

# **Clash of Identities**

Why China and the EU are unharmonious in Global Governance

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**Abstract:**

China and the EU should not be unharmonious in global governance if both sides grasp the true essence of the relations and our times. This

paper argues that the real reason for the absence of harmony is the clash of identities. China is trying to keep balance among four identities: i) developing country; ii) emerging power; iii) oriental civilization; and, iv) socialist state; while the EU is also shaping its own identity beyond Europe. This entails four paradigms for China-EU relations: relations between the biggest developing country and the biggest developed bloc, between an emerging power and post-modern model, between eastern and western civilizations, and between socialism and capitalism. The dynamic identities of both China and EU lead to natural partnership for the two key players in constructing a multipolar world and pursuing effective multilateralism while at the same time result in identity dilemmas and misperceptions for each other. In the eyes of Europeans, it is difficult for China to hide behind the developing country curtain, being expected to play a more responsible role as an emerging global power, competing with and confusing the EU with its reserved and efficient way in dealing with global issues as oriental civilization and socialist state. And vice versa, in Chinese eyes, the EU is failing to represent the developed countries, the post-modern model, the western bloc, and capitalism. The mission for China and the EU is to bridge the identity and misperception gaps and seek new global consensus towards a harmonious world, while leaping forward on the back of common interests, common challenges and common values.

**Keywords:** China, EU, identity, global governance, Harmonious World

Traditionally speaking, China-US relations cannot be worse and China-EU relations cannot be better since the former has overlapping

geopolitical interests while the latter has not. But even China and EU are not cooperating well in Africa where they have increasingly overlapping geopolitical interests. This reminds us that to grasp the true essence of China-EU relations, we should go beyond traditional realist or liberalist perspectives.

As both an old and new country, China shares more similarities with the EU than the US. We can draw such conclusion either from the shared diverse cultures of China and the EU, hierarchical tradition and secular society or from American exceptionalism based on Protestantism and its anti-communism gene. China is an old civilization but a new player in world affairs, so is the EU. China is a culture community instead of a nation-state,<sup>1</sup> so is the EU. China enjoys dynamic and diverse identities, so does the EU, which causes both clashes and collaboration between China and the EU.

### **China's Dynamic Identities in Today's World**

Liang Qichao, a great scholar at the end of the Qing Dynasty, has

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<sup>1</sup> China has 56 nations which is not the typical nation-state. In fact, although the development of nations in China has a long history, it was usually called race, tribe, etc., but not "nation". The word "nation" was translated from the Japanese language. Wang Tao, a thinker in the late Qing Dynasty, first introduced the word "nation" in his article "Foreign Affairs is about Learning Others' Advantages" in 1882. So is nationalism, nation-state, sovereignty, territory, etc. See Wang Yiwei, "Seeking Chinese New Identity: the Myth of Chinese Nationalism", *World Economy and Politics* (Beijing), No. 2, 2006.

classified Chinese history as “China’s China”, “Asia’s China” and “the World’s China” which also embodied China’s three identities.<sup>2</sup> In today’s world, “China’s China” refers to socialism with Chinese characteristics. “Asia’s China” refers to oriental civilization. “The World’s China” refers to a developing country and emerging power.

China has lost its traditional identity since the Opium War. The traditional Chinese world outlook, “All under heaven”<sup>3</sup> (“China’s China”, in which China equals the world) fell. Not until 1912, when the Republic of China was founded as the first democratic nation in Asia, did China finally accept the new identity of “Asia’s China” and partly “the world’s China”, with the integration of the western system based on sovereignty and nation-state, while combining with traditional the Chinese political structure. When the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, China got a new identity: socialist state. At the same time, China identified herself as the big brother of the third world during Mao’s era. After China began to open and reform, China has been an emerging power by integrating with Asia and the world and embracing regionalization and globalization, through which Chinese identities as “Asia’s China” and “the world’s China” have fully come into being.

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<sup>2</sup> Liang Qichao, “Introduction to Chinese History”, *Yinbinshi Heji* (Complete Works of Liang Qichao), Beijing: Beijing Press, Vol.1, No.6, 1901, pp.11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Zhao, Tingyang, “The Concept of All-under-heaven: A Semantic and Historical Introduction”, see: <http://transcultura.jura.uni-sb.de/publications/zhao-le%20robert1.doc>

Until now, the relations between China and the world have reached the stage of “World’s China” vs. “China’s World”, i.e., between “China in the world” and “Chinese version of the world”, which was indicated by the “peaceful rise” strategy and “harmonious world” outlook. With the rise of economic China, political China followed and cultural China comes thereafter. And today’s Chinese aggressive diplomacy and public opinions indicates that the Chinese focus has shifted more and more from “world’s China” to “China’s world”.

