World, culture, Chinese, understanding: a fragmentary epistemological conceptualization

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Abstract   This essay, derived from the corresponding conference presentation, uses the English title of the Young Experts Symposium 2022, "Understanding Chinese Culture in the World," as a starting point for a fragmentary conceptualization of its four key terms, albeit in reverse order for dramatic effect: world, culture, Chinese, understanding. Employing the technique of form determination, which regards a concept as the unity of a binary opposition and thus necessitates naming the counterpart of each positively defined phenomenon, the introduction initially delves into the necessity of consistent terminology in theory-building. The second section addresses the issue of conceptualizing the all-encompassing concept of the world, which does not exclude anything. The third section explores the possibility of "formalizing" the equally vague—due to its comprehensive nature—term of culture. The fourth section delves into the implications and determinants of "Chinese." Finally, the fifth section offers an interpretation of "understanding" that identifies it with connecting to a communication, ensuring that society (communication) continues.

Keywords   World · Culture · Chinese · Understanding

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On words and concepts

Every theorist is confronted with the challenge of transforming mere words into concepts—precise words. Those who do not exercise special care in determining these "elementary theory building blocks" of scientific texts are unlikely to achieve a robust theoretical framework.[1]

One approach to conceptualization employed by systems theory is the determination of "form" (Spencer-Brown 1972). "Form" in this context does not refer to shape but is an attempt to specify the distinction established by a designation.[2] Implicitly invoking a central figure in Asian philosophy—the positive–negative difference embodied by the *yin–yang* 陰陽 symbol—this concept does not signify the fundamental principle of balance in nature and the universe, as in Daoism, or a "cosmic sexual act" (Karl-Heinz Pohl) between two polar forces. Rather, the constitutive aspect of this relationality (Bartosch 2015, p. 217) is related to concept creation, representing the unity of what is distinguished by a distinction. The first step toward determining a form is thus accomplished when it becomes possible to identify the distinction that is inevitably and necessarily at play when something is designated.

The consequence of this formal determination is that any discourse no longer presents itself as merely discussing an entity or something that "is." Instead, it is seen as a form of expression that continually oscillates between opposing sides, operating against the backdrop of a persistent difference. The distinction "culture," for example, includes what it marks and excludes what it co-marks but does not explicitly name that which is situated on its opposite side. What applies to *yin–yang*, namely that both sides are interdependent and engage in a dynamic (thus visually undulating, "interpunctuated") interplay, is thus characteristic of all distinctions: If the outer side of "culture" disappears, so does what "culture" is, and "culture" can no longer be "cased" (in Wittgenstein's sense: as a verb for a "something-is-the-case" determination). Whenever "culture" is spoken of, the opposite side is also implied, as a negative reference that is always already in play. Irrespective of the phenomenon with which theory positively engages, it is always imperative for it to discern the corresponding negative aspect—an elaborate approach that finds no use in everyday life. Here, words are used in a somewhat robust manner: it suffices to designate something and leave open what it is distinguished from. One speaks of

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[1] In the spirit of Charles Sanders Peirce's assertion that "the studies preliminary to the construction of a great theory" should be "at least as deliberate and thorough as those that are preliminary to the building of a dwelling-house" (Peirce 2010, 199–201). It is instructive to recall his analogy once again. While the endeavors of an architect enthusiast who attempts to "build a papier mâché house, with a roof of roofing-paper, foundations of pasteboard, windows of paraffined paper, chimneys, bathtubs, locks, etc., all of different forms of paper" might yield some insights for actual house builders, the ultimate result, unfortunately, would be "a detestable house," scarcely functional. However, Peirce does not employ this picturesque scenario—envision the paper structure in a stormy tempest—to emphasize the necessity of conceptual consistency. Instead, he employs it to illustrate his rejection of "one idea'd philosophies," philosophical systems or worldviews that are overly simplistic, relying on a single dominant idea or principle to explain complex phenomena.

[2] Dirk Baecker refers to it as "the logical space of discourse (*logos*)," in which the focus is not so much on logic in terms of true and false distinctions, but rather on exploration, affirmation, and variation of observations (Baecker 2021, 15).

"world," "culture," "Chinese"—and it works. Although differences are presupposed, one does not orient oneself to the distinction.

Certainly, one can, like Goethe's Faust, choose to refrain from "delving into words" (German: *in Worten kramen*). While there is no need to fully embrace magic, it is important to recognize that the realm of science is not always the most suitable domain for intellectual exploration. Especially when dealing with highly complex issues, science can sometimes prove to be ill-suited for the necessary investigation. Furthermore, it often lacks the freedom for creative thinking. However, only to the extent that science operates with concepts, do its distinctions differ from those of everyday chatter.[3] Demands are placed on the word that regulate the consistency of its use and make it distinguishable as a distinction, so to speak, to specify the "from what." These demands aim not only at the absorption of situational differences and anomalies that characterize any word but also at the possibility of its context-free use (that is, one that initially inhibits the posing of direct questions).

The theory presented and advocated here treats all distinctions as variables, encompassing both the designation (e.g., culture) and the distinction (for instance, culture/nature). This implies that different distinctions suggest different designations, and the same designation within the context of a different distinction becomes a different designation. The latter is particularly evident in the case of "antonym substitution," the exchange of an opposite term. What happens when one swaps out the other side, such as placing "China" on the opposite side of "culture"? Contrastingly, the Han Chinese have long engaged in a practice, spanning centuries, characterized by the discernment between *hua* and *yi* (Chinese: *hua-yi zhi bian* 華夷之辨), commonly referred to as the Sino-barbarian dichotomy. This delineation involves the distinction between a culturally defined realm representing "China" (*hua*) and those deemed cultural or ethnic outsiders (*yi* 夷, conventionally labeled as "barbarians"). Functional equivalents of this process of self-elevation through discrimination (in its original sense of making distinctions) can be found across human history and cultural spheres: Hellenes/*bárbaroi* (βάρβαροι), European/savage, Christian/heathen, Brahmin/Dalit, etc.

