Toward a More Coherent China and a Correspondingly Realized World

What kind of political unit is China? Does China actually exist (as anyone conceives of it)? Do different types of polities exist today, or are all political units essentially the same (i.e. states)? Why does the question of China's political unit matter for both political science and the world— as opposed to being just a pretentious or pedantic academic exercise in typology problematization? As the PRC (People's Republic of China) rises, two questions about its future have captured the imagination of Western scholars and, increasingly, the general public. The first, in its domestic, comparative context is when or whether China will democratize. The second, in what is generally perceived to be more consequential for the world as a whole, is whether China's rise will be peaceful, as it loudly proclaims as a "status quo power", or violent, as realism's balance of power principle predicts.

Rather than pretending to answer these questions directly, this essay will examine the likelihood that each of these two questions is framed by expectations and terms whose universal applicability fails to attain. Most fundamentally, they rest on a highly questionable assumption that China is a nation-state like any other (a nationalistic billiard ball growing quickly in size). Instead, this essay proposes that China is an idiographic, as opposed to nomothetic, entity. Its own self-image as something other than a "normal" nation-state might one day challenge altogether the prevailing "imaginary" of a world consisting of nation-states.

Even if a fundamental reconceptualization of political units of analysis is not in the works, if China and its 1.4 billion citizens interpret the world more along traditional lines of itself as the "center kingdom" in a system encompassing "all under heaven", room will have to be made in political discourse for this interpretation. Indeed, given certain ontological and epistemological commitments, the distinction of the Chinese traditional worldview being only a normative aspiration (an impossible utopia as opposed to already objectively existing) may not even matter. The number of people holding the particular view and/or working to achieve it, asserting and establishing a powerful, alternative, and uniquely Chinese teleology, could itself challenge or change the systemic consensus. As one volume's title puts it, "The Teleology of the Modern Nation-State" is both geographically dependent on a dominant Western worldview and may actually "distort...[what] we are

examining".[1] If China is comparable to anything, a European nation-state with a smaller population than an average PRC province is an obviously problematic place to begin any analytical adventure. To draw more meaningful insights, it is necessary to consider how China is seen by its own nation.[2]

This research proposal is organized as follows: first, philosophical issues of ontology will be briefly discussed. After assuming a post-positivist approach to categorization generally, lengthier examinations of several well-known political units (nation-state, empire, and civilization) will follow, based on the previously outlined issues and bifurcated interpretations of Western political science and Chinese tradition (or rather, contemporary Chinese interpretations and applications of it). Next, the aforementioned traditional Chinese worldview of "all under heaven" (天下 *tianxia*) will be examined as an alternative representation of the world, with particular regard for how China and other units fit into a system whose primary benefit is posited as an end to nationalist alterity. Finally, a research agenda for interpretive research will be laid out, with the goal of better understanding how Chinese people see their homeland, whether or to what extent it resembles how Western political scientists characterize it and all states.

The fundamental problem addressed by this proposal is how or whether to label China as a political unit of analysis, given differing definitions, ontologies, and the fact that the contemporary Chinese state inherited ("liberated" via reconquest) the territorial possessions of the Qing Empire, ruling its frontiers more directly than the final dynasty ever did. Given that the meaning of China has changed over time and has always meant something different to a Chinese person, a Tibetan, a Westerner or other person outside traditional sinocentrism, the concept is best interpreted as a "text-analogue", with the goal of understanding its intersubjective meanings rather than orientalizing it as a static or objectively existing entity (but not actually as anyone imagines it).

Correspondence and Coherence. Charles Taylor's seminal article, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", goes to great lengths to challenge the notion that anything named by humans can have an objective existence— an expression which conveys a meaning exactly, without any confusion or nonsense, or without constituting some of its meaning by the very means of its expression. "The very terms in which the future will

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[1] See Fogel's introduction, pg. 7. As a historian, he is referring both to the distorting anachronism and inaccuracy of histories centered on nation-states either in eras preceding their formation or in the many regions whose political units do not conform to Eurocentric concepts (and despite universal, teleological expectations, may never conform completely). This proposal will use China to challenge prevailing uniformity of political units both temporally and spatially.

[2] It is the position of this proposal that China does have its own nation, that Chinese nationalism will be a great force in the 21st century, but that China as it is currently defined politically and geographically will not become a nation-state within our lifetimes. Later sections will explain this apparent contradiction.

have to be characterized if we are to understand it properly are not available to us at present" is as true today as it was in 1971, and China presents a clear source of terms as yet unknown but essential for the future.[3] Whether or not an "all under heaven" exists, and virtually no one would say that it does, its truth might be found in a new world order which seeks to establish it. If correspondence standards of truth are relaxed, we may be treated to greater understanding of those on the other side of cultural and ideological divides, and this is a goal eminently worth pursuing.

Prof. Nick Onuf has described positivist and post-positivist ontologies in terms of their foundational assumptions and foci in making "truth claims". In the correspondence version, well-defined, material objects are essential, and names of things correspond to real, actually existing things. Language only plays a descriptive role, with units of analysis already existing independently of the names humanity has given them. As a methodological consequence of its need for specificity, the goal of research using a correspondence conception of truth is often to focus on narrowly defined problems, with empirical and often quantitative data, building toward understanding in "small pieces" which ultimately provide evidence for meso-level theory. This is generally the ontology in which positivists operate, but Sartori's "traveling problem" looms large: are the researchers using the same term talking about the same thing? Theories based on universally existing units, such as nation-states, inevitably stretch their foundational concepts to the point where primary examples, fitting the original definition best due to their congruency with the category's geographic origin, are only the minority of the population.[4]

Drawing on expectations that language describes a corresponding reality, the problem of categorization is simply a matter of finding the best fit for a particular thing. Within this mindset, a systemic challenge would point out the inadequacy of existing categories to describe all things. To posit that a thing exists, as when people

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[3] Taylor, pg. 50. Quoting something pithy from this article may be akin to cherry picking, but a summary of how Taylor sees correspondence and coherence claims could also be found on pg. 45, where he says with typically well-reasoned authoritativeness, "We need to go beyond the bounds of a science based on verification [correspondence] to one which would study the inter-subjective and common meanings embedded in social reality [coherence]."

