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Abstract

China's growing economic, political, and cultural power is an important global issue; Chinese people are increasingly interested in thinking about their country's future as a world power. This article introduces the special issue 'China's futures – and the world's future' by discussing how futurology works in China. It argues that Chinese futures studies exhibit two general trends: (1) a shift from locating the future outside China to see China itself as the future, and (2) a shift from officials centrally planning the future to many different people dreaming about many different futures. The battle for the future thus is not necessarily between China and the West, but also takes place within the People's Republic of China amongst different groups of Chinese intellectuals. This Introduction examines themes that unite the special issue's diverse set of articles, especially the interplay between technical and cultural innovation. Studying the future here is important not because the forecasts are 'true'; more importantly, Chinese discussions of the future can tell us about how people in the PRC interact with their own past-present-future, and how they interact with people in other countries in the present.

Keywords

Chinese politics, citizenship, futures studies, futurology, innovation, strategy

It is easy to 'prove' that China is the future. By 2010, it had the fastest computer in the world,¹ the smartest students in the world,² and was enthusiastically entering the space age – just as the United States retired its fleet of Space Shuttles. Popular books tell us that China's rise is not merely technical. Rather, they argue that we are in the midst of a grand geopolitical and geoeconomic shift of power from the West to the East, and more specifically from the American Century to the Chinese Century. Books with titles such as *When China Rules the World* thus graphically describe how Beijing is constructing an alternative modernity for a post-American world order.³

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John and Doris Naisbitt's *China's Megatrends: The 8 Pillars of a New Society* is part of this trend when it proclaims that 'China in 2009 was creating an entirely new social and economic system – and a political model, which may well prove that "the end of history" was just another pause along history's path'.⁴ Importantly, the Naisbitts came to these conclusions in a novel way: in 2007, they founded the Naisbitt China Institute in Tianjin as an 'independent' think tank to conduct their research. While *When China Rules the World* was translated from English into Chinese, in 2009 the Naisbitts published *China's Megatrends* first in Chinese – and only then in English. Although the content of *China's Megatrends* is of minimal value – it does little more than reproduce Beijing's official propaganda slogans – the process of its research and publication exemplifies two significant trends in Chinese futurology:⁵ (1) a shift from locating the future outside China (by figuring China as 'backward', and the West as 'advanced') to see China itself as the future, and (2) a shift from officials centrally planning the future (e.g. through the party-state's Five-Year Plans) to many different people dreaming about many different futures. The battle for the future thus is not necessarily between China and the West (as we are incessantly told), but also takes place within the People's Republic of China (PRC) amongst different groups of Chinese intellectuals.

This special issue examines how Chinese people are thinking of China as an alternative model of politics (Frank Pieke on neo-socialism), development (Paul C. Irwin Crookes on innovation strategy), defence (Nicola Horsburgh on nuclear strategy), nationalism (Kelvin C. K. Cheung on identity politics), international order (Linsay Cunningham-Cross on international relations theory), world order (Astrid Nordin on cosmologies), and civil society (William A. Callahan on citizen intellectuals). While the special issue's articles address the content of China's futures, this Introduction will examine the style of Chinese futurology: not so much 'what' is the future, but 'where' is the future, and 'how' is it forecast? Like in American and European futures studies, knowledge and power are interlinked in China, where the objective of futurology is not just how to know the future, but how to control it.⁶ Studying the future thus is important not necessarily because the various forecasts are 'true', so much as what these futuristic plans and dreams can tell us about how Chinese people interact with their past-present-future, and how they interact with people in other countries in the present.

Where is the future?

