



China Dreams

20 VISIONS
OF THE FUTURE

WILLIAM A. CALLAHAN

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Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Callahan, William A.

China dreams : 20 visions of the future / William A. Callahan.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-989640-0 (hardback : acid-free paper) 1. China—Foreign relations—2002—
2. China—Forecasting. 3. China—Foreign relations—United States.
4. United States—Foreign relations—China. 5. Social change—China.
6. Politics and culture—China. 7. China—Intellectual life. 8. Intellectuals—China—Biography.
I. Title.

DS779.47.C25 2013
327.51073—dc23
2012047002

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2
Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

To the memory of Anne Bruls (1960–2011)

Classmate, scholar, diplomat, friend

*There's something happening here,
What it is ain't exactly clear.*

—Buffalo Springfield

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Acknowledgments

THIS RESEARCH WAS supported by a Leverhulme Trust Fellowship (2010–2011), and the British Inter-university China Centre's grant from the Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (RES-580-28-0008).

For their helpful comments and advice, I thank Elena Barabantseva, Geremie R. Barmé, Roland Bleiker, Shaun Breslin, Chris Buckley, Sumalee Bumroongsook, Kelvin Chi-kin Cheung, Patrick Chovanec, David Kelly, Prasenjit Duara, Michael Dutton, Rosemary Foot, John Garnaut, Han Lijing, Robert Hathaway, Yinan He, Wei Hsueh, Christopher R. Hughes, Malgorzata Jakimow, David Kerr, Richard Curt Kraus, James Leibold, Lin Xiaofang, Rana Mitter, Astrid Nordin, Evan Osnos, Michael Pettis, Frank N. Pieke, William Schroeder III, Shi Yinhong, Suwanna Satha-Anand, James T.H. Tang, Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, Thongchai Winichakul, David Tobin, Jianying Zha, Zheng Yongnian, Zhu Jie, Zhu Wei, and the participants at the British Inter-university China Centre's "China's Futures and the World's Future" workshop held in Manchester (2011). The book also benefited from students' comments at my Identity and Security in China and East Asia class at the University of Manchester (2012).

I especially thank Elena Barabantseva, Mary Erbaugh, and Richard Curt Kraus for commenting on the full manuscript: many of the book's best arguments and clever formulations come from their comments. At Oxford University Press, I thank David McBride and Alexandra Dauler, who helped me focus and clarify my ideas.

Finally, I thank Sumalee for all her help and support.

Chapters 2 and 5 are refined versions of:

"China's Strategic Futures: Debating the Post-American World Order?" *Asian Survey* 52:4 (2012): 617–642.

"Shanghai's Alternative Futures: The World Expo, Citizen Intellectuals and China's New Civil Society," *China Information* 16:2 (2012): 251–273.

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Introduction

CHINA IS THE FUTURE

IT'S AN EXCITING time to be