In this context, my focus lies not on the political, historical, psychological implications of this schema, encompassing matters of identity construction, discrimination, moral self-aggrandizement, or attitudes. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the singular aspect of co-production; that it is the designation within the framework of the distinction that constitutes the information upon which communication operates. It makes a difference whether one distinguishes non-knowing from explicit (mathematically based) or implicit (situational) knowledge.[4] It makes a difference whether one distinguishes humans from animals (and considers them rational), distinguishes them from gods (and acknowledges their mortality), or distinguishes them from

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[3] Confucius considered this linguistic precision necessary even for everyday life and cautioned against the repercussions of overly casual speech: "If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success." (Confucius 2022, p. 263).

[4] Bartosch (2015, 414) on the fundamental difference between Cusanus' and Wang Yangming's 王陽明 concepts.

machines (and searches for their vitality). In the case of the Sino-foreign duality, *hua* represents the preference value guiding actions, while *yi* serves as the reflection value negating the designated value.[5] It is called the reflection value because it allows for a departure from attributions and the selection of new ones. Outsiders, "barbarians," can cross the border from *yi* to *hua*, entering Chinese culture, for instance, by adopting Chinese values and customs.[6] Slaves, and even women, can attain humanity (alluding to Aristotle's distinction, who had placed them—along with animals—on the other side). The small dot found on each side of the two halves of the *yin–yang* symbol embodies this possibility of "re-entry," namely, the excluded opposite appearing on the inside of a distinction, under the conditions of that side. In the area of music, for instance, in the form of John Cage's *4′33″*, which brings the outside—noise—into the music.[7] Even when one reflects on oneself, such re-entry is realized. One could also observe the introduction of capitalism into communism, as realized under Deng Xiaoping in China, as a form of re-entry. Conversely, current tendencies in the United States can be seen as a re-entry of communism (in the form of state regulations) into capitalism.

Social theorists regularly marvel at the multitude of unused distinctions that society affords itself, at the expense of the few that persist. Luhmann's assumption was: "They obviously lie outside the schema of possible motives and rational calculations" (Luhmann 1997, p. 39). Society ensures that what can be distinguished has always already been pre-distinguished: good from bad, rich from poor, subject

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[5] This asymmetry can also be observed, albeit in a less pronounced manner, in the *yin–yang* symbol, which doesn't truly embody "equality" but rather gives a certain preference to the masculine *yang*. How an initial asymmetry can be imbued with moral and political significance and transformed into a hierarchical order has been demonstrated by Lévi-Strauss through the nature/culture distinction: "Elements on the same side of the taxonomy get classed together, males with culture, females with animality" (Douglas 1986, 63). For Bourdieu (1987, pp. 730–32.), the primary contrast of society lies between the "elite" of the ruling class and the "mass" of the dominated. The oppositions of second, third, nth order (underlying the "purest" aesthetic and ethical judgments) for Bourdieu still rely on this primary, "veiled" opposition. From a form-theoretical perspective, however, it is crucial to differentiate between classification and distinction, particularly when aiming to comprehend the precise reasons underlying social variation. We are dealing with two distinct operations. The distinction culture/nature does not occur in any semantic space; it merely requires a preference for one side to operate—a motive. On the social plane, the motive then becomes a matter worth fighting for, in Bourdieu's terms: it can unfold ideological effectiveness.

[6] Deng Xiaonan (2021) points out that this distinction initially began as an internal one within the empire. It emerged after the conflict between Han Chinese and non-Han ethnic groups had been resolved, leading to assimilation with—in our terminology: the re-entry of—the nomads, that is, "barbarians." It was only subsequent to this blending that it was projected outward. The development of the traditional Chinese script allowed for the stabilization of this distinction: those who could write belonged to the "refined" *hua*, while those who were illiterate automatically found themselves on the outside. Over time, cultural determination was elevated to an ethnocultural identity, supplemented with physical, non-societal or non-discursive, and thus supposedly non-contingent, "God-given" components.

[7] The term "re-entry" used here also originates from Spencer-Brown's vocabulary. The result of reintroducing a distinction into its own form is the creation of a "degree of indeterminacy" (Spencer-Brown 1972, p. 47), which can only be resolved by introducing an imaginary value. This value then appears as a new distinction to which the same principle applies. The crucial point, and indeed, in the case of the "Laws of Form," the punchline, is that this re-entry has already occurred whenever a distinction is made. Simply put, the initial distinction is not truly the first; it inherently compensates for the indeterminacy it inevitably leads to.

from object, dishwasher from millionaire, the Beatles from the Rolling Stones, the good human nature (Confucius) from the bad human nature (Xunzi), bloodless discourse from vibrant life, major from minor, etc.[8] The much larger part of the possible is found in the "unmarked space."[9] Apparently, it is part of the meaning of social forms not to use vast resources of the possible, to leave them untouched, in the realm of the undistinguished. Currently, in the Western context, we can perceive the reconfiguration of an ancient, and quite possibly the most ancient, ideological distinction known globally—that of democracy versus autocracy. In short, it is essential to exercise particular care when determining these "elementary theory components"—those words that are crucial.