In the 20th century, the future was located outside of China. The New Culture Movement consciously imported the exotic Western entities 'Science' and 'Democracy' to cure the ills of China's 'backward' traditional culture. In the 1950s, New China was certainly more advanced than imperial or Republican China; but Mao Zedong still famously predicted that 'the Soviet Union's today will be China's tomorrow'. During the Great Leap Forward, and then again with the Cultural Revolution, China presented itself to the globe as a revolutionary model of the future – but the tragic results of these mass movements underline the PRC's failure to embody the future for itself, much less the world. With the reform and opening policy, the West – and especially the American Dream of middle-class consumer

success – became China's model for the future. Thus, according to many commentators, 'today's West is China's future'.⁷ For China's post-1980s generation, the Chinese Dream is not only to pursue the American Dream in China; as one teenager in Dalian declared, 'It's my dream to live in a nice suburb in America!'⁸

Many Chinese analysts likewise take the United States as the standard of modernity, development, and the future; as Arthur Waldron writes: 'If one were to name a single metric by which the Chinese government judges itself, it would be the United States.'⁹ As we will see in this article, the main goal of many Chinese futurologists is not a utopian society, but simply to surpass the United States economically, militarily, and politically.¹⁰ A survey of newspaper and scholarly journal articles shows that the term 'futurologist' (未来学者) is characteristically modified as 'American futurologist' or 'Western futurologist'.¹¹ Woodside notes that Chinese intellectuals enthusiastically consume Western futurology, treating Alvin Toffler (author of *The Third Wave* [1980]), and John Naisbitt (whose *Megatrends* was published in 1982) as 'oracles'. Yet Woodside wonders at the lack of native Chinese futurologists.¹² Naisbitt's recent experience confirms this; as he famously recounts in *China's Megatrends*, in 1996 Naisbitt told President Jiang Zemin, 'Taiwan has a small story to tell, and tells it very well. China has a big story to tell, and does a terrible job in telling it.' To which Jiang replied: 'Why don't you tell it? We will give you all the support you need.'¹³

The future and futurology thus are both located outside of China's discursive landscape.

But things are changing. At the end of his glowing assessment of *China's Megatrends*, a Chinese reviewer suggests that it is time for China to tell its own story: 'Chinese people have the ability to create a great story, Chinese people also definitely are able to learn how to tell our own story, allowing China's story to spread to the world, to emotionally move the world.'¹⁴

To many in the PRC, the West is no longer the future: China is the future. We can see this in the appearance over the past five years of arguments for the China Dream (中国梦), the China Model (中国模式), the China Experience (中国经验), and the Chinese School (中国学派).¹⁵ This trend includes a plethora of consciously futurist studies by Chinese authors: *China: 30 Years in the Future*; *2030 China: Towards Common Prosperity*; *2025: The China Dream*; *China: Moving Towards 2015*; and *2049: Believe in China*.¹⁶ Sinocentric futurology comes in two forms. He Chuanqi's annual *China Modernization Reports* exemplify the first trend. Rather than refuting Western modernization theory's linear view of progress and development, He builds on it. Whereas before Chinese saw themselves as a backward nation, He's 'Second Modernization Theory' positions China at the cutting edge of a general theory of progressive development.¹⁷

However, most of China's new futurologists see China as an alternative to the universals of Western modernity. Rather than taking 'the outside' as the measure of China's development, such books directly criticize the 'Soviet model' and the 'American model' to avoid repeating the shocking collapse of the Soviet Union, or what they see as falling into the 'booby-trap' of Westernization. Because of China's unique history and civilization, it needs to tread its own developmental road; otherwise it is on the 'road to suicide' like the former Soviet Union.¹⁸

Curiously, many of these Chinese futurologists look to the past to explain their objectives. ‘Confucian futures studies’ should be an oxymoron since the classics gaze back to an ancient golden age, rather than to a future utopia. Yet now noted scholars are looking to the past to plan China’s future and the world’s future; time-keeping here shifts from linear progression to a circular view of dynastic history that not only revalues Chinese civilization but also Chinese empire. Many authors thus see ‘the rejuvenation of China’ in the 21st century in terms of ‘restor[ing] China’s power status to the prosperity enjoyed during the prime of the Han, Tang, and early Qing dynasties’, when it was at the centre of a hierarchical world order.¹⁹ There is a parallel shift in futures studies from stressing technical solutions to social problems to mining China’s glorious civilization for moral answers; as the articles by Cheung, Cunningham-Cross, and Nordin in this special issue show, many Chinese scholars are busy combing ancient texts for ideas such as *tianxia* (天下), Great Harmony (大同), and the Kingly Way (王道) to guide ‘the Chinese century’.²⁰