[4] More explicitly, the concept of a nation-state *corresponds* best with the largest countries in Europe, where the concept originated. Tilly, Philpott, Torpey, Anderson and countless others have written on the formation of sovereign nation-states, each emphasizing various angles such as the need to form armies and national economies better able to trade with like units, to accommodate religious differences, to "embrace" populations and regulate migration, and to disseminate national culture with the aid of "print capitalism", etc., generally starting in France but spreading throughout Europe in the modern era. Microstates in Europe and throughout the world, combined with huge, federalist BRIC countries and the U.S. challenge the nation-state from either extreme of geographic size alone, while levels of economic development, imperialism, etc. all reduce the extent to which the term "nation-state" is both fungible and corresponding to real things.

say that China is a thing which actually exists, does not mean that it exists as a particular *type* of thing.[5] If we accept that types of things exist, such as the polity types known as nation-states and empires, however, all actually existing political units must "belong" to an existing category, or a new category must be created to describe them (and possibly other, as yet undiscovered things which are found to be similar). A system based on like units can thus be challenged by claims that the units comprising it are of different categories, too far from categorical identity to be interchangeable within the system. The world system preferred by Western political science is based on nation-states, for example, and to an extent the obvious existence of other forms such as city-states, microstates, states which more closely resemble empires, etc. diminishes the veracity to which the system, as described, is said to correspond.[6]

A more fundamental challenge is that of a post-positivist ontology of coherent truths, focusing on the relationships between named concepts (metaphors, in Onuf's terms) which lack, or perhaps cannot have, objective existential properties. Coherence entails internal consistency, the minimal requirement that contradictions are minimized, and the expectation that the target audience of any argument, theory, or universalist cosmology shares an understanding of the terms used to make truth claims. If chosen terms relate to each other in coherent ways that everyone agrees upon— or at least those with whom one engages in dialog— a generally accepted truth is established. Reality claims and standardized definitions of objects are, in effect, relaxed to enable meaningful dialog across inevitably different ontologies. A preference for coherence is less concerned with defining the objects to be analyzed— it may well deny their objective existence altogether— and more concerned with their relationship with other loosely defined units and reaching out to other fields of study, other cultures where the terms may not exist, be translated or agreed upon exactly. As a result of the relational emphasis, macro-level statements about entire systems, using larger but harder to define terms such as "modernity", "capitalism", and "development" can be used more flexibly (as long as they make sense within a particular argument, to a particular audience).

By contrast, "smaller" and presumably well understood terms like "state" may be problematized in the mode of coherence, especially when the term is used in different contexts or accompanied by existential

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[5] This is to say that China (or anything else) can exist without being a particular type of something. Categories would thus be rejected as too problematic for the heuristic value they add to analysis.

[6] Presumably, the system-preserving response to this challenge is that the mere existence of other types of political units doesn't mean there isn't a system. Other forms (and entities other than polities) exist, but they simply aren't as important for political scientists to study. The claim that nation-states are predominant and therefore most important is still a normative one, and I'll have to read up on it in future revisions to understand justifications of it based on empirical evidence.

assumptions on the same level as "brute facts". Not only do countless definitions and theories related to the state exist; the term is burdened with fitting every existing polity into it in order for a state-centric political science to be relevant to the world. If this weren't troublesome enough, some theories do not distinguish among types of polities and use the term "state" interchangeably to describe a "unitary political actor", a serious problem for a political entity such as China, kindly self-described as "multinational" and still claimed by two existing, opposed regimes in the PRC and RoC of Taiwan. While the latter has increasingly conceded the Chinese state to the former in recent decades, those with a strong inclination to essentialize might suggest that Taiwan remains the more purely Chinese state, as it retains the old script and escaped the anti-traditional Cultural Revolution of the Mainland from 1966-76. Even among positivists, the "real" China is subject to debate.

This proposal could go in one of two interpretive routes. The first could accept an ontology of correspondence between names and objects but dispute whether China fits neatly in a single category[7]. This holds little analytical promise, however, as only the most strident positivist would be able to assign the contemporary PRC any categorical label without holding his or her nose. These analysts might instead fall into the neologistic trap of naming a new category just for China.[8] The second, focusing on the coherent relationship among agreed-upon terms would attempt to reconcile China's own self-image and the divergent views of it in the dominant discourse of Western modernity, described by historians as "the teleology of the modern nation-state". It is this second, more complex approach that the remainder of this proposal will pursue, but first, a stylized and possibly incoherent table of sinocentric illustrations of the previous points:

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[7] Again, Sartori's classic piece appropriately privileges what he calls "classic" concepts as mutually exclusive "data containers" which emphasize difference so that observations (data) can be clearly placed in (be an example of) only one concept.

[8] As a previous term paper on the PRC's regime type suggests, many are content to do this, both in hopes that their uniquely modified version of authoritarianism or democracy might resonate with scholars, being more accurate in its description of how China really is while also making a name (or at least a coherent body of work) for oneself. In just the past five years, books and articles have used dozens of singly-applicable labels to describe the ruling CCP regime (i.e. fragmented, responsive, adaptive, or evolved authoritarianism for modified forms, unwieldy "quasi-formalized" as an example of a neologism coined by a prominent China scholar, Joseph Fewsmith, unlikely to be used by anyone else), and barring a dramatic change like the revolutions of old (which even the Party itself seems to fear most of all), agreement seems a long way off.

FIGURE 1 content:

Sth. called China has existed & (essence) hasn't changed for a long time. (Naming Sth. called China brought it into existence long ago)

There have been ruptures in history where China changed fundamentally and may have ceased being China for a time. (China has not existed continuously.)

China exists, but we don't agree on what it is (but our agreement isn't necessary for China to exist)

🕉
We need to agree on some basic characteristics of "China" in order to talk about it coherently, but China is a product of our collective imagination and doesn't really exist. (Not sure whether it can exist or not)

China has never yet existed but may one day when all agree what it is (or when everyone agrees on at least one characteristic of it). Because we don't all agree, China doesn't exist. It exists if and only if we agree fundamentally what it is.

☽ ☺   ♓   ♏   ⚙   ⌘

Land now called China exists, so it was China before humans called it China. There is, was, and always will be a China.

Sth. called China has existed for a long time, but its meaning/ referent/ thing /antecedent has changed (while keeping the same name). A China has existed continuously (no essence but same name)

China is a nation-state, empire, civilization, tianxia, etc. (These categories exist, and China is one of them)

Softer: These categories are not mutually exclusive, or it doesn't matter which one China is, but China exists.