World

Let us commence with the term that encompasses everything: "world" is an undeniable category—it is that which excludes nothing. It is a horizon or background of undeterminedness, an unmarked space that allows objects to appear and subjects to act. World is thus not itself a selection from other possibilities.[10]

This fundamental problem obstructs any conceptualization: Anyone attempting to translate the word "world" into a concept, that is, seeking what is decidedly not "world," quickly encounters the absence of its counterpart. One cannot determine what is designated by contrasting it with its opposite, the negation of the world can only be carried out within the world; in this sense, the word is "indifferent," because it encompasses its own negation (Luhmann 2023, p. 655). While it is possible to juxtapose "worldly," in terms of the profane or secular, against an otherworldly sphere, this, too, is a part of the world. No hermit ever left the world through any act of world-flight. No "*bai lan* 摆烂," no "*tang ping* 躺平," takes place outside of this world, no hermit looks at it from an external perspective.[11] Everyone who says no to severe competition and social expectations, as a voluntary retreat from pursuing

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[8] It is highly intriguing to trace how, throughout the evolution of music, society converged on two scales, namely major and minor, discarding the various other scales such as the Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, and Mixolydian.

[9] Another term by Spencer-Brown (1972). While the "marked space" represents a distinction or boundary, the unmarked space is everything else, undifferentiated.

[10] This fact remains unchanged, even as the notion of parallel universes is increasingly discussed in science and the mass media, once again underscoring the characteristic contingency of all events in modern society—a contingency that does not spare the contingency of one's own choices, which, in turn, enables precisely this selection. Each parallel world, as a choice, as an idea, remains situated within the confines of the present one.

[11] The two expressions denote everyday forms of resistance among young people in China, which have recently garnered attention in the media. They have even been elevated to the status of protest movements. "Lying flat" serves as a metaphor for resignation, rejecting intense competition in favor of a more modest and content life. "Letting it rot" is the more assertive variant, wherein individuals embrace their circumstances rather than attempting to reverse them. The expression originally comes from the context of sports and is frequently employed by NBA/NFL fans to characterize players who cease putting in effort when the outcome indicating their defeat becomes apparent.

certain goals, does so within the world. The only way to escape from it is through self-inflicted mortality.

Because "world" excludes nothing, it cannot be communicated—this would be like trying to communicate the medium of light, which makes things visible in the first place. Therefore, as Luhmann and Fuchs make clear, "communication does not share the world; it partitions it" (1989, 7). Consequently, in communication, the world is always given as a paradox. The act of communication "violates" (in Luhmann's phrasing) its unity.

I recommend understanding "world" as the unity of the system/environment distinction. The premise of a shared world is replaced by a theory of observing observing (sic) systems, each generating its own distinct world: politics, economy, law, science, education, art, and so forth—mega-systems that take on functions previously handled within the strata.[12] These systems operate autonomously and globally. They only respond to their own operations and are thus operationally closed. Only politics can make collectively binding decisions, and decisions are linked to the offices one holds; only science is responsible for determining and evaluating scientific truths; only the economy handles payments and relevant non-payments (debts). We are confronted with a world that no longer closes in on itself, an absurd (internally contradictory) one—a world of worlds.[13] This world-world cannot be reduced to a common denominator. One can disrupt politics through non-political events but cannot determine how it responds in its own terms; the same applies to all other systems. In such a world, everything is mutually observable: politics observes the economy using its own methods, and the economy observes back. Such a society can be characterized as "hypercomplex." It lacks unity, leadership, and a *sensus communis*. Other subsystems, organizations, replace this heterarchy internally with hierarchy. As these insulated areas of stratified order no longer align with the structure of modern society, a notable aversion to hierarchies can be observed, particularly in countries associated with the Western hemisphere (a sentiment to which concepts like "flat hierarchy" respond). In China, on the other hand, hierarchy continues to be regarded as a valuable asset, not least due to the influence of Confucianism. However, even here, it faces mounting challenges.

The capacity for the world to be observed, or more precisely, for it to observe itself, can be attributed—at least according to the observer who is this text—to the latent differentiation between medium and form. Without this physically grounded distinction between loose (medium) and strict coupling (form), no perceptive system would have likely developed. The fact that this differentiation constitutes the condition for the possibility of perception can be easily illustrated with a compelling example provided by Luhmann: If the medium of air produced its own sounds, if light was visible by itself, distinct perceptions (sounds, objects) would be impossible.

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[12] This thesis, too, can be counter-observed; however, within sociology, there exists a consensus regarding this state of functional differentiation. It is challenging to approach a more accurate representation of truth than through this concurrence.

[13] Luhmann notes that unity is therefore "only to be achieved through revolt against the world," partly influenced by his reading of Albert Camus' *L'homme révolté* (1951).

Culture

"Understanding Chinese Culture in the World" necessitates a precise definition of the concept of culture, especially in light of the fact that Chinese politics increasingly deploys culture as a reference point for its own national identity. This reversion, which already commenced under Hu Jintao and is associated with the explicit and even brutal rejection of traditional culture since the May Fourth Movement in 1919, is, not least, a response to the question posed by Shanghai historian Ge (2017): "Why should everyone identify with this state? What should one specifically identify with and on the basis of what consensus?" With the 4th Doctrine, "the signature doctrine of Xi Jinping's thought" (Lee 2022), which calls for "confidence in our culture" (*wenhua zixin* 文化自信), the Chinese government has created a comprehensive "culture doctrine" that offers a nuanced response to this question. It serves as the foundation for the other three doctrines, as Xi Jinping asserted that without China's ancient civilization, the country's successful path would not have been possible:

> In other words, the CCP's socioeconomic policies (confidence in our path), political system (confidence in our system), and Marxist ideology (confidence in our theory) were conceived and constructed based on traditional Chinese culture. Moreover, Xi Jinping frequently emphasizes that contemporary Chinese scholars ought to promote the excellent elements of Chinese traditional culture (*Zhonghua chuantong youxiu wenhua* 中華傳統優秀文化) and use them to carry out the mission of the "Sinicization of Marxism" (*Makesi zhuyi Zhongguo hua* 馬克思主義中國化). (Lee 2022, p. 60)

Culture appears as the root and soul of the Chinese nation, setting the direction for how the country should handle the legacy of its multi-ethnic empire within the framework of the nation-state. Kangxi era porcelain is no longer regarded merely as an artifact of the feudal Emperors but, as expressed by Nien Cheng in response to a Red Guard who destroyed her wine cups in the name of science and technology, "part of our cultural heritage" (Mitter 2004). The old culture, denied during the Cultural Revolution, is no longer positioned in opposition to the new socialist culture; instead, it directly converges towards it. However, the associated theoretical challenges should not be underestimated. In Marxist theory, culture is conceived as part of the superstructure; therefore, it can by no means constitute the foundation of society, a role assigned to the economy.

But what precisely are we addressing when we discourse on the subject of "culture"? What characterizes the process of cultural construction, particularly in contrast to that of the nation-state?

The UNESCO defines culture in the broadest sense as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a society or a social group, encompassing not only art and literature but also lifestyles, forms of coexistence, value systems, traditions, and religious beliefs." In short, culture can encompass so many aspects that it raises the question: What, then, is not "culture"? The etymology of the term does not offer much clarity either. It originates from the Latin word

"colere," which means "to cultivate." Essentially, it signifies how humans shape a living space out of the given nature. Consequently, the concept of culture presents theorists with similar challenges as the concept of the world, as culture cannot be readily distinguished from society. Due to this overextension, Niklas Luhmann, in a polemic witticism, refers to culture as "one of the worst concepts ever formed" (1995, 398).

For the theory to which this text aligns itself, the crucial question is not what culture "is," but how one observes it, or more precisely, which function one wishes to assign to it within a given theoretical framework. In this regard, Talcott Parsons (1971) remains stimulating. From his perspective, cultural values serve the management of expectations in conflict situations, representing a specific form of typification of meaning. When meaning cannot be precisely assigned—what exactly constitutes a conflict situation, according to Parsons—efforts are made to typify coherent and regularly usable meaning. This sometimes leads to categorizing the unassignable meaning as "nonsense." With the help of cultural values, attempts are made to assign meaning, and in some cases, suppression occurs depending on the available selection patterns.

Unlike Parsons, Luhmann refrains from assigning culture a distinct system status of its own. He concedes to cultural ideas that cannot change arbitrarily in relation to the social system that employs them. Culture appears to exhibit a degree of tenacity, or "inertia" (Pohl 2021, p. 1). Conversely stated, all ongoing communications are faster than, for example, customs and traditions. The question then becomes: How is this firmness, tenacity, or persistence established? How is the arbitrariness of variation restricted? How does German culture, or Chinese culture, persist?[14] Luhmann's response, which supplements Parsons, elucidates how this occurs: in the form of a reservoir of themes or a society's memory, in which its history is retained. The forms that can be employed for these functions are what Luhmann calls semantics. He distinguishes between "knowledge of the historical variability of all forms" and "intentional foundational knowledge to which one can ultimately connect" (Luhmann 1980, 9). The latter is encapsulated within the realm of culture. It affords the opportunity to subject society to a meta-level of renewed observation and to observe how observation unfolds within it: European, US-American, Chinese, and so forth.

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[14] For the theory underlying this exposition, the assertion of culture as the society's memory presents a challenge, as it presupposes the disappearance of events, the "elemental decay" (Fuchs), rather than preservation and continuity. The subsequent question revolves around how to grasp something that seems to perpetually evaporate—to borrow from Peter Fuchs: how one can construct a house from air (Fuchs 1998, p. 119). I cannot delve further into the theoretical construct or concept of autopoiesis in this text, which implies a complex form of temporality that can be succinctly described as the generation of deferred actuality: the existence of momentary events is retrospectively established by a subsequent event, which is itself posthumously called into existence. Peter Fuchs' response is equally intricate and relies on metaphorical language: Durability (structure), that is, "possibilities of retention" at the operational level owe themselves to the fact that everything observed takes place in a substrate or medium. This substrate or materiality slows down the operations, so to speak, serving as a kind of counterforce. Specifically, language can only be differentiated or discriminated because the words and sentences are slow enough for this purpose. Culture, as memory, arises when communication can utilize its own elements as a medium in which it establishes differences that can be used as resources for reuse (memory) and as sources of forgetting (Fuchs 1998, p. 127).

The pre-modern era did not depend on this possibility, as the world did not yet exist simultaneously on multiple levels. There was a single plane of existence, and the objective was to examine its order, establish the forms of nature or being, or formulate rank distinctions, which then reflected the hierarchy of things and individuals. In modernity, as we have seen, this chain breaks, leading to the "contingentization" of all circumstances. Since society lacks a counterbalance in an orienting unity through which it could experience its own multiplicity as multiplicity within a single context, since everything can be counter-observed, cohesion becomes a cultural matter. The concept of the nation enables something quite similar but encounters its own artificiality and the difficulty of having to imagine community where there originally was none. Thus, what is "Chinese," in the sense of an imagined community, can draw these imaginations from the semantic larder of culture. It endows the Chinese identity with legitimacy in the form of a sorting mechanism that preserves what needs to be preserved and allows the values stored there to be brought "out of storage" when necessary. Confucianism, for instance, which was once held responsible for the country's perceived backwardness over several decades, was subsequently resurrected from this repository.[15]

