Reflections on War and Peace in the 20th Century:
A Chinese Perspective

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The topic of war and peace is a classic one in international politics. In its modern terms, it could trace back to the Thirty Years War in Europe in 1618-1648 and the Westphalia Peace setting. In the 18th and 19th centuries, especially the latter, the European powers succeeded in building up models not only the games of war, but also the peace settlement. The European models were enriched in the 20th century after the United States participated and became a more and more influential player.

When the 20th century draws near the close, it witnesses wars not necessarily in the European political culture rooted terms. In the nuclear age, people certainly put their premier attention to the danger of a nuclear war and the way of avoiding that. In the meanwhile, people are now putting more concerns to those conflicts, in the forms of civil wars in Africa; to the on-going war in Chechnya, which has already caused the terrible bombings in Moscow and other parts of Russia. There is also a great deal of concerns about the Kosovo War. Would it be a model as a way of conflict resolution in the 21st century, just like the Boer War in the closing part of the 19th century which became the prelude of the guerrilla war of this century?

Here a very important phenomenon is the revival of fundamentalism as an origin of wars in different parts of the world when the 20th century comes to an end. Would this kind of fundamentalism lasts into the 21st and becomes a spreading disease to mankind? This kind of fundamentalism has its, or their indigenous background. Should the world community pay more concerns to the deep-rooted indigenous political cultures and find ways of dealing with them cooperatively?

Peace or peace pursuing, as the most important part of the international politics, is another big challenging issue for the new century. Would the historical lessons be helpful for peace building, peace pursuing and peace keeping? Or would new thinking, mechanism as well as ways be created in order to meet the needs of the challenges of the 21st century?

It would be too much a task for this paper to answer all these questions raised above. However, this paper tries to contribute some views from the Chinese perspective. As an emerging regional power with global influence, China's role in the

Ming

world affairs is indispensable. On the other hand, China, as an East Asian power with different political background from the West, carries its own historical legacies. Furthermore, as a developing country integrating itself into the existing world system, China must join the efforts with others in shaping the future. To some extent, it could be regarded as a case study in the reflections on war and peace in the 20th century, in this very pluralistic world. The following points would touch upon mainly five dimensions relating to the Chinese experiences in the 20th century world affairs. They are: (1) the international political environment; (2) the Chinese traditional political culture and its perceptions on the war and peace; (3) the role of the Chinese military in politics; (4) the current reform and the changing perceptions of the world; (5) the new challenges. It is needless to say that all these interpretations are the author's personal view that doesn't represent the government's standpoint.

1.

   For the 20th century Chinese, the international political environment plays very crucial role for their perceptions towards war and peace in modern terms. When the first generation of the Chinese modern leaders appeared in the political scene, either the founder of KMT like Dr. Sun Yat-sen and his comrades and followers, or the founders of CCP like Li Dazhao, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, they were all extremely conscious to the term "defend the country, defend the Chinese roots" (Bao Guo Bao Zhong). The memory of the Chinese failures in the Opium War, The Sino- Japanese War, the Boxer Rebellion were quite fresh in their minds. For this generation, no matter what kind of political belief they held in contrasting ways regarding to domestic issues, they were very much in common in interpreting the international pressure they were facing. For them, the western powers were the source of all disasters and humiliations China suffer and the wars launched by these powers were nothing else but ways of exploiting the Chinese for the benefits of the west. In his classic book "The Chinese Politics in the 20th Century," the late Prof. Tang Tsou wrote: "the foreign aggression threw very important, sometimes decisive impacts on the Chinese domestic politics as well as the conflicts of the political powers."[1] It should be pointed out that the Chinese domestic politics was deeply influenced too by the pressure from outside which stimulate the strong nationalism. When the KMT and CCP both pursued the goal of getting rid of the foreign powers,

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[1] Tang,Tsou, *The Chinese Politics in the 20th Century*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 51.