Many subjective Chinas exist, and we needn't agree on one for China to exist.

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│ China: One of humanity's │
│ oldest social facts, or just a │
│ figment of our imagination? │
└─────────────────────────┘

◆   ♋

China does not exist, never did, never will.

China exists when 2 or more Chinese people agree on what it is.

China exists when any 2 or more people agree on what it is.

China is whatever an individual Chinese person says/thinks it is.

China is whatever any individual says/thinks it is.
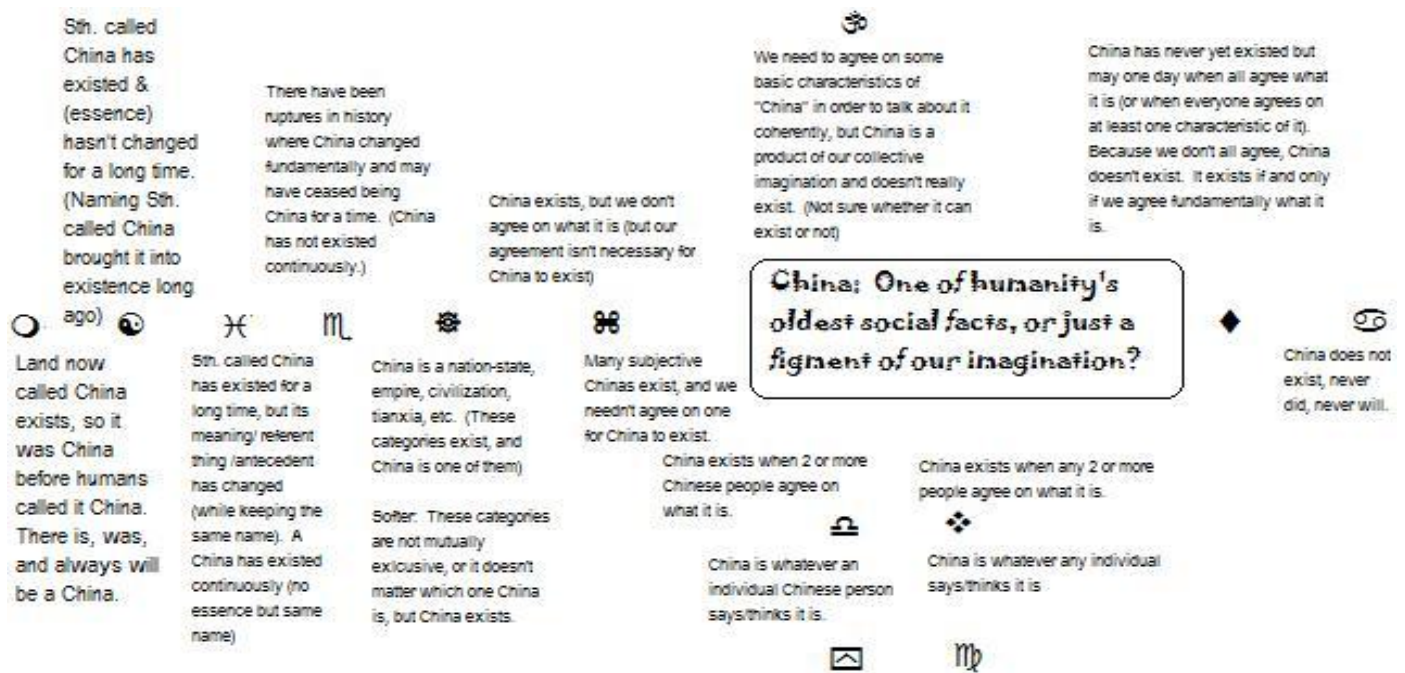
⚌   ♍

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FIGURE 1: Ontologies of Chinese Existence. The left side leans toward equating brute facts and social facts in a single, supposedly objective ontology where language is only descriptive, the hardest form of correspondence claims. Edging right, what we think doesn't affect existence. Further right but still on the left side, what *an individual* thinks doesn't affect existence (but a group might). In the center, it matters how many people are claiming a social fact and the extent to which all agree. On the right side, only "brute facts" exist; social facts are imagined.[9] On the far right, there are no brute facts or any external reality because language must constitute or even create everything. Not sure how close to outright solipsism that is, but it's intended as the hardest form of non-positivist constructivism, at least. Note also that the claim is also made by nationalists that no non-Chinese person can ever define China; such would be an example of imperialism.

Rather than transforming itself into a full-scale, rambling philosophical rumination which might discuss each point in FIGURE 1 and not resolve anything, it is necessary to adopt one for the actual analytical portion of the proposal. The main contention is that, due to differing conceptualizations of China, its correspondence to a single entity is impossible. While the following sections show that agreement is still a long way off, it seems almost disrespectful to say that China is simply something humanity has imagined for thousands of years. Thus, it is the assumption of this proposal that China exists, but its meaning (and resemblance to particular polity types) has changed over time. As an epistemological tidbit, also, we may never know what China really is. For something it is clearly not, yet is assumed to be, let us continue by considering China as a nation-state.

Nation-State. To begin with a gross oversimplification, the subfields of comparative politics and international relations (IR) appear to be concerned with, or have affinities for, correspondent and coherent truth

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[9] Here and throughout this proposal I use the terms "brute" and "social" fact from my (possible mis-)understanding of Searle.

claims, respectively.[10] In partial contradiction of commitments made in the previous section, it is assumed, out of convenience as much as ignorance, that before we can know how things relate to each other, we would very much like to know what these things are. Thus, the focus of these sections will be on the comparative concern of what China is, though in addition to the previously mentioned problems with striving for correspondence between labels and reality, definitive criteria cannot be isolated from how China interacts with other political units in the world.

