinction between culture and civilization is established through careful considerations of its development within European intellectual history. The following chapters show that certain patterns that can be detected in both Chinese and American culture/civilization have led to assumptions about their own countries’ being the centers of the world, assumptions shared, to such an extent, by no other nation in the world. Further analyses developed in the present book lead to a comparison of Chinese and American nationalism, distinct ideas about religion, as well as about architecture. All these themes remain dependent on an evaluation of either culture or civilization.

## **China, America, and Hyperreality**

Within this book are examples of how China produces a hyperrealist version of its *culture* through devices that are peculiar to the traditional (Confucian) treatment of history and how American hyperrealism has traditionally created a materialized utopia of civilization. The mythical and pseudo-historical past upon which many Chinese philosophical discourses are built leads to a quasi-virtual timelessness whose effects remain significant in China’s contemporary political life. It is unavoidable to examine China’s traditional self-enclosedness in the light of the “dark side of Confucianism” that includes some undesirable parts of Chinese history (its social and political oppression for example) and extends into the contemporary world. American

hyperrealism, on the other hand, will be seen as being present not in its *culture*, but in its *civilization*. This civilization has often been described as a materialized utopia excelling in simulations like Disneyland and Las Vegas or as an aseptic, dishistoricized environment that authors like Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco have classified as hyperreality. It permeates large parts of American life like an underlying structure creating unique constellations. It has created an America in which the actor president Ronald Reagan can slip between Hollywood and reality until the real “comes back as the double of a self that never was” (Rubinstein 1989: 583) because the sign of a president has become a presidential reality. It has created an America of fantasy environments, providing a fictionalized landscape that has the qualities of theme parks in which the border between reality and fantasy has been lost. It has created the world described by Mark Slouka in which Oliver Stone can appear as a historian, “Joe McGinniss as a biographer, Geraldo Rivera as a journalist, Leonard Jeffries as a geneticist and Barbara Streisand as an authority in national policy” (Slouka 1995: 111). It has created an America where General Schwarzkopf celebrates the Gulf War victory by throwing a huge party at Disney World.

## **Bo Yang and Baudrillard**

The starting points of the present research are Bo Yang’s *The Ugly Chinaman* and Jean Baudrillard’s *America*. Bo Yang uses his leading concept, the Chinese *soy paste vat*, as a metaphor for Chinese culture, by means of which he tries to come to terms with the Chinese past and present. According to Bo Yang, Chinese culture develops through fermentation and an infinite process of indiscriminately adding cultural components, which resembles the production of soy paste in a vat. Bo Yang’s thesis states that the cultural elements within the 5000 year-old vat of Chinese culture have never been churned and as a result, the thick paste of its *culture* has prevented the development of Chinese *civilization*.

Though a great deal of my analysis concentrates on Confucianism, the main focus lies not on Chinese history, but on everyday life in contemporary China. A non-academic book like *The Ugly Chinaman* has been chosen as a starting point because Bo Yang’s lively and unpretentious description of a concrete Chinese present establishes a link between my relatively abstract thesis about hyperreality and the relationship between culture and civilization and the concrete world.

To Bo Yang’s soy paste vat theory of Chinese culture, I offer a vision of America elaborated

on by several authors, most famously Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco. In his book *America*, Baudrillard experiences the New World through an exoticizing lens of estrangement that has been shocking for many Americans because the country appears as distant and culturally removed as if the author were writing about China. Hyperreal America is the “Desert America” most present in California and in the Midwest, it is the America of cleanliness, politeness, and happiness settled in a utopian future, which is unquestionably civilized, but which foreign visitors often find soulless and “culturally empty.” Baudrillard draws a picture of American civilization that is interesting for the present study: a straightforward and predominantly utopian affair, indefatigably preoccupied with turning things into material realities and relatively unable to ironize upon the future because American civilization is supposed to be the future by definition. Slavoj Žižek has brought this to a point by writing: “Poor people around the world dream about becoming Americans – so what do the well-to-do Americans, immobilized in their well-being, dream about?” (Žižek 2002: 17).