In sum, there are four identities for today’s China which brings complex relations with EU:

1. Socialist state: China’s China, i.e., China still feels the ideological gap with EU.
2. Oriental civilization: Asia’s China, i.e., China still feels the cultural gap with EU.
3. Developing country: The World’s China I, which invites controversial debate and misperceptions between Chinese and Europeans. China defines itself as a developing country traditionally and realistically, since China’s per capital GDP ranks only 103 in the world; while Europeans consider it as China’s irresponsible to hide behind the curtain of a developing bloc.

4. Emerging power: The World's China II, which has the least dispute.

No doubt, “the world's China”, i.e. China's identities as a developing country and emerging power, are more discussed and recognized in today's world. “China's China” and “Asia's China” are working under domestic constraints in shaping China's international behaviour.

Of course, China's identity is changing, not just because China is undertaking a transition during the open and reform period, but partly because the world's identity is also changing, i.e., a new world identity is shaping up. Since World War II, a new international order has been emerging. The Western/American version of globalization is giving way to diverse globalizations. China cannot just rely on it and should adjust herself to match the future world. The world should also adjust itself to match the rise of the emerging powers.

Then, how does one make China's four identities into harmonious co-existence? Chinese historian Zhang Baijia discovered it famously in his article “Changing Itself and Influence the World” by describing the mutual impact between China and the world as “the world impacts China

through China's self-changing".<sup>4</sup> Based on such logic, one can understand why China was a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, while India was fully colonized in the 19th century, and why the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, but China is still keeping her own political system. To cultivate China as another India or expect China will follow the step of Soviet Union is an illusion, in James Mann's word "the China Fantasy".<sup>5</sup>

Also, because of that, China always claims that foreign policy is the extension of domestic politics and highlights the guideline of non-interference in the internal affairs of others as one of the five principles of peaceful co-existence. Chinese low-profile diplomacy "*tao guang yang hui*" can also be grasped according to such logic, which makes Chinese government always focusing on domestic politics first. China hesitated to take diplomatic initiatives in former times.

Does the logic change now? Has China reached the stage of "changing the world and influence herself"? Partly yes. After all, the world is on the eve of dramatic changes to cope with global challenges and to meet the demand of the rise of emerging powers. But such changes are far behind China's changes. Whatever China has changed, some countries are still

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<sup>4</sup> Zhang Baijia, "Gaibian Ziji Yingxiang Shijie" [Changing Thy Self, Influencing Thy World], *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue [Social Sciences in China]*, No.1 No. 1, 2002, pp. 4-19.

<sup>5</sup> James Mann, *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression*. New York: Viking Adult, 2007. pp. 1- 144.

unsatisfied with a quite new but not totally new China.

Partly no. We should not exaggerate or over-explain China's rise which is mainly benefiting from globalization. The rising Chinese power is not just an independent power which China can use freely but a structural power depending on the world. And most importantly, China is still a developing country. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao often uses such comparison with multiplication-division:

As premier of China, my responsibility is heavy, the job is demanding, and there is endless work to do. 1.3 billion is a very big number. So if we use multiplication, any small problem multiplied by 1.3 billion will end up being a very big problem. For a very big aggregate divided by 1.3 billion, it will come to a very tiny figure. This is something that is quite difficult for foreign visitors to understand and appreciate. <sup>6</sup>

To keep the balance between “China's world” and “the world's China”, the future is determined by the interaction between China and the world, which will be tested by China-EU clash of identities.

## **Dilemmas for the EU's Normative Power Identification**

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<sup>6</sup> Interview With Wen Jiabao: A Complete Transcript From Chinese Premier's Meeting, *The Washington Post*, Nov. 21, 2003, See: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A6641-2003-Nov22&notFound=true>

Similar to China, the EU holds four identities in the eyes of Chinese: the biggest developed bloc, post-modern model, western civilization, and European capitalism, which in general is described as a normative power. However, EU's such self-identification draws both identity advantages and disadvantages.