Systemic assumptions underlie many theories of relations between nations, with structural realists like Kenneth Waltz being criticized for superficial conflations of different types of states and realists who open the "black box" of the state, like Stephen Walt, losing the appeal of neorealism's simplicity and ontological confidence, attempting to save a system-level theory by looking at its sub-units perhaps too closely.[11] When realist IR scholars refer to the anarchic, international world system, they consider it to be composed of states, specifically nation-states, territorially based polities with self-identifying nations (large groups of people) who profess loyalty to the same.[12] Since at least the 1970's, other prominent ontologies to describe the world have come to the fore, including Wallerstein's "world system" of core and periphery (still based on states, but explicitly unequal ones) and various liberal and constructivist challenges to realism which generally accept the existence of states but dispute how they relate to each other and whether other entities deserve scholarly attention. To generalize broadly, the higher the level of analysis, the more it is assumed that the units of the level(s) below are uniform or not radically different from each other , whereas this proposal contends that China and perhaps several other states are fundamentally, consequentially divergent from the standard nation-state and should be expected to "behave" differently. Clearly IR is not the focus of this proposal; rather, it will draw on much recent scholarship on China to show how these conceptualizations of the world have never been completely accepted among Chinese thinkers.

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[10] To reiterate, correspondence approaches can make claims about what things are but have trouble with higher levels of analysis, such as systems whose component parts stretch the original concepts' meanings too far to be trustworthy. For provisional truths to be coherent, by contrast, relationships with others are prized, so that communication can traverse gaps in definitions.

[11] For all of this, I'm relying on notes from an intro to IR core seminar from several years back. Waltz's chapter on "Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power", in Keohane (Ed., 1986), is foundational for the most parsimonious, system-level theorizing. Walt, 1988, finds that, on closer inspection, real and perceived threats apparently differ from state to state. Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics*, 1981, is also a helpful delineation of the "rising power" threat to balances of power in the realist's world system.

[12] Note, as many scholars of citizenship do, that a state has both a territorial and membership component. A possibly important divide may exist between state and nation-state, then: state membership requires only that one be an officially recognized citizen; defacto membership in a nation-state might be denied to citizens who fail to meet the qualifications of an exclusive nationalism (i.e. for reasons of race, ethnicity, religion, language, etc.). The definition also goes beyond Weber's minimal definition of a state in that a corresponding nation must exist who believe that their particular state's monopoly of legitimate violence is just.

Foremost among these thinkers is Hui Wang, a representative of what is called the "New Left" in the PRC, a group of intellectuals within and independent of the ruling CCP (Chinese Communist Party) united by their disapproval of China's neoliberal economic reforms. Strong among their beliefs is that the wholesale adoption of "universal" (aka Western) values is inappropriate for China, and this translates into political theory by criticizing foundational ontologies of political science, seeking instead uniquely Chinese ontologies.

Wang and many others see the nation-state, modernity, and capitalism as intimately intertwined, but also problematically teleological and correspondence claims to real objects whose parochial definitions are woefully unacknowledged. Suisheng Zhao's *A Nation State by Construction* is indispensible for tracing the rise of a Chinese national consciousness, first among elites like Sun Yatsen and gradually spreading throughout the population, even in one of China's most weak and fragmented periods.[13] Perhaps more interesting from an interpretive perspective is Benjamin Schwartz's classic biography of Yan Fu, a late-Qing intellectual who, after formative years spent in the West reading and translating books by liberal theorists like Spencer, Locke, Mill, and others, came to a prescient conclusion that the pressures of modernity would require China to form a strong national consciousness and improve itself if it were ever to regain its former status.[14] This involved a fundamental shift in political values from Confucian "virtue" to national strength. Schwartz notes that the very concept of a nation was imported from the West, along with the diagnosis of the Chinese nation as "the sick man of Asia", internalized by Yan Fu as well as the seminal Chinese novelist of the era, Lu Xun[15].

Interestingly for the purpose of a study of polity types, Yan Fu thought that the modernizing mission could best be carried out by a decrepit Qing dynasty whose attempts at reform came only as last gasps in its

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[13] China's republican and nationalist era in the early 20th century, ruled variously by a self-declared (and short-lived) emperor, warlords, and the Guomindang (GMD) of Chiang Kai-shek was among China's most divided, though considerable regional differences still exist. As the land and peoples of China were under so many different political systems and leaders with very limited territorial range or ability to penetrate into society (especially rural areas where the majority of the population lives), defining "China" would have been all but impossible, and perhaps few could claim the existence of a single, unified political unit worthy of the name. Beyond the linguistic fact of innumerable regional and city-specific dialects which more resemble the differences in European languages, some geneticists contend that Chinese people in the north more closely resemble Europeans genetically than those of South China.

[14] Many Western critiques of Yan Fu's readings of classic liberal texts accuse him of fundamental misreadings: liberal thinkers were supposed to be primarily concerned with the rights of the individual, perhaps even in opposition to the state. Yan Fu, contrarily and in what might be a called a "close reading" of Yan's notes and translations on the part of Schwartz, sees the potential of a nation—or rather, a strong state able to stand up to foreign incursions into China and possibly even assert itself beyond national borders—made up of "self-strengthened" individuals loyal to the state. Certainly, this seems to be in the process of realization by the contemporary PRC. Yan Fu, it should also be noted, was in opposition to the Confucianists of his time, who were still very conservative and in denial of the challenges Western confrontation brought. Yan Fu was, instead, a reformist, also opposed to revolutionaries who demanded (and briefly attempted) to form a modern Chinese republic.

[15] Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q", published in 1921 and 1922 and considered a masterpiece of Chinese literature, is still required reading in the contemporary PRC's schools for its portrayal of traditional Chinese as backward and in need of "self-strenghtening". The pathetic protagonist of the title deludes himself with thoughts of "spiritual superiority" (likely for being a traditional Chinese peasant) even while fearing and submitting to foreign tyranny and oppression. Or so says Wikipedia.

imperial death throes of its last decade. As the Republican Era proved to be just as chaotic and ill-fitting as Yan Fu predicted and feared, his conviction that a democratic nation-state was inimical to China only grew stronger as Sun Yatsen's (and later Chiang Kai-shek's) national experiments continued. The aforementioned and contemporary Hui Wang similarly finds "nation-state logic" to be a poor fit for Chinese modernity, and his 2011 translated volume, *The Politics of Imagining Asia*, finds a foil not only in the West, but also in a revisionist "Kyoto School" of history which had explicitly sought to elevate the modern status of Asia.[16] Wang describes the Kyoto school's radical agenda as a matter of establishing China as the birthplace of the modern nation-state, in the Song Dynasty of AD 960-1279, even as the dawn of modernity itself.[17] Despite its glorification of China, Wang rejects these claims precisely because of the imperial transition problems described in the next section. In more detail, the transition from the imperial Tang Dynasty to the supposed Chinese nation-state of the Song hardly resembled the more obvious de-imperialization that was the Qing to Republican restructuring of the 1910's, conducted and justified with explicitly modern rhetoric and national goals. In direct contrast to the Kyoto school's recentering of modernity, Wang seeks to address the empire and nation-state distinction directly, with the ultimate goal of "liberating" China from "simplistic European nationalism".[18] In terms which should be music to any constructivists' ears, Wang states unequivocally that the framework of transition from empire to nation-state is "constricted by a discourse of teleological modernity." Instead of aspiring to the status of a nation-state like any other, the concept must be transcended and replaced with a more accurate, culturally derived concept.