However, culture transcends being a mere receptacle for specific values; it also incorporates the discourse surrounding these values and the comparison of repositories or horizons of significance within which perceptions, interpretations, and actions are situated. The challenges associated with establishing such a semantic coherence in the modern context can currently be observed in the United States. Here, the nation grapples with the values of the American South—a history closely intertwined with an economy built on slavery, a struggle that manifests in a tension between acknowledging this historical past and championing the principles of human rights. This culture war is something that the CPC is determined to prevent. Consequently, it does not permit the coexistence of two or more different versions of China. Being the unquestionably dominant political party in the country, which renders the comparability of power claims nonexistent, it is in a favorable position to implement its vision.[16]

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[15] It should be noted, however, that this view—emanating from the 4th May Movement and becoming official party policy after the founding of the Republic and, during the Cultural Revolution, leading to temple destructions and the prohibition of Confucian practices—was not shared by all Chinese. For example, the New Life Movement sought to promote Confucian values as part of a project of secular modernization, and Du Zhongyuan, in a 1934 edition of his *New Life* (*Xinsheng*) journal, called for a nuanced approach to its heritage: moving away from blind worship, which could have toxic effects, towards a historical contextualization (Mitter 2004). Gu Hongming, a diligent translator of some Confucian classics into English, regarded Confucianism as the essence of Chinese culture. Moreover, from his perspective, Confucius "gave the Chinese people the true idea of a State—a true, rational, permanent, absolute basis of a State" (Gu 1915, 24). Note the other side of the distinction: an irrational, temporary, relative state.

[16] Without this dominance, the intended ideological reduction of political complexity could not be achieved, which is why Luhmann speaks of the variant of a one-party system; while the structure may undergo modifications, the function remains preserved. In *Politische Soziologie*, he explicitly acknowledges the significant planning capacity of such a system, but cautions that this internal coordination might come at the expense of the external coordination, namely, the relationship of this system with a functionally differentiated society (Luhmann 2010, p. 324). Contrary to Luhmann's assumptions about one-party systems, it is noteworthy that China's political system has, in fact, developed "antennas" for perception.

Both aspects, expectation management (Parsons) and thematic reserves (Luhmann), operate as biases. In this regard, the insights of Mary Douglas (1989) and Thompson et al. (2018) are instructive as they elucidate the close interconnection between shared values and beliefs and the social relations they serve to legitimize. It can be posited that through socialization, a dualism is instilled within us all: certain behaviors are conceived as worthy of praise in a given culture, while others are deemed undesirable. Douglas and Thompson advocate for the "unity of difference" between customary usage and people. In our ways of life, cultural bias—consisting of shared values and beliefs—converges with patterns of interpersonal relations, forming a reciprocal relationship: "Adherence to a certain pattern of social relationships generates a distinctive way of looking at the world; adherence to a certain worldview legitimizes a corresponding type of social relations" (Thompson et al. 2018). However, each way of life needs each of its rivals. It is through this juxtaposition that robust group boundaries are made possible, sometimes bordering on aggression. Yet, without this interplay, the way of life that depends on these alternatives from the outside, would collapse. Thompson et al. outline five distinct worldviews or cultural biases: a hierarchical perspective that emphasizes order, structure, and the preservation of societal norms; an individualistic perspective that values personal freedom, autonomy, and self-expression; an egalitarian perspective that prioritizes social justice, equality, and collective well-being; a fatalistic perspective that accepts events as predetermined and beyond individual control. And we have already touched upon an outlier in the framework, the path of the hermit, who seeks to elude social control by refusing to control or be controlled by others—who lies flat, lets it rot.

Based on these five ideal types, "American exceptionalism," for instance, can be observed as a merger of individualism and egalitarianism, conspiring to weaken hierarchy. Meanwhile, Chinese exceptionalism appears as a blend of hierarchy and egalitarianism, with the latter notably championed during the Cultural Revolution. While I agree with the first assessment, I am skeptical regarding China. I tend to align more with the viewpoint of Harro von Senger (1998, 281–287) and see a fusion of hierarchy and individualism. The recurring rejection of self-affirmation and the advocacy for selflessness throughout Chinese history—formerly by Confucius, and today by the CPC—suggests that we are not grappling with a value that inherently inspires the Chinese people due to their inherent nature. Instead, we are confronted with an officially desired ideal state. "What truly occupies the center for many Chinese is not the community but the 'self,' perhaps so strongly that the counterpressure exerted by millennia of moral concepts praising collectivism by the authorities has been correspondingly substantial" (von Senger 1998, p. 288, tr. M.H.).

The authoritarian model's justification hinges on the premise that the exercise of authority (and inequality more broadly) is necessary for harmonious coexistence, which is recurrently invoked in the Chinese context, a justification that stands in contrast to Western perspectives. Mary Douglas goes so far as to conceptualize hierarchy—defined as the structure in which authority is exercised—as "the rejected

Other" among cultural forms. In her view, "we see its dangers but have no clear model of how it would be if it worked well. Yet hierarchy is the social form that can impose economies and make constraints acceptable" (Douglas 1989, 94). This ability should not be underestimated in times of rapid climate change and environmental degradation, and it is precisely within this context that Douglas introduces it into the discourse.[17]

Individuals who identify with a particular culture bestow upon themselves a certain dignity. They no longer take arbitrary positions but instead, with pride and confidence, lay claim to a legitimate pattern. The potential for such culturalization to become politicized is evident. In the case of China, the identification with cultural identities serves not only as a defense against the cultural hegemony of the West but also as a response to the intricacies of the highly complex, pluralistic Chinese society. It introduces an order that can be narrated into a world that seems increasingly resistant to narratives. It provides a concise address for membership and participation. Importantly, it is not solely a matter of whether the attributions are accurate; it is solely about their occurrence—and once they occur, they become accurate. One observes the connection between Marilyn, Warhol, Elvis, and soon one finds oneself trapped within the framework of the observation schema of popular culture. One observes the connection between Confucius, Kungfu, Mao, and soon one finds oneself ensnared within the observation schema of Chinese culture.