122

they both realized the importance of the military power. A typical example was the establishment of a number of military schools in China early in this century. Among them, the Huangpu Military School in Canton was the most well known one where Chiang Kaishek (the leader of KMT) was the president and Zhou Enlai (the leading figure of CCP) worked there as the Director of the Section of Political Affairs. Another example might be the famous slogan raised by Mao Zedong: "Political power comes out of the barrel of the gun."

The impacts of the two world wars on the Chinese domestic affairs were enormous. Generally speaking, there were two major ones: first, China got more integrated into the world affairs, though in a passive way; secondly, the world wars made the political conflicts within China more deeply, especially the Second World War. It turned out that right after the world war, the Chinese civil war started and lasted for three years. As a political result, the Chinese Communist Party took over the power and started a new political phase in the modern Chinese history.

2.

While the international factors played crucial roles in China's process of modernization, it is equally important to examine the factors from China's own political cultural tradition.

"The leading principle is pursuing peace and harmony" (He Wei Gui), this classic teaching of Menfucius from more than 2000 years ago has been the guiding line for almost all the rulers of China. China has been described as the "Middle Kingdom" by some western scholars. No matter how many differences there are in interpreting this particular term, the consensus is that China's ways of dealing with neighboring countries were different from the European models.

In Europe, history witnessed the emergence of several great powers starting from the 17th century: Britain, France, Prussia, Austria and Russia. It was war, or wars that made these powers into being and then pursuing the principle of "balance of powers" which would guarantee a relatively stable international peace for a while. The international situation was different in East Asia in this regard. Almost totally isolated from the western part of the world, China was the leading power in East Asia until the mid- 19th century. The tribute system was an application to foreign affairs of the Confucian doctrines of the Chinese emperors. The principle of "balance of powers" was certainly very foreign for the Chinese statecraft.

In the first part of the 20th century, when China was passively integrated into the world affairs and the wars, and bothered fiercely by its internal conflicts, the principle set by the ancient saint was hidden by. However, after 1949, it was picked up again

by the leading figures of the new republic. Compared with their predecessors, they seemed to have more confidence of resuming this traditional thoughts of statecraft. In the meanwhile, they were a group of people who held a mixture of idealism and pragmatism. In the idealistic dimension, they followed the Leninist school, believing that imperialism produces war. However, in the pragmatic dimension, they fully realized that a peaceful international environment meant a great deal for the PRC. The principles they initiated at international forums came out form this pragmatic background and had their roots in the Chinese traditional culture.

Another aspect of the Chinese view on war influenced by the traditional political culture is to define the wars with moral judgments. The Chinese used to measure things with its own moral standards. For wars launched by invaders, they are all unjust. For self-defense wars, they are all just. This moral measurement has its cultural root in the Chinese history, but in the meantime also shows the defensiveness in the psychological dimension.

3.

A few years ago, when the rhetoric of "China threat" became quite a fashion in some of the west literature, one of those sayings is to put China in the same category as Germany before the First World War. In his recent writings, Dr. Joseph Nye criticized these points by compare the relationship between the pre-first world war Britain and Germany, and the post cold war United States and China. His conclusion is that "the historical analogy between the Kaiser's Germany and the contemporary China is seriously flawed........Although China's economy and its post-cold war diplomatic assertiveness have expanded considerably, in neither economics nor foreign policy is China simply a reborn Germany of the Kaisers."[2]

Maybe one more point could be added to the above arguments. The pre-first world war Germany was in the deep historical shadow of the Prussian military tradition. It was not until the end of the second world war, after the German people suffered tremendously themselves during the Nazi period, had they started giving serious reflections on the war and history.