At least one aspect of a world made of nation-states has considerable appeal to China as a pretender to leadership of the global South: the concept of state sovereignty. Unfortunately, however, Mark Leonard's 2008 *What Does China Think?* finds much dissatisfaction among Chinese leadership about how rarely the supposedly universal principle of "noninterference in domestic affairs", frequently invoked by "rogue states" and others facing Western disapproval, is respected. Contrary to Chinese critics of the nation-state, Leonard envisions a "walled world" of truly inviolable state sovereignty, were Chinese norms to replace liberal ones ostensibly based on universal human rights, embedded with the right or obligation to intervene when these are seen to be violated.

Empire. A 2010 book edited by Kimberly Kagan, entitled *The Imperial Moment,* asks provocatively

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[16] Wang, pg. 74-5
[17] The logic of this claim is that the nation-state is the foundation of modernity itself, so if the nation-state began in Asia, Asia was modern before Europe. For similar claims that China embodied many elements, such as a market economy, long before they were incorporated into any European society, see Bin Wong's *China Transformed*.
[18] Wang, pg. 77

what, if any, empirical difference exists between powerful states (or the U.S. hegemon, whose possible designation as an empire animates much of the analysis) today and the empires of the past. Comparing six self-avowed empires, including the Chinese Qing of 1644-1911, she and her contributors find that two characteristics are shared by this important but impossible to define term. The first is simply the self identification as such, all but impossible in the 21st century, as the term has been irreparably tainted by connotation with violations of sovereignty, not to mention the deservingly reviled and similarly cast off concept of colonialism. Part of the difficulty of identifying empires in the present day is also the extinction of emperors as leaders; the often celestial prestige formerly accorded to such a title would now invoke only ridicule.

The second indicator is the decision (as states do not become empires accidentally) to "issue orders to formerly autonomous states with certainty that they will be obeyed".[19] I find that this distinction rather glosses over the likelihood that this certainty is established by conquest or otherwise coercive subordination of some kind. In the Chinese case, a full spectrum of Qing imperial conquest lies at the heart of distinctions between most of the region's nations and states: as Perdue's body of work notes, the reason we know of no Zungharian nation (or state) is because the Qing, irked by the Zunghars' frequent invasions, insubordination and non-trustworthiness, physically eliminated them. By contrast, Tibetans, Mongols, and eventually the Uyghurs showed due respect to Qing imperial claims on their territory and maintained suzerain status in recognition of their inseparable non-Chineseness— they could hardly have been Chinese before the term became united under Han nationalism of the late 19th century to the present, and until the term is de-ethnicized it is arguable whether they ever *can* be members of a Chinese nation. Thirdly, as Dai's article illustrates, the contemporary Burmese state's existence owes much to fierce resistance of the 18th century to Qing attempts at forced annexation.

In short, what IR scholars point to as bellicose or greedy states, often attributed to realist theories and unnatural except for the "offensive" version offered by Mearshimer[20], may simply be an innate, behavioral manifestation of being an empire. Empires' prime directive and function as a polity are to expand their territory, their ideological reach and, thereby, their glory, never knowing the point of "overstretch" until it has been passed. A world of empires needed no theory of offensive realism because notions of sovereignty had yet to extend beyond Europe, but this extension, still incomplete by Southern accounts, did not necessarily mean the extinction of

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[19] Kagan, pg. 173.

[20] Mearshimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, besides outlining one of the better known scenarios of rising China as a threat to the global balance of power (i.e. U.S. hegemony and the peaceful post-Cold War order we know and love), was called in my intro class a repudiation of "namby-pamby defensive realism" and the work of a "tenured sociopath".

empires. Today, and not without some gratitude, the problem of violating the sovereignty of another nation's territory must be rhetorically justified or disguised out of global perception, and assumptions about the universality of the nation-state aid this cloaking. The very fact of the first indicator being unlikely requires the second to be justified in terms of principles of a higher order than sovereignty, such as "self-defense" (especially its nebulous preemptive form) and the protection or establishment of "universal human rights". But this is delving into IR again, truly impossible to avoid in discussion of imperialism. To bring us back to China and a comparative context, how can imperialism be defined and analyzed internally, and what does it mean for the people who live within its more flexible "spheres of influence"?

Taking the definition of empire liberally, Guy Sorman and Ross Terrill have written two recent books which can be accurately described as anti-China polemics, categorizing the PRC as an explicitly evil empire, not only for draconian rule of its frontier peoples but also its illiberal regime. More nuanced accounts and scholarly accounts which do not simply equate "empire" or "authoritarian" with "bad", yet still generally critical of the supposed autonomy of national minority regions, are thankfully just as plentiful.[21] Also, and perhaps bridging grand condemnations with more scholarly neutrality, there can hardly be a pithier statement than Suisheng Zhao's classification of China as "the last great multi-ethnic trans-continental empire left in the world."[22]

Whether "empire" is analytically useful beyond shorthand invective and despite its varying definitions is well worth exploration. Imperialism can be coherent in terms of territorial or capitalist expansion, but there will likely never be a global consensus on whether all "interventions" beyond the borders of one's own nation-state are imperialist. Indeed, to an extreme isolationist, any state with a foreign affairs bureau or embassy abroad might be seen as imperialist.

Again, Hui Wang offers a different perspective on empire than the one commonly understood in the West. He begins with an incisive critique of the concept of Asian despotism, presumed to be the predominant mode of governance in the outdated, "old empires" from the Ottomans to the Qing, seen as incapable of "modern capitalism", which was said to require European "political structures".[23] Instead of a pre-modern entity lacking

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[21] For accounts of the empire to nation-state transition, see generally Duara, Esherick et. al., Fiskesjo, and Zhao as a personal favorite. For accounts focusing on the Chinese frontier and especially Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Mongols, the accounts of Goldstein, Leibold, Liu, Millward, Rossabi, and Shakya are indispensible, though many Chinese would dispute their claims vehemently if their books were allowed (or translated) in the PRC.