Yet socialism has not been abandoned; many also appeal to China’s indigenous 60-year cycles (甲子) to recover China’s revolutionary history of the 20th century.²¹ The authors of *The China Dream* and *The China Model*, for example, self-consciously mix socialism and Chinese tradition in order to theorize about China’s people-centred order (民本) and the value of China’s martial spirit (尚武).²² In other words, it is increasingly popular to employ circular views of history in order to integrate past, present, and future, and thus China’s tradition, revolution, and reform.

Beijing is also starting to export futures. Either because China is big (with one-fifth of the world’s population) or because it is good (China can make great contributions to human civilization), many authors assert that China’s future is the world’s future: ‘China and other countries all need to focus on this question: what does China’s future development mean for world order?’²³ In its conclusion, *2049: Believe in China* (2049 相信中国) confidently answers this question: ‘not far in the future the world will accept China’s model ... a model that surpasses its potential’ to make China a country ‘as rich as America, but one that loves peace and social harmony more, and is capable of lasting a long time’.²⁴

Interestingly, this optimistic Sinocentric future for the world sharply diverges from mainstream futures studies in the West. While national interest is a common theme everywhere, one of the founding fathers of futures studies, Wendell Bell, explains that its ‘general purpose’ is more cosmopolitan: ‘To maintain or improve the freedom and welfare of humankind, and some futurists would add the welfare of all living beings, plants, and the Earth’s biosphere.’²⁵ Rather than promoting a holistic view to benefit a common humanity, the membership application for the China Society for Futures Studies (CSFS) requires that applicants must first ‘ardently love the motherland’.²⁶ Although this may be standard wording on applications for any official society (社团单位), the main question of the society’s secretary to me during a recent interview – ‘Do you think that China is a threat?’ – confirmed Chinese futurology’s nationalistic style.²⁷

How is the future?

Alongside the shift in the future’s location from outside China to inside the PRC, the method of forecasting the future is moving from centralized state planning to the more

decentralized activity of citizen intellectuals. Within futures studies there is a tension between those who seek to discover the singular future of scientific progress that is determined by quantitative analysis, and those who are dreaming of plural alternative futures that emerge from open-ended creative thinking.²⁸ Scientific method and state planning here are intertwined in the centralized forecasting of a singular future.

Although we might assume that futures studies emerged from post-First World War movements in Europe and America – such as RAND Corporation in the United States or Bertrand de Jouvenel's *Comité International Futuribles* in France – we should remember that Marxism also is a futuristic ideology that charts its own path from the nasty present to the communist future.²⁹ Science is a key element in Marxism; indeed, to separate himself from the dreamy ideas of utopian socialists, Marx promoted his new ideology as 'scientific socialism'. In the PRC, science is also an important space where socialist ideology and futurology overlap: Hu Jintao's slogan 'scientific development outlook' (科学发展观) was added to the constitution of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007. Modernization, progress, and development thus are presented as scientific facts rather than ideological positions.³⁰

However, like with the Soviet Union, the PRC's futurism is better described as Leninist due to its top-down notion of development that relies on a centralized planning of the command economy, which also regulates social and cultural life.³¹ China's first Five-Year Plan was issued in 1953, and the current 12th Five-Year Plan was approved in 2011.³² Hence, even though Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms introduced markets to China, official futures studies still employ state-led centralized notions of modernization, progress, and development. To introduce China's 12th Five-Year Plan to a general audience, top economist Hu Angang outlines his methodology and goals: 'Comprehensively know China, deeply analyse China; meticulously plan China, scientifically develop China' (全面认识中国, 深刻分析中国; 精心设计中国, 科学发展中国). The title of *Beijing Review's* interview with Hu about the 12th Five-Year Plan says it all: 'A plan is born'.³³ He Chuanqi's *China Modernization Reports* also stress a centralized control of knowledge and planning:

China Modernization Reports persist to scientific, innovative, strategic and constructive paths to make systemic exploration of the basic facts and principles of world modernization and have rational analysis over the basic features and reasonable paths to China's modernization.³⁴

The China Society for Futures Studies likewise trusts in scientific progress guided by the state. As the author of '21st Century Challenges', which is published in the society's house journal *Future and Development* (未来与发展), confidently states: 'Futurologists' scientific achievements in addressing these challenges through forward exploration and research, pushing the progress of human civilization, cannot be denied.'³⁵ According to the China Society for Futures Studies' revised Constitution (2008), its objectives are not only to study China's and the world's 'future prospects' but also to obey China's 'national laws, regulations, national policies and social morality and serve to build socialism with Chinese characteristics'.³⁶

The future in China is centralized in terms of both the 'knowability' of hard science and 'governability' of state planning,³⁷ both of which seek to discover a future that is

inevitable and undeniable.³⁸ After all, the China Society for Futures Studies' other house journal is entitled *Discover* (发现).

Yet alongside this centralized singular view of the future, new voices are emerging to propose different dreams, possibilities, and futures for China. Mega events over the past few years – the Beijing Olympics (2008), the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PRC (2009), and the Shanghai World Expo (2010) – are provoking many Chinese beyond officialdom to think in new ways about China's future – and the world's future. One of the most interesting developments has been the appearance of a new group of intellectuals who consciously work in public space to imagine China's preferred future. The party-state still exerts tight control over political discourse; but alongside this narrow political space, Beijing's reform and opening policy has created a wide variety of social and economic opportunities for 'citizen intellectuals' in China's expanding arena of civil society. Citizen intellectuals are 'independent voices' not because they are in opposition to state power, but because they take advantage of China's new social and economic opportunities to choose when to work with the state, and when to work outside state institutions. Hu Angang, for example, works within the system on the committee that draws up China's Five-Year Plans; but he also uses his position to publicly push a 'green development model' that is often at odds with the political leadership in Beijing.³⁹

Many of these citizen intellectuals still appeal to science to ground their forecasts. But a host of others are dreaming of alternative futures that are more critical and open-ended. The liberal newspaper *Southern Weekend* (南方周末), for example, engaged in unofficial futurology when it gave out 'China Dreamer' awards in summer 2010 to diplomats, journalists, artists, and writers in a grand ceremony at Peking University.⁴⁰ Most notably, Chan Koon-chung's critique of the 'China model' in his science-fiction novel *The Gilded Age: China 2013* (盛世：中国2013年) provoked a firestorm of commentary amongst Chinese intellectuals.⁴¹ But not all citizen intellectuals are liberal critics; this new trend also includes conservative voices such as Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu because his *The China Dream* is a personal commentary on how China must become the number one country in the world – rather than an official statement of the Ministry of Defence.

This move from planning a singular future through mathematical modelling to imagining alternative futures matches the shift from outside to inside China discussed earlier; recall that the Naisbitts' book reviewer reframed China's futurology from scientific discovery to 'creating a great story' that would 'emotionally move the world'.⁴²

Great changes are certainly taking place in China. But they are complex and multilayered. Hence, I am not arguing that there has been a grand one-way shift from the state to civil society, from central planning to decentred dreaming, or from the future as outside China to China as the future. Rather, this special issue's articles highlight how understanding the productive tension between the state and civil society, planning and dreaming, and outside and inside China is what is most important – and most interesting.