On the one hand, the EU is a *sui generis* normative power which distinguishes it from others and from history:

[...] the EU is a normative power: it changes the norms, standards and prescriptions of world politics away from the bounded expectations of state-centricity. However, it is one thing to say that the EU *is* a normative power by virtue of its hybrid polity consisting of supranational and international forms of governance; it is another to argue that the EU *acts* in a normative (i.e. ethically good) way.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, in today's world, mutual learning and tolerance among different civilizations is an inexhaustible source of strength for social progress. The European Union is a rising power on a declining continent, which reveals the following dilemmas concerning the EU's identification as a normative power:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ian Manners, 'The Normative Ethics of the European Union', *International Affairs* 84:1, 2008. p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> See Wang Yiwei, "The Identity Dilemmas of EU Normative Power: Observations from Chinese Traditional Culture", in André Gerrits eds., *Normative Power Europe in Global Politics*, chapter 6, Clingendael European Papers, December, 2009.  
[http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/2009/20091200\\_cesp\\_paper\\_gerrits.pdf](http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/2009/20091200_cesp_paper_gerrits.pdf)

\* *The dilemma of representativeness*: Most countries do not belong to the so-called post-modern world; most people do not live in post-modern societies. The EU is in a minority position. It may advocate the human rights of other people, but it represents less than one-twelfth of the world's population and can therefore never act in the name of international society. The EU is a regional civilization that claims to represent universal values - in this respect, it fails to recognize the gap between idealism and reality. In a hugely diverse world, the EU is a lone actor, whose 'power of ideas and ideation' is neither accepted, nor applauded, by other civilizations.

\* *The dilemma of integration*: The EU advocates diversity within its own borders but it promotes uniformity (on the basis of its own norms) outside—this is another crucial contradiction with regard to the notion of normative power. Since the EU's normative power originates from European civilization, it will be difficult to cross civilizations and to impact on other than Europe's own, rather homogeneous, civilization, which is based on Christianity. The EU's successful enlargement in recent years and the difficulties caused by Turkey's potential membership reveal this clearly. States applying for EU membership do so in their perceived self-interest, not because they necessarily share the Union's 'original' norms and ideas. They consider the Union as an umbrella for

protection or as a platform for bargaining.

\* *The dilemma of words and deeds*: The EU presents and defends both norms and interests. This raises the suspicions of other states, which suspect the Union of being hypocritical and of applying double standards. For instance, the EU has recognized Russia's market-economy status while it denies China's (despite the fact that China is a member state of the WTO, while Russia is not). European scholars occasionally express their concerns too: "The identity projection, by presenting the EU as a strong and effective actor, has a potential negative impact on value diffusion because the EU may no longer be considered a benign and altruistic actor by foreign audiences"<sup>9</sup>

More importantly, 'Normative Power Europe' reflects the following problems of mentality:

\* *European superiority and 'centralism'*: As Scheipers and Sicurelli assert: "The EU's identity construction as a normative power has often been described as a practice by which the EU portrays itself as a force for good while at the same time depicting other actors as inferior, thereby

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<sup>9</sup> Steffen Bay Rasmussen, 'Discourse Analysis of EU Public Diplomacy: Messages and Practices', Clingendael Discussion Paper in Diplomacy 115, July, 2009.

disempowering them rhetorically”<sup>10</sup>. Europe was once one of the centres of the world. With the power shift to the east, the policy paradigms are also shifting. The world is returning to a ‘normal’ situation: if a ‘concept’ at all, ‘Europe’ has become a regional concept again. ‘Europe’ is no longer a universal concept. True multi-polarity implies not only redistribution and a plurality, of powers, but also a decentralization of ideas.

\* *Dichotomy*: Highly influenced by Christian culture, EU elites often take means to be goals, dividing the world into ‘Europe’ and ‘non-Europe’. Democracy offers a good example. Democracy is actually a means, but it is seen as a goal for reaching people’s hearts. The EU often blames China for being a non-democratic country, but it does not seem to realize that Chinese culture prefers to reach people’s hearts directly, in its own way, and not necessarily through European-style democracy. The Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang put it eloquently:

The framework of thinking for the West is people as the objects to ‘view/see’ the world. In this theory-of-knowledge framework, every subject that cannot be ‘converted’ is viewed absolutely: God or Other. Hence, God has been identified as the source of creation, but Other—especially heathens—are affirmed as irreconcilable enemies<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Sibylle Scheipers and Daniela Sicurelli, ‘Empowering Africa: Normative Power in EU-Africa Relations’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15:4 June, 2008, p.607.

<sup>11</sup> Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia System (All under Heaven): Introduction of the Philosophy of World Institutions*, Nanjing, Jiangsu Higher Education Publishing House, 2005. p. 13.