[22] Zhao, pg. 34. Perhaps this statement, given the title of his book, is his own assessment of the incompletion of the China's grand project of national integration.

[23] Wang, pg. 18. Later, he says that the concept of "state" needs to be freed from European capitalism and the nation-state. Such restrictions make the concept of a non-capitalist nation-state, which he either sees or prefers that China be, "unimaginable".

"historical subjectivity" for not being a nation-state, empires like the Mongolian Yuan and Manchurian Qing were in fact states with distinct, sometimes modern political cultures— cultures which, while differing from dynasty to dynasty, were or at least became Chinese. Indeed, China is unique for having been ruled by, but later absorbing not one but two foreign conqueror nations into itself.

Furthermore, the Qing empire was not imperial in the European or Japanese sense of conquest and subordination of other nations. Rather, the concept of a Chinese Empire is not foreign, but a rediscovery of past glory through virtuous rule which attracted rather than conquered tributary states. As previously mentioned in the nation-state section, the Kyoto school saw the ethnically Chinese Song and Ming Dynasties as quasi-nation-states, but their framework can't accommodate the initially foreign rule of the Mongolian Yuan and Manchurian Qing. As Chishen Chang notes, superiority over subordinates is not the same as rule over subjects, and China's dynastic history as an empire is what allowed it to be ruled by foreigners— quite impossible in the case of a nation-state.[24] While the dynastic system differed in these details, all dynasties shared certain imperial qualities, such as rule by an emperor who was eventually seen as the paragon of Chineseness.[25] Wang, in short, embraces a traditional concept of Chinese empire and may be at odds with his own government for being comfortable applying an imperial label to the contemporary PRC. Perhaps most importantly, he notes that the empire/nation-state binary has been repeatedly exploited by colonialists intent on creating and propping up puppet nation-states which are no more than a disguise for the pernicious form of imperialism.

Civilization. The word for civilization in Chinese is inseparable from China's proud achievements as the world's oldest continuous one. This proposal argues that the term "civilization" has been hijacked by Huntingtonians from its considerably less threatening designation of ancient and traditional cultures which ought never be treated as unified or static, nor even existing in the present day throughout the world. Before getting on the scholarly bandwagon of dismissing Huntington's claims, however, it should be noted that many Chinese— perhaps more after reading *The Clash of Civilizations*— think in terms of China as a proud civilization

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[24] Chang, pg. 9. In this vein, it is worth noting that minority nationalities are fairly well represented in the CCP, crucial for the appearance of real autonomy in their national homelands. Whether a Mongolian, Tibetan, or Uyghur cadre could rise in the ranks to the ruling Politburo, however, is dubious though by no means proscribed by law. Certainly, however, it would mean something very different for a non-Han minority member to become the PRC's president than for, say, a black person to become POTUSA.

[25] Kirby's Chapter in Fogel's edited volume notes that the concept of China itself didn't really include the Chinese people until after the last dynasty fell. Until then, "China" often denoted the next concept "all under heaven", the emperor as the "son of heaven", or simply a word that foreigners—but not local, actual Chinese--used to describe this place. Kirby also highlights the lamentations of elite nationalists like Liang Qichao, on pg. 107, who at the turn of the 20th century said that "the Chinese people by and large had no idea what 'country' they were living in. They referred to it by *chaodai*, by the name of the ruling dynasty." By Kirby's account, China didn't "become China" until 1912, as a wholly new polity.

with 5000 years of continuous history. Many post-2000 accounts have quoted Lucian Pye's earlier proclamation that today's China is a civilization masquerading as a nation-state.[26] Guangyun Cheng's article on the self-confidence engendered in China's recent rise states unequivocally that a much greater role for Chinese political philosophy should be carved out of current scholarship, and this advocacy is accompanied by the proud statement that "the Chinese people have set up an institutional civilization with Chinese characteristics".[27]

It is not farfetched to imagine some especially proud Chinese as clinging to a notion of China as civilization itself, with the "West and the Rest" all grouped together as a mere flash in the pan. Hui Wang and a few of the Chinese contributors to Callahan's 2011 *China Orders the World* aren't shy about invoking the more ancient than traditional Confucian concept of a world consisting of the civilized and the barbarian— "periphery" could perhaps be substituted to make the designation of contemporaries lacking virtue (and thereby not deserving inclusion in *tianxia* except as an uncivilized other) more palatable.

The civilized/barbarian dichotomy in Confucianism certainly resonates with the modern Chinese concept of "yellow man's burden". In ancient times, the Chinese imperative was either to civilize the barbarians in its frontiers or build a wall to keep them out. In a related framework, the CCP has, since its founding in the 1920's, made ostentatious legitimizing claims for itself to bring each of the PRC's "55 minority nationalities" into modernity— decidedly different from the immoral interference of Western imperialism. Without belaboring this with more skeptical speculation, it would be interesting in the interviews proposed in the last section to get a better idea of whether any Han Chinese still subscribe to the traditional, hard dichotomy. If so, would this be true evidence that some Chinese still see the outside world as uncivilized, lacking in virtue— or would it simply indicate a typical Sinocentrism (to which any civilization is prone) which considers itself the center of the world, with distance from the center denoting a secular decline in importance? Also worth investigating: does the noble duty to modernize inspire more earnest devotees to the cause in the heart of Chinese civilization (such as in the Eastern province of Shandong, where Confucius was born and has never ceased to be revered) or in the Western frontier where actual attempts to modernize the minorities are taking place?

For all its analytical unwieldiness, to study the world from a standpoint of civilizations potentially acknowledges that there is much more to culture than just politics. Political culture, itself a highly contested term, almost certainly extends beyond state borders with other more recognizable aspects like language and

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[26] The contributors to Fogel's *The Teleology of the Modern Nation-State* generally substitute "empire" for "civilization".
[27] Cheng, pg. 4.

religion. For an entity as huge, amorphous, and ultimately defiant of unanimous definition as China, the problems of using "civilization" as a category or unit of analysis are more problematic than applying the label to China's status or self-image. For an even larger concept with all of these problems and more, we turn finally to the rediscovered concept from Chinese tradition, of a world that has yet to earn the status of "worldliness".