Chinese cultural descriptions, therefore, do not merely describe; they are part of the practice that brings Chinese culture into being through these descriptions. The term functions like a cipher; it manufactures on paper a unity that does not exist in reality—one need only look at the multitude of different cultural milieus in China.[18] In short, the concept of Chinese culture generates that which it pertains to; it performs. It is, therefore, not a category that designates a region of being identical with itself among others. In fact, it is not a system but a form. It does not so much verify and sanction whether certain values, norms, and conventions are adhered to or not; it does not operate on the level of behavior and its surveillance or programming but rather on the level of the observation of this behavior. It assesses whether certain observations still make sense. In this regard, it, like all culture, is invented and must be reinvented time and again.

Chinese

Let us now turn our attention to the question of how the sole adjective in the title, which specifies the term "culture," could be transformed into a concept.

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[17] A notable plea for hierarchy—not only in China but also in the rest of the world—is found in *Just Hierarchy* by Daniel Bell and Wang Pei (2020). The problem is embedded in the title: for who decides which hierarchy is "just," meaning legitimate, and which is not? Additionally, there is the subsequent question of which "morally desirable goals" it is meant to serve. Those that the authors consider worthy?

[18] On the great differences existing within cultures, see Marsella et al. (2000).

Just like culture, "Chineseness" is a construction, a product of observations conditioned by various factors. What is deemed characteristic of China is what it is observed (or described) as, or what it observes (or describes) itself as. The question is: How can the diversity of actors represented by the term—ranging from the central government, provinces, large and small state-owned and private enterprises, banks, universities, think tanks, state media, sports, cultural institutions, and Confucius Institutes—be condensed into a manageable description? Is there an observation (description) that is useful and can be pragmatically employed, yet simultaneously addresses central issues not only pertaining to China?

Indeed, such a description exists. Accordingly, "Chinese" is the adjective that pertains to the nation-state of China, with a territory of 9.6 million square kilometers, 56 ethnic groups, and a population of 1.4 billion. Granted, it is a rather straightforward, unremarkable proposition. Initially, it has the advantage of refuting the notion of exceptionality (exceptionalism)—because precisely in this status as a nation-state, China does not differ in the slightest from other states like Pakistan, Germany, or Namibia.[19]

Transforming this simple proposition into an intriguing thesis is possible. The primary concept that can be utilized for this purpose is one we are already familiar with—that of the world society. The second concept repeatedly appearing in this text is functional differentiation. When we combine them for our purpose of defining China, it becomes evident that not only politics, economy, mass media, and science are subsystems of the world society—the nation-state is in that category, too. From this perspective, China represents localized forms within the realm of power. It embodies a functioning, politically bound regionality. What China engages in is political politics, economic politics, legal politics, educational politics, foreign politics, and so forth. The challenge of functional differentiation lies in the fact that its mega-systems are not readily accessible—not by mail, telephone, or even through modern communication technologies. This is where the nation-state comes into play. One can engage in correspondence with China, as a nation state possesses an address, which can be understood as its function. Like other nation states, China, as a locally bound entity, organizes a social representation that allows politics to connect with addressable units, oriented structures, and processes.

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[19] The attempt to make China an exception is also evident in the current effort to distinguish China as a "civilization" (or "civilization state") from ordinary nation states. Coined by Lucian Pye in 1990 to characterize China with a unique sociopolitical character, distinct from the European nation-state model, the Chinese leadership has recently embraced this terminology to refute Western claims and legitimize their governance. This effort to emphasize sociopolitical continuity and reject the idea of a rupture embodied by the Westphalian nation-state model is also reflected in the works of Ge and Xu and their rejection of a nation as an "imagined community." While arguments supporting this continuity can be found, I find the term counterproductive because it implies that the country has not yet attained the level of functional differentiation and does not embody a fully developed, modern state. Instead, the term "civilization" reasserts the status of a developing country. See also Gungwu (2023), who cautions against asserting "civilization power" as universal and conflating it with national interests: "When what is regarded as vital in the life of a people is challenged by others who are intertwined economically and technologically in one global system, there is little room for compromise and tolerance, upon which coexistence rests.".

While nation-states do create the framework for self-representation and representation of others within the functional system of politics, they are not entirely "synchronous."[20] Many nation-states do not exhibit complete synchronicity in their perspectives regarding the global handling of functional differentiation. The hypothesis is that China falls within this category. "Chinese" would thus denote how China approaches its cultural policy, religious policy, foreign policy, the role of mass media, and the generalization of particular ideas and ideologies. This is pursued by attempting to exert control over communication flows that inherently elude control, as they originate and persist within the autonomous functional systems. With the aid of this heuristic, one could potentially delve into the issues plaguing China, as well as those of other nations. Peter Fuchs (2020, p. 3) has invoked Durkheim's concept of "anomie" here, which I find unhelpful, especially amid ongoing anti-Chinese debates, as it implies the negation of expected regularities, suggesting a deficiency. Instead, I would emphasize that while the global order is built upon functional differentiation, that is, separation, it is not always possible to replicate this separation in regionalization. This can be attributed, like all social phenomena, to historical reasons, to China's "path dependence." The factual condition of China as a nation state is shaped by a history that cannot be simply ignored, as the West desires, under the "Become like us!" mantra. It can be observed, for example, that many sectors in China are still essentially integrated through families. Such a phenomenon can be described as corrupt or anomalous on one hand, and one can criticize it for obstructing substantial structural changes in society, as the state cannot assert itself alongside such a large family structure—even though it actively attempts to do so. But before any criticism, which is, of course, possible, an accurate description that takes this factor into account must first be created, one that is not prejudiced by notions of resentment (Hagen 2004, p. 41).