The Chinese case is different from the German's. Following the western model of building up a modernized army, the Chinese were very careful in defining the military role in a much bigger political framework. In this regard, Mao Zedong raised a

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[2] Joseph Nye, "The Rise of Chinese Power and the Future of International Security," in *NIDS International Symposium on Security Affairs*, June 1999, p. 106.

famous saying: It is the Party that controls the gun and not vice versa. As mentioned above, the Chinese military forces always compose as an important part of the whole political structure but never a dominating one. To understand the contemporary role of the Chinese military forces, it is necessary to understand the Chinese grand strategy and the priorities.

4.

    The last two decades of the 20th century witness the dramatic changes in the Chinese politics, economy, society and foreign relations. However, the most significant change is nothing else but the people's mentality. The Open Door policy initiated in the late 70s and early 80s was based on a fundamental assessment of the world situation. The Chinese leadership recognized that the biggest threat to China was not from outside but from within, i.e. the mentality of isolation and the ignorance of the changing world.

    This kind of recognition coincided with the China policy adjustments by the other major powers around the world. Leaders in the United States, West Europe as well as Japan reached a consensus that a modernizing and stable China is in their long term interests. As some China watchers pointed out: "China's opening to the outside world occurred because both its leadership and the industrial democracies concluded the nation's isolation was costly and dangerous for China, the region, and the world."[3] Again, the international political environment gives a favorable setting for the positive happenings within, though not that smoothly. However, compared with the other parts of the 20th century, China's relations with the other major powers reached to the most constructive point. This grand new setting helped shaping fresh new ideas on China's perception towards the world and it certainly focused on the core issues of war and peace.

    One Chinese leading scholar of PLA challenged the old school on war and peace directly by pointing out that the world situation had changed dramatically. In his famous book "The Essences of the Nowadays Chinese Military Thinking," he put his views as follows: "Since the end of the Second World War, there is no war among imperialists, no war between imperialism and socialism. The Korean War and Vietnam War were both regional limited wars. In contrast, there have been several military conflicts among the third world countries. There were also military conflicts

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[3] Elizabeth Economy and Michael Oksenburg, *China Joins the World*, Council of Foreign Relations, 1999, p. 5.

among the socialist countries. We have to ask ourselves why because the traditional way cannot give a convincing explanation for all of these."[4]

This kind of new thinking is quite different from those in the 50s, 60s and 70s. Together with these new ideas, China started taking a more active attitude and actions in the international gatherings of arms control, non-proliferation and other related international regimes. All these show that China integrates itself more actively into the world affairs and encouraging signs continue to emerge.

However, the recent war in Yugoslavia, though quite remote from China, caused very strong response from the Chinese, especially after the tragic bombing on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Together with very strong emotional protests toward NATO, mainly the United States, voices also raised challenging those rational views introduced above. The Taiwan issue makes these arguments more strong and articulating. The public opinions are turning to very nationalistic and certainly could not be ignored by the leadership. Once again, the international environment showed its power on the Chinese domestic scene and this should be regarded seriously, because the counterforce stimulated by the outside could also be very strong and lead to a risky direction.

5.

In retrospect, the 20th century has been witnessing the integration of China into the world affairs. This process would not stop when the century turns to a new. As a regional power with global influences, China would contribute more to the world compared with the early part of the century. However, as modern history shows, China joins shaping the world mainly by changing itself.

In its international relations, China should be more active to the international regimes. In the meanwhile, more thoughts should be given to two vitally important bilateral relations: the China-U.S. relations and the China- Japan relations. At the present moment, neither one is on a stable base which could guarantee a smooth way to resolve conflicts. Maybe the trilateral relationship of the U.S., Japan and China is a more crucial one in a long run for the three parties are regarded as the major players in the regional affairs, not to mention that globally. People of insights from the three parties have started a series of projects studying this relationship though no official settings of formal talks so far.

[4] Pan Shiying, ed., *The Essences of Nowadays Chinese Military Thinking*, PLA Publishing House, 1993, p. 29

Intellectual infrastructure is essentially important. NGO level dialogues and discussions would certainly contribute to the ground missed usually by those formal diplomatic meetings. The road ahead would still be quite rough.