Tianxia (天下): "All Under Heaven". Tingyang Zhao, author of several books on the subject and its leading advocate, describes the concept of *tianxia* as the realization of what has yet to earn the designation of a real "world", namely our currently flawed one, divided into constantly quarreling nation-states and dysfunctional remnants of the colonial era. Long a favorite topic of sinologists and global historians, in the past two decades China's rapid economic development has perhaps necessitated that Western political theory take this traditional concept seriously, at least to the extent that it is believed by current Chinese leaders. Following the chaos and violence of Maoist and Tiananmen attempts at revolution, all encapsulated in the feared concept of 乱 *luan*, the contemporary PRC has become veritably obsessed with order and stability. Hyper-conscious of the necessity of a stable internal and external environment for continued development, the most telling objective of the PRC government's past five-year plan has been President Hu Jintao's aspiration to build a "harmonious society".[28] Beyond Chinese borders, the concept of *tianxia* idealizes a Confucian past of government striving for virtue eminent enough to inspire surrounding countries to pay tribute to China's greatness.

As Callahan's article and book chapters note, the *tianxia* system is conceptualized as a fundamentally orderly and peaceful one, while the system of competing nation states has mainly wrought disorder and war—semicolonization for China, two world wars, a long Cold War and uncountable hot proxies. This contrasts directly with Timothy Mitchell's account of colonization in Egypt. Where the Europeans saw themselves imposing their own, supposedly objective concept of order in all aspects of Egyptian society, which apparently lacked both a conceptual grasp and material application of it, *tianxia* (and likely the view of developing countries which have experienced Western "intervention") is a reaction to Western impositions seen as morally empty and fundamentally disorderly. As Cheng puts it, only two world systems have ever been operative: the colonialist Western one and the tributary *tianxia*, and while noting that a return to a sinocentric world needn't make China a unipolar hegemon, the world should acknowledge how much of the world is Chinese.

In a similar vein, Lian Zhou's review of contemporary political philosophy has a definite tone of

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[28] The "harmonization" of society is now taken as a euphemism for censorship of dissenting viewpoints, exemplary perhaps of how the establishment of a *tianxia* system would be established in practice.

advocacy, of critiquing the West from a clearly Chinese perspective. A focus on the state is too constricting and doesn't allow for understanding of other political forms, so it's best to "start big", from a truly global perspective that only *tianxia* can provide.[29] This would be a "universal utopian empire" rather than Western empire, though presumably a truly global empire could be the logical extreme or end point of either form. The Chinese perspective is simply better able to cultivate a global consciousness and avoid adversarial relationships. *Tianxia* also seeks to apply ordinary language to concepts relating to the world as a whole, an objective which Zhou attributes to Wittgenstein,[30] but specifically an ordinary *Chinese* language through which some key parts of Chinese philosophy should be universalized.

It is on these grounds that *tianxia* advocates open themselves to criticism, as from Chishen Chang, that the motivation for bringing traditional Chinese political philosophy to the fore is not a benevolent desire for world peace or a particularly sincere belief that it holds the solution to the world's most pressing problems. In agreement with Callahan's criticism and Cheng's unabashed national pride, Chang sees the promotion of *tianxia* as a product of a newly felt need on the part of the New Left to be "self-confident and creative, rather than just self-critical", based on a constant need to provide something Chinese to counter the West.[31] Chang also goes into far more depth than Callahan about the misuse of the *tianxia* concept itself: "China" itself had six or seven meanings in antiquity, at least two of which were near-synonymous with a more historically accurate *tianxia* which was "inclusive but not all-containing".[32] In short, while comparative political theorists like Leigh Jenco criticize the West for parochializing Chinese political philosophy, criticism of its most prominent contemporary contribution, whether from the East or West, is more convincing than the original product.

Interpretive Research Agenda. But what do ordinary Chinese people think? Even if the average person in any society is not much of a political theorist, each has a unique and important concept of where s/he lives and what it means to be a part of the polity (i.e. is a part of a political culture).[33]

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[29] Zhou says that the West's attempt at "internationalization" of politics (globalization) still sees the world only from the perspective of the nation-state.

[30] Zhou, pg. 6.

[31] Chang, pg. 12. Furthermore, Chang notes that a narrow focus on solutions with roots in Chinese tradition allows *tianxia* advocates to avoid consideration of other intellectual traditions which challenge or reject the legitimacy of the nation-state, such as Marxism and anarchism. Callahan too accuses Zhao, author of several books on *tianxia* and the source of his own summary of the concept, of ignoring a longstanding and evolving ideology of cosmopolitanism simply because it is not Chinese.

[32] Chang, pg. 8. In the golden age of Chinese history, the Tang Dynasty, Chang notes that *tianxia* was particularly bounded and narrow. In Confucian terms, Chang outlines on pg. 10 the belief that each of the family, state, and *tianxia* (three traditional Chinese levels of analysis) has an ideal to which the virtuous are duty-bound to aspire.

[33] Almond and Verba come to mind as another example of an attempt to categorize every person's "orientation" to the political institutions where they live.

Schwartz-Shea and Yanow's *Designing Interpretive Research* offers several pointers for how an inquiry into China's polity question might be conducted so as to engage people in a way that is of mutual interest, i.e. a real conversation, rather than a one-way solicitation which treats interviewees as interchangeable data dispensers. The topic of China's possibly imperial present is, of course, highly sensitive, and direct questioning is neither part of polite interpersonal communication in China nor likely to yield much insight if the interviewee is put immediately on the defensive by a foreign stranger. In reflexive terms, it is expected that talking to a foreigner such as myself will yield many passionate attempts to help outsiders "understand China", a highly desirable goal most often noted to be utterly lacking in Western media seen as monolithically anti-China.[34] In the past, accusations of misunderstanding might have been most attributable to being on the other side of the Marxist dialectic, but as communism and even perhaps "socialism with Chinese characteristics" fade from practice, much to the chagrin of the New Left, dialog which is scripted or convictive guarantees no understanding. Rather than making sense, it is more likely to make one's conversational partner bored, confused, or angry. On more than one occasion, a long bus or train ride has rendered me a captive audience for the locals to set the Westerner straight, and the main methodological challenge may be the maintenance of a dialog or organically evolving conversation, rather than a one-way venting of local frustration with a clueless West.