\* *Mentality of linear evolution*: One of the prime examples of strictly linear thinking is the ‘European’ interpretation of Russia’s history and identity. Europeans tend to look down on Russia, mainly because Russia has never undergone the benign effects of such crucial stages in European modernization as the Renaissance period. Yet the European Renaissance came after the Dark Age, and as there was no Dark Age in Russian history, why would there have been a Renaissance? In today’s world, this type of linear thinking, an important aspect of European culture, has lost relevance. Other powerful countries have not been part of Europe’s history. They have not followed the pattern of European experience. Europe’s pattern of development is not universal.

If the EU wants to build a healthy and mutual beneficial relationship with China, it needs to confront these issues. It would be much more productive if the EU accepted the China model as an alternative to its own. EU should consider China as a different civilization, and not attempt to tailor it according to modern EU mentality, including such issues as human rights and democracy. As one of the hottest global issue, climate change issue reveals these lessons more clearly.

### **Case Study: Clash of Identities between China and EU over Climate Change**

Identity follows responsibility and responsibility reflects identity. Multilateral and dynamic identities draw multilateral and dynamic responsibilities. The dynamic identities of both China and the EU leads to natural partnership for the two key players in constructing a multipolar world and ushering in effective multilateralism; while at the same time causing clash of identities in dealing with global challenges. Both China and the EU should have their appropriate responsibilities following their respective four identities.

Let's take climate change as an example. China's position on climate change should keep in balance the following four dimensions to match China's four identities.

- China's China: The basic human rights for Chinese are the right of living and developing. Facing the global climate change, to feed up 1.3 billion people and to provide the comfortable environment for them are the two basic responsibilities for Chinese government. In doing so, Chinese emission rights have not been used up comparing with other countries. Chinese per person emission is less than one third of that of the developed countries'.

- Asia's China: Asian countries are the most to suffer from climate change because of its population density. As the biggest country in Asia and the most populous country in the world, China will an increasingly leading role in building up an Asian regional mechanism to cope with climate change on the base of the 10+1 and 10+3 frameworks.
- World's China:

1) Developing country: as a P-5 member of the UN Security Council representing the developing countries, China should protect their rights by highlighting the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility” under the Kyoto Protocol, preserving sovereignty by not accepting international inspection or deep quantified emission cuts, but volunteering to reduce emissions in their own ways besides the survival emissions. For developing countries, development is the key.

2) emerging power: China is one of the emerging powers in the process of rapid development. One of the third Chinese emissions of greenhouse gas are international transferring emissions. In other words, China exports products but inputs pollution at the same time. “Made in China” is not just made for Chinese, but is largely consumed by foreigners especially the westerns without paying a tax on international

transferring emissions.

As a special developing country and emerging power, China plays a leading role in the developing world and among emerging powers, in coping with climate change beyond her national interests. Climate change is not just a challenge but also an opportunity to change the Chinese development model. Having realized this, even the Chinese per person emission level is quite low, but considering the trends of climate change and wooing to win the future international competitions advantages, China is taking full consideration of her total emissions level and voluntarily cutting its greenhouse gas emissions intensity per unit of GDP by 40-45% below 2005 levels by 2020.

Of course, the order and level for the above identities/responsibilities are changing with time, but the identity of “China’s China” is always the basic and the core.

At the same time, the EU plays a the leading role in climate change as the biggest developed bloc, post-modern model, western civilization, and European capitalism.

Then, the climate change issue entails four paradigms for China-EU relations:

1. Relations between the biggest developing country and the biggest developed bloc, which means that China-EU relations over climate change leads to a convergence of the main contradictions between the two blocs, which holds the key for negotiation.
2. Relations between an emerging power and apost-modern model, which result in potential a zero-sum game between China and EU over the contemporary and historic responsibilities for climate change.
3. Relations between eastern and western civilizations, which lead to the different approaches in dealing with climate change: adaptation or mitigation?
4. Relations between socialism and capitalism, which brings together different mentalities in negotiating: justice or efficiency?

China plays the key role in bridging the gap between the developing world and developed world and between emerging powers and developed countries in particular. So, to deal with China in climate change and other issues is to deal with the developing world and BASIC (emerging powers) countries. EU disappointed China again in the Copenhagen climate change conference by not only missing the opportunity to cooperate with China in global governance, but even tended to isolate China and blamed

China for arrogance after failing to do so.<sup>12</sup>

Again, the Copenhagen climate change conference revealed the current difficulties in China-EU relations which can be traced back to China's identity dilemma in the eyes of Europeans: difficult to hide behind the developing country curtain, and expected to show more responsibly as an emerging global power; confusion and competition from China's reserved and efficient way in dealing with global issues as an oriental civilization and socialist state; and conversely, EU's identity dilemmas in Chinese eyes: failing to represent the developed countries, the post-modern model, the western bloc, and capitalism, while keeping its self-identity