Themes

The special issue's seven articles examine how Chinese voices are planning and dreaming about the future in key fields ranging from nuclear strategy and development models to alternative notions of civil society and the growing influence of popular culture. What

draws these diverse topics together is a focus on innovation, including both technical innovation and cultural innovation. To understand China's nuclear strategy, for example, Horsburgh argues that we need to concentrate on its conceptual innovation as much as on its technical capabilities. Irwin Crookes likewise concludes that China's technological innovation strategy would be even more successful if it avoided protectionist urges and focused on building a transnational knowledge community. Hence rather than seeing hard power and soft power as distinct and opposite, the articles examine how material and symbolic power are interrelated. They argue that ideas matter; to understand China's new influence in global affairs it is necessary to look at how Chinese people – both in the government and outside it – are discussing China's future as the world's future.

Another theme that runs throughout the special issue is how to understand China's peculiar situation: it is the world's second largest capitalist economy, but it is ruled by one of the globe's last communist parties. Many of the articles (both implicitly and explicitly) refer to Deng Xiaoping's 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' slogan to understand the grand transformations taking place in the PRC. The debate is about what is primary: Cheung and Cunningham-Cross argue that the focus has moved from 'socialism' to the 'Chinese characteristics' of tradition and nationalism; Pieke, on the other hand, argues that socialism is still very important in China, albeit in an innovative form that he calls 'neo-socialism'. This shifting dynamic of 'socialism' and 'Chinese characteristics' speaks to the broader issue of the tension between the universal and the particular in China that is also examined by Nordin and Callahan. All of the articles explore how the past is invoked to explore China's future in ways that probe the relation of tradition, modernity, and Westernization.

While 'futures talk' characteristically positions China as an alternative to the West, the last theme that the articles examine is 'alternatives' within China. This topic, pursued most notably in Callahan's and Nordin's articles, excavates alternatives to the mainstream, party-state, and Beijing-centric plans for a national future. It considers political possibilities by exploring China's paradoxical situation where a narrowing political space is complemented by growing social and economic freedoms.

Rather than forecast China's inevitable dominance or inescapable collapse, the special issue's nuanced multidisciplinary approach to China's future as a world power yields complex conclusions. China's rise is best described as uneasy; as it fulfils its grand aspirations China simultaneously encounters nagging political, social, and economic problems. According to both Five-Year Planners and military strategists, China is in an 'era of strategic opportunity'. The stakes are high – if Beijing misses this great opportunity for grand success many feel that it risks total failure: 'If China in the 21st century cannot become world number one, cannot become the top power, then inevitably it will become a straggler that is cast aside.'⁴³

While wide-ranging, the special issue is not comprehensive; but this should be seen as a strength rather than a weakness since comprehensive approaches to futures studies typically have a very short shelf-life. The special issue is speculative; but unlike many of today's popular books (e.g. *When China Rules the World*), the articles are grounded in theoretically informed empirical research. As suggested already, they are not technically futures studies; rather they are analyses of what Chinese futurology can tell us about contemporary Chinese politics, society, and culture.

In addition to telling us about current trends in the PRC, the articles make important contributions to theoretical and conceptual debates. Rather than simply charting the emergence of a Chinese modernity that is distinct from the West, the articles show how multiple modernities are also taking shape *within* China. These novel forms of grand strategy, socialism, capitalism, world order, and civil society are important not simply for China; because of the PRC's growing global impact, these new conceptual practices increasingly shape discussions of politics, economics, culture, and society beyond China as well.