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[20] I loosely draw upon the concept coined by Ernst Bloch (1992[1935]), known as the "simultaneity of the non-simultaneous." This expression refers to the phenomenon where, in a particular historical epoch or within a society, various social, economic, and cultural developmental stages or temporal currents can coexist, seemingly defying harmonization. Bloch employed this term to underscore the intricacy and contradictions inherent in society. He argued that in any given society or era, elements from the past, present, and future can concurrently coexist. These elements may either clash or intermingle, exerting influence upon each other. Viewed through the lens of systems theory, this concept is applicable to the "outdated" segmentary and stratified forms, which have by no means been entirely supplanted by functional differentiation but rather find themselves unable to assert an all-encompassing claim to legitimacy (Heidingsfelder and Chen 2023, 107). In contrast to Bloch's framework, wherein the "simultaneity of the non-simultaneous" is often discussed in the context of his philosophy of utopianism and his emphasis on progress and hope for a better future, I do not share the belief that scrutinizing these contradictions and tensions within society can contribute to propelling social change and transformations, that is, steering society towards betterment. However, I believe that grasping this concept of "simultaneity of non-simultaneity" can indeed aid us in gaining a deeper comprehension of society.

Understanding

How can an "understanding of understanding" (Bartosch 2021) be achieved? The classical understanding of understanding is to grasp or comprehend the meaning, significance, or nature of a thing or situation. It involves delving into connections and capturing underlying contexts.

Currently, the majority of the Western public does not attribute such comprehension to China, as the question of connections and backgrounds is deemed misguided from the outset. Observers who attempt to de-escalate the escalating conflict situation in the Indo-Pacific, as well as those who advocate for cultivating empathy, the ability to see the world as others see it, and to allow that China "might see something we haven't seen, or they might see it more accurately" (Fulbright 1989, p. 217), are scorned in Germany as "China sympathizers" (a derogatory term that was previously applied to Russia, as understanding it was seen as going against all common sense). Understanding China, sensitizing oneself to the rules and expectations of the Chinese culture, according to this idea, goes too far and is morally questionable—a "change of place in thinking" advocated by François Jullien is out of the question for the West, which feels threatened in its cultural hegemony and processes the opposite of openness and receptivity, but rather a refusal to recognize and understand its own cultural standards and values. With Goethe: the West apparently wants to know nothing about its own culture. Its own standpoint is not relativized. This is all the more surprising, considering that it constantly embraces pluralism and diversity, advocating for a world where differences can coexist peacefully. But China is too different, it seems—and indeed, this notion of "otherness" found expression in Western media discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic, so much so that Meinhof (2020) identified a "New Orientalism." What was accomplished during the Cold War by researchers like Franz Schumann or John Wilson Lewis, who wrote about China in a way that tried to understand how it functioned under Mao, what was the role of ideology, how did the Party as an administrative entity work, etc., appears to be no longer in demand. Instead, one seeks confrontation with "neighbor China" (Helmut Schmidt)—and does so without consideration for the losses that must inevitably arise in the event of decoupling from this neighbor. The trivialization of these measures, signaled by the new term "de-risking," cleverly shifts the focus of the debate; it now emphasizes national security. However, it does not change the fact that the shaping and molding of one's own culture is considered the only correct or meaningful orientation knowledge against the Chinese "counter-world," positioned as the only legitimate, meaningful orientation. The recurring reference to human rights violations, censorship, and China's political system is meant to justify this point. Morality serves as a profound conduit through which the ideological dichotomy between liberalism and communism is imbued with significance and fervor: "Each side of the conflict raises for its own Armageddon, as it is evil that must be defeated and good that must win. Moralization of politics makes the parties to the conflict irreconcilable, and it is fraught with naturalization of evil, the elimination of which becomes the goal of militarist politics" (Timofeeva 2023, p. 2). This moralization appears as a

political variant of cancel culture. It seems that the Chinese have not yet "awoken" and must be awakened by the West—once again. If they do not conform, they will be "canceled" or de-risked.[21]

The Greek author Aeschylus, in his work "The Persians," issued a warning to his fellow citizens, cautioning them against adopting the behaviors of their most formidable adversaries. While he emphasized the democratic achievements of Athens, he simultaneously implored the Athenians to alter their arrogant conduct. Regrettably, his warning went unheeded, leading to the well-known outcome: the downfall of Athenian democracy during the Peloponnesian Wars. It is to be hoped that the Western world can still reconsider and amend its patterns of thought.

From the Chinese perspective, Western high morality appears strangely hypocritical. The behavior of the West during the era of colonialism and missionary activities in China explains the recurrent firm stance exhibited in both territorial (Taiwan, Tibet) and human rights issues. The hypocrisy also becomes evident when examining the case of Hong Kong. For 150 years, the British governed Hong Kong without democracy, neglecting to provide any civic or human rights for the Chinese residents of the Crown Colony. In a move seemingly aimed at challenging China, a more or less democratic system was hastily implemented just before the handover. Harro von Senger views the differential treatment of Hong Kong by England and Europe in terms of human rights as an indication "that, from a British-European perspective, different standards, and consequently different values, apply to Chinese on the human rights level than to Europeans" (von Senger 1998, 281, tr. M.H.; see also von Senger [1997]).