Unfortunately, access to elite decision-makers whose conceptualizations of China might be more influential is unlikely to be possible, given the continuing need to maintain the "party line". It is expected, however, that "regular folks" will have more to say about being Chinese as a lived experience rather than the standard narrative of the CCP. Prof. Onuf also describes Chinese students of political science as eager to engage in dialog but surpisingly quick to adopt the terminology and expectations of realism, so even among those who are motivated by national pride to study politics there may be something close to consensus in the matters of China's rise and U.S. decline covered adequately by Western-derived realism.[35] Nationalistic claims of unity aside, a lot of variation in responses is expected, and flexibility for an "abductive", back-and-forth learning experience will be essential. In my experience, however, Schwartz-Shea and Yanow's advice not to prepare a script of questions beforehand is impossible to adhere to; language difficulties alone will necessitate the use of

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[34] The best illustration of this view is Chinese nationalists' reaction to coverage of the 2008 riots and protests in Tibet: countless Youtube videos playing patriotic music behind text and images explaining "the truth" (China's point of view), and a website, www.anticnn.com , which documented instances of Western media's deliberate distortion of images and events to portray the PRC in a negative light. Interestingly, the CCP itself may have shut the website down in the interest of projecting a non-threatening, harmonious image of itself to the world.

[35] In future revisions I will incorporate Ian Johnston's insights into Chinese realism, but again out of time this go-round.

guiding questions to break the ice, probe issues and interviewees of varying levels of sensitivity, and to stay focused when the interviewee inevitably veers into something tangential like, say, how much the U.S. "likes to make war". The appendix contains a list of questions and translations for this purpose.

Preliminary Conclusions. Even if China's rise poses no material threat to the world, which realists are wont to dispute, the growing importance of a non-Western but still universalistic discourse could shatter many supposedly objective ontologies. From the perspective of ontological correspondence, people will never agree on what China is. From coherence, China is whatever people agree that it is, but the number agreeing completely may never reach a critical mass for a "social fact" to emerge. In short, while most people agree that China is becoming more "important" in the world of the 21st century, our political theories are largely incapable of dealing with it as a unit of analysis--it works as a *focus* of analysis but becomes problematic whenever grouped with other entities on the assumption that they are like units. No one, except possibly some very well-traveled Chinese people themselves, seems entirely sure what China currently is, and this makes it very difficult to say what its future holds.

The two questions posed at the beginning of this proposal are not only more of an imposed concern of Westerners than Chinese; their phrasing rests on terms and assumptions which citizens of their orientalized topic may well reject. The notion of a democratic empire or civilization sounds odd to a political scientist, while a global democracy is not even a shared utopian vision between East and West, or among cosmopolitans generally. At the risk of reifying another false dichotomy, if Western social science demands precision and Chinese philosophy thrives in the ambiguities of interpretation and indefinite truths, perhaps post-positivists should root for China's rise to shatter the West's conceptual hegemony. Certainly some positivist political scientists wouldn't mind if we all moved there in the mean time— just as well since Chinese statistics can't be trusted, making the country almost as inscrutable to their methodologies as to the first Westerner's who encountered the Qing at its peak, far advanced over the West and without need for anything it had to offer. In the always-pertinent words of Hui Wang, "The point is that 'China' has no existence that is external to us. Nor is it something other than the object of a particular historical subjectivity. 'China' is closely tied to the thought and action of the people of particular eras."[36] Such statements may expose the current "One-China Policy" of the U.S., attempting to mediate between the PRC and RoC of Taiwan, as a positivist fantasy, "harmonizing" obvious contradictions. Unless such

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[36] Wang (2011), pg. 77

rigidly positivist ontologies are softened, the unacknowledged hermeneutical circle of discourse on China

threatens to become a vicious cycle of adversarial misunderstanding.

APPENDIX: Important Chinese Terms for This Proposal (from www.nciku.com)

I've found two entries for "ontology", one given in the field of mathematics, 实体论 *shitilun*, and one in philosophy which I presume is more apt, 存在论 *cunzai lun*. The latter, translated literally, is a "consideration of existence".
国家 *guojia* = state, country
民族 *minzu* = nation, nationality, ethnic group (This term did not originate from Chinese and has several meanings, arguably evidence of the Chinese language's lack of precision in modern terms of Western origin)
民族国家 *minzu guojia* = nation-state
帝国 *diguo* = empire (meaning in traditional Chinese differs from the Western concept, according to Hui Wang)
帝国主义 *diguozhuyi* = imperialism (in the PRC, this is still generally used in the Marxist sense of global capitalism)
皇帝 *huangdi* = emperor (term originally means "son of heaven", title used to name the dynastic leader of China and thereby translated)
文明 *wenming* = civilization (esp. an advanced one, presumably this is how the term was translated in the Chinese version of Huntington's *Clash*, though the thought of Chinese people using it as a unit with different varieties, multiple *wenming* sounds odd. Chinese people would probably talk about different 文化和生活方式 *wenhua he shenguo fangshi* , "culture and ways of life of a people, nation, or period regarded as a stage in the development of organized society". While Chinese nationalists may like what Huntington has to say about them, the Chinese language doesn't make the use of civilization as a unit of analysis any less unwieldy.)
天下 *tianxia* = "all under heaven", the traditional Chinese conceptualization of the world, also can be synonymous with "China", and no doubt some Chinese people see English as inadequate for lacking an equivalent!
政体 *zhengti* = regime (origin unknown)
I have been unable to find a Chinese word equivalent to how I'm using "polity", i.e. as a political unit.

Guiding Questions & Translations for Interviews

Is China a nation-state like any other? 中国是否跟所有其他的国家一样？是不是一个民族国家？
Can a "multinational" state like China be a nation-state？   像中国的多民族国家能不能成为普通的民族国家？
Are *any* countries nation-states (,or are all actually multinational)? 你认为民族国家真的存在吗？ 不是所有的国家都是多民族国家吗？
Some say the PRC is still an empire like the Qing was. What do you think? 有人说当今的中国很像大清的帝国。你怎么看帝国的问题？
Does China need its own world view? 中国需不需要自己的全球观念？
Does the world need a universal conceptualization derived from Chinese tradition? (Translation can wait on this, and I need to test this on some Chinese students at UCI to make sure these are all clear before heading into the field.)

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