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Notes

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3. Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World*, New York: Penguin, 2009; Stefan Halper, *The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Basic Books, 2010.
4. John and Doris Naisbitt, *China's Megatrends: The 8 Pillars of a New Society*, New York: Harper Business, 2010, xii.
5. The term 'futurology' is out of favour in Western writings; but I use it along with the more preferred 'futures studies' because in the Chinese case futurology (1) is commonly used in Chinese texts, and (2) because it gives the sense of an activity that is both hyper-scientific and populist, which is the case in China.
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10. See Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo meng: hou Meiguo shidai de daguo siwei zhanlüe dingwei* (The China dream: The great power thinking and strategic positioning of China in the post-American age), Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubanshe, 2010.
11. See, for example, 2054: Ni xiangxiang budao: weilai xuejia dadan yuyan (2054: You cannot imagine: Futurists' bold predictions), *Shijie zhongxuesheng wenzhai* (World students' digest), no. 2, 2006: 34–5.
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18. Liu, *Zhongguo meng*, 88, 292; Pan Wei, *Zhongguo weilai 30 nian: yuanjing yu xianjing* (China 30 years in the future: Vision and booby trap), in Wu et al. (eds) *Zhongguo weilai 30 nian*, 62–4.
19. Yan Xuetong, The rise of China and its power status, *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 1(1), 2006: 13; also see Pan, *Zhongguo weilai 30 nian*, 56.
20. Lindsay Cunningham-Cross in her article in this special issue, 'Using the past to (re)write the future: Yan Xuetong, pre-Qin thought and China's rise to power', talks about this concept in a slightly different way as 'true kingship' or humane authority (*wang*).
21. Pan, *Zhongguo weilai 30 nian*, 56; Pan, *Zhongguo moshi*.
22. Pan, *Dangdai zhonghua tizhi*, 23–59; Liu, *Zhongguo meng*, 245.
23. Wu et al. (eds), *Zhongguo weilai 30 nian*, 1.
24. Bai, *2049*, 282.
25. Wendell Bell, *Foundations of Futures Studies: History, Purposes, and Knowledge*, vol. 1, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003, 73.
26. *Zhongguo weilai yanjiuhui ruhui xuzhi* (Application information for the China Society for Futures Studies), 15 February 2008, <http://www.csfs.org.cn/n1313041/n1314722/51580.html>, accessed 20 June 2011.

27. Interview with Xia Zhen, Secretary of the China Society for Futures Studies, Beijing, 27 April 2011.
28. See Andersson, *The Future Landscape*, 2–3.
29. For a history of futures studies see Bell, *Foundations*, vol. 1, 1–73. For a discussion of Marxism as futures studies, see Wendell Bell, *Foundations of Futures Studies: Values, Objectivity and the Good Society*, vol. 2, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004, 44–60.
30. Development ideology is promoted in the West by international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and United Nations. W. W. Rostow's capitalist theory of modernization, after all, was billed as a non-communist manifesto.
31. Bell, *Foundations*, vol. 1, 10–14.
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35. Zhang Jize, 21 shiji de tiaozhan (21st century challenges), *Weilai yu fazhan* (Future and development), no. 3, 2001: 16.
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37. These two terms come from Andersson, *The Future Landscape*, 17.
38. The language of the necessity and inevitability of China's future success is very common. For example, see Qin, Guoji guanxi lilun Zhongguo pai shengcheng; and Pan, *Zhongguo weilai 30 nian*, 63.
39. Hu and Yan, *Zhongguo*, 2.
40. Zhe shi ganyu mengxiang de ni (This is what you dare to dream), *Nanfang zhoumo* (Southern weekend), 12 August 2010, 21. The work of the seven 'China dreamers' is described on pp. 22–8.
41. Chan Koon-chung, *Shengshi: Zhongguo 2013 nian* (The gilded age: China 2013), Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2009. Also see Zhansui Yu, Questioning the 'Chinese model of development': A critical reading of *Shengshi: Zhongguo 2013*, *The China Beat*, 28 July 2010, <http://www.thechinabeat.org/wp-trackback.php?p=2423>, accessed 18 June 2011.
42. Yang, *Weilai xuejia jiang 'Zhongguo gushi'*, 110.
43. Liu, *Zhongguo meng*, 9. Also see National Development and Reform Commission, *Report on the Implementation of 2010 Plan*, 22; Hu and Yan, *Zhongguo*, 1; and Pan, *Zhongguo weilai 30 nian*, 58.

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