However, this self-righteousness should not be our primary concern in this context. The fact that the West has no right to moralize, not only due to its own history—Friedbert Pflüger (2021) lists "[i]nquisition, extermination of the Indians, slavery, colonialism, the Holocaust, chemical bombs in Vietnam, Srebrenica, or Abu Ghraib"—but also because it continues to undermine its own values through military interventions, globalization, technological dynamics, social divisions, and environmental degradation, requires no further elaboration. Let us, therefore, focus in the following on a conceptualization of the sole verb in the title. For this purpose, it is helpful to first take a closer look at everyday processes of understanding in order to once again visualize the distinctiveness of words and concepts.

In the view of systems theory, the social realm is a complex network of communication processes, where the success of a message is not modeled as "real" understanding, a seamless transmission from sender to receiver, as if someone were to send a package that the recipient simply accepts. This notion implies that something is always "lost" or "given up" during communication. Instead, communication is understood not as a two-dimensional but as a three-dimensional selection process,

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[21] The iridescent term of the West, I cannot conceptualize within the scope of this text—it remains a word. But it can be at least acknowledged that this entity evidently places greater importance on certain aspects over others (such as the territorial or geopolitical): namely, its self-description as the heir of the Enlightenment.

effectively subverting the rigid mechanics of the sender–receiver model.[22] Within this framework, the three components of information, message, and understanding are synthesized. In every act of communication, there is always a purpose or content, such as "understanding Chinese culture in the world." How else could communication present information if not by conveying it? To observe communication where there is none, one simply needs to posit a communicator. Then, even a tornado communicates. Or the flight path of a bird. Or a turtle shell roasted in a fire.

The first selection is information. In terms of the psychic system, someone selects a state and designates it. This selection of information ensures that communication establishes a connection with the world; it incorporates the aspect of external reference, referring to facts or situations, and the necessity to understand it. The selection of message chooses a specific form of conveying this information from a range of possibilities. It transforms the primary form of information into a secondary form, which, for communication, becomes a primary form—"primary materiality" (Fuchs). It is only through the message that the informational value of an event emerges, as the arbitrary nature of an event is removed through the division into information and message. Understanding as the third selection compares the information (the "What") with the message (the "How"). But communication only occurs when the result of this comparison is communicated once more and can be integrated into the ongoing reproduction of communication.

Communication in this sense is nothing more than a connection that, in retrospect, sets the event—regardless of what was thought or felt psychologically—as identical. In other words, understanding does not mean deciphering or decrypting. Apart from the inherent difficulty of definitively determining an individual's intended meaning, communication itself is not reliant on this facet, rendering it essentially inconsequential. Neither intentions nor any kind of logic determined by structures govern communicative events. We cannot know them, and whatever someone communicates about their intentions is just another form of communication whose truth value I cannot verify. Only clues exist.[23]

What matters is that communication continues. This can happen with an encouraging nod or in the form of a headshake, with a yes as well as with a no. If, as a speaker, I want to avoid the crisis of understanding—even the understanding of "understanding"—I must simplify and coarsen the information component of the speech and employ the communication component in an intensified manner, in other words, rely on "strong communications."[24] The interrelated messages subsequently

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[22] However, this does not change the fact that the transmission model may be helpful in technical or physical contexts, as demonstrated by Shannon (1963). Yet, in terms of communication, it is misleading because it places the essence of communication in the act of conveying and presupposes the self-identity of a message. From my perspective, the message is merely a selection proposal, a suggestion. It is not I, the author, but you, the reader, who shapes a text like this.

[23] In relation to works of art, Adorno holds the view that through such a reconstruction, they become enchanted into the document of their author and thus diminished (1973, 254).

[24] This is precisely what children do quite naturally—they communicate "emphatically," with the communication component initially dominating significantly, and it is only as a child's age increases that it is slowly replaced by the accentuation of information (external reference).

determine how the distinction between information and communication can be understood. Then, a communication, such as, "More Lockdowns!", can be interpreted as the communication of the opposite: that one no longer wants them. In the ultimate consequence for our theory, this means that a message attains the status of "messagehood" only when the social system successfully actualizes a connective operation and subsequently references it.

The crucial criterion, therefore, is to pay attention to the connections—to the sequence of communicative acts. This sequence can be abstractly summarized as a continuous "yes–no." For the concept of understanding contains two levels: first, the expectation of success, and second, the expectation of rejection. However, on the second level, understanding does not imply that the communication will also be accepted. In this sense, communication is inherently strategic, as it anticipates the probability of success, the acceptance of communication.

What does this mean for us, in the context of this conference, in relation to our topic? Communication would not be so much a medium of understanding, a vehicle for agreement, or even reconciliation. Not even in Habermas' opposing viewpoint is understanding a factuality; it is only a horizon that is never reached, so to speak (even though Habermas suspects its fundamental attainability in language). In other words, we should refrain from seeing communication only as a solution, especially since deliberate attempts at consensus tend to provoke contradiction and dissent. Instead, we should learn to view it as a problem, which, in turn, cannot be solved by communication; it can only be continually addressed. From this perspective, communication only appears as a reference horizon for the construction of social order—an order that does not rest on a consensus of values or an agreement about these values. "An operative consensus in the form of a fictitious basis for action is quite sufficient. All that is necessary for the continuation of society is time or the connection to—contingent—selections" (Heidingsfelder and Chen 2023, 115).

This serves as a form of alleviation for communication, operating akin to a pressure-relief mechanism. Consequently, it relieves communication from the undue weight of unrealistic expectations. The notable aspect of this suggestion is its alignment not only with a systems-theoretical perspective but also with a characteristically "Chinese" approach that would not go badly with us right now: "Seek common ground, tolerate differences" (*qiu tong cun yi* 求同存异).

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