China's complex identities and stage of development indicates that the soft conflict with the EU is unavoidable over international responsibilities in global affairs. However, it will be part of the relations between China and the EU during the transition period. China's identities will shift from history-oriented, present-oriented to future-oriented sooner or later. As a consequence, China will share more and more common understandings and responsibilities with the EU on global affairs. The EU should be patient to wait for a new China, at the same time, should give up the illusion of westernizing China and getting out from the anxiety of being

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<sup>12</sup> Premier Wen Jiabao to clarify the Copenhagen Conference, Xinhua BEIJING, March 14 , 2010. See: [http://english.gov.cn/2010-03/14/content\\_1555804.htm](http://english.gov.cn/2010-03/14/content_1555804.htm)

Chinanized. Harmonious co-existence and intensive cooperation between China and the EU will not only offer more hopes for global security, but also will reduce global insecurity.

The climate change issue reminds us again that China-EU relations should go beyond the bilateral dimension and reach the true essence of the relations of the above four paradigms. The difficulties and complexities also mean a great hope for a relationship that pursues a mission for humanity.

As the UK House of Lords, European Union Committee - Seventh Report argued recently, “As was shown at the Copenhagen climate change conference in 2009, the balance of global power is moving strongly eastwards and southwards. Without resolving its relationship with China, the EU cannot achieve its aims. The role which China and the EU can play in shaping 21st century global affairs will be crucial to solving the world's problems.”<sup>13</sup>

## **Looking Ahead: Building a Harmonious World Starting from China-EU Cooperation**

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<sup>13</sup> UK House of Lords, European Union Committee - Seventh Report, “Stars and Dragons: The EU and China”, 23 March 2010. See: <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/ld200910/ldselect/ldeucom/76/76i.pdf>

Identity not only means self-identification but also means being identified by others. The mission for China and the EU is to bridge the identity and perception gaps.

Around 2,500 years ago, Confucius argued, “The gentleman aims at harmony, and not at uniformity. The mean man aims at uniformity and not at harmony.” How can China and the EU handle the new paradigm of the relationship to avoid the “mean man” outcome? This is a true challenge for the future leaders both in China and in the EU.

Given the diverse and dynamic identities, both China and the European Union share ambitions to shape the international order according to their own values. The only way to avoid a clash of ideas and identities is to look for, and to stress, the elements of agreement and consensus . Surpassing domestic and ideological disputes, China and Europe share more and more common international values, such as effective multilateralism and global governance. But even in the domestic field, China shares common social values with Europe, such as secularity in the societal sphere and cultural diversity.

Keeping this in mind, and apart from the EU’s above identity dilemmas,

from the Chinese side, there are three ‘beyonds’ to be achieved:

\* *Beyond the state, concerning society*: since the Opium War, China has been preoccupied with national independence and prosperity, seeking nation-building and international stature as its dominant goals. When China eventually changes its economic growth model from export-oriented to domestic demand-driven, focusing more on harmonious society-building, it will undoubtedly have more to learn from the EU model, and hence understanding will grow.

\* *Beyond rejuvenation, concerning innovation*: Since Chinese development is still at the stage of growth and rejuvenation, the Chinese think more in terms of practical results (GDP) than in process (happiness). Immediate ambition (rise) is of greater importance than the distant goal (harmony). The EU mirrors these sentiments, stressing the essence and goal of development. In the future, in its ‘post-rise’ era, China will undoubtedly share with the European Union more emphasis on cultural innovation and on contributing to global values.

\* *Beyond the nation, concerning humanity*: Traditional Chinese diplomacy aims to safeguard and enhance national interests. In the post-rise era, China will be more and more concerned with the harmony

of humanity. China's contribution to mankind is not just 'Made in China' but its way of living; not just its achievements in modernization but also the norms to shape the international system. The liberalist perspective on 'Normative Power Europe' will eventually grow stronger among Chinese observers, at the expense of the realist one.

To achieve the three 'beyonds' described above, China–EU relations and the whole content of the relationship between China and the world need a leap forward, from common interests and common challenges to common values (consensus). The future of China–EU relations lies in seeking common ground and putting aside differences in order to deal with the uncertainties of our times, to work on a new global consensus and to build a harmonious world with long-lasting peace and common prosperity.

*Note: The views expressed in this article are the author's personal views and do not reflect those of any organization he is affiliated with.*