While Bo Yang criticizes China’s excess of culture and lack of civilization, Baudrillard criticizes the American *excess of civilization*. Baudrillard’s vision of an American “paradise materialized” is diametrically opposed to Bo Yang’s “hell” of the Confucian soy paste vat. In spite of this, both paradise and hell are driven by identical systems because both rely on the mechanics of a self-enclosed and auto-productive reality. Both systems are radical. America materializes a utopian future as the highest state of civilization not equipped to *fight* culture, but to *ignore* it. The political scientists Ziauddin Sardar and Meryll Wyn Davies, in their controversial UK bestseller *Why Do People Hate America?* analyze America’s inability or unwillingness to exercise self-reflection and characterize this unwillingness as ‘knowledgeable ignorance’. One of the central arguments of their book is

that at the heart of relations between America and the rest of the world stands a problem of knowledge. In precise terms, we call it the problem of ‘knowledgeable ignorance’: knowing people, ideas, civilizations, religions, histories as something they are not, and could not possibly be, and maintaining these ideas even when the means exist to know differently. (Sardar & Davies 2002: 13)

The Chinese project, on the other hand, ends with the establishment of an absolute past of a Middle Kingdom unreachable by any outside *civilizational* critique. According to Martin Jacques in his recent, *When China Rules the World*, “The challenge posed by the rise of China is far more

likely to be cultural in nature, as expressed in the Middle Kingdom mentality. Or, to put it in another way, the most difficult question posed by the rise of China is not the absence of democracy but how it will handle difference” (Jacques 2009: 270).

It is here that a comparison of Baudrillard and Bo Yang becomes almost necessary. The Chinese soy paste vat filled with familism, poetry, religious beliefs, superstitions, irrelevant names, quotations, and legendary kings can be opposed to the American vat filled with highly marketed consumer goods, media images, aesthetic surgery, Oprah-style quick fixes, superhuman enemies, and other fakes. Both the American and the Chinese vat create an almost religious form of hyperreality leading to unrealistic self-perceptions that can easily lead to conflicts with the rest of the world.

Throughout the present book, the comparison is carried out by using well-established intellectual models of culture and of civilization whose meanings are explained in the second chapter. Both China and America engage in cultural/civilizational simulations of the highest degree. China’s Confucian simulation of *culture* and America’s utopian simulation of *civilization* suggest identical copies of either culture (China) or civilization (America) for which no original has ever existed.

At no point do I pretend that Bo Yang, a relatively unknown Taiwanese novelist and essayist, has had the same influence on Chinese studies as Baudrillard on social and cultural studies. However, both have established, in the most radical fashion, positions that many other authors have expressed less radically and less clearly: Tai Chen, Lu Xun, Chen Duxin, Hu Shi, Herrlee Creel, Lin Yusheng, Etienne Balazs, John Fairbank, Lucien Pye, Simon Leys, Rupert Hodder, Michael Puett, Hua Shiping, Chong Woei Lien, Peter Gries, Wang Shuo, Lionel Jensen and Timothy Weston in the realm of Chinese studies; and Alexis de Tocqueville, Francis Hsu, Claude Roy, Paul Claudel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Louis Marin, Mark Slouka, Diana Rubinstein, Jaap Koojman, Michael Steiner, Scott Bukatman, Jean-Philippe Mathy, Dick Meyer, Slavoj Žižek, and Micheal Sorkin in the realm of American studies. In no case are Bo Yang and Baudrillard introduced as harbingers of absolute truths about China and America, but they are presented as authors providing interesting starting points for an ongoing analysis.

Though all aforementioned authors have formulated their views at different times and in different contexts, the essence of their analyses remains surprisingly constant. In other words, the idea of the “hyperreal” that permeates this book and that is explained by borrowing elements

from a large variety of analysts subsists in an abstract fashion independently of certain political or historical contexts. Were it otherwise, no comparison between China and America would be possible. It does not matter, for example, that Hu Shi (who, in certain circumstances, arrives at conclusions similar to Bo Yang's) wrote about his own society at a time of immense turmoil due to two world wars and on-going civil unrest within China and that Baudrillard was writing about a country not of his own during a time of relative political stability and economic expansion through neoliberal globalization. The production of hyperreality is so essential and abstract that the same pattern can be found in both cases.

### **A New China, a New America?**

Many observers feel that China, if it really wants to “advance beyond the present interregnum, (...) must enter an entirely new era of history that will impact both China and the world—a new era, a sublime moment, that no ‘post-‘ word can adequately describe” (Lu 2001: 68). The same can be said about the United States of America. Baudrillard's “concrete mythology of America” that is entirely made of civilization finds its counterpart in the Confucian myth of Chinese culture produced by the soy paste vat; and the myth of a civilizatory utopia finds a counterpart in the myth of cultural superiority. What both countries seem to lack is the organic interplay of culture and civilization because historical constellations prevented them from developing such strategies.

Instead of claiming, as does Samuel Huntington in his *The Clash of Civilizations*, that there is simply no common ground between certain civilizations, I believe that the best approach to solving problems between nations is comparative analysis. Certainly, reductionism, the confusion of particularities of human phenomena, as well as essentialization and reification are dangers inherent to any comparative analysis. However, a methodology that clearly distinguishes culture from civilization can prevent many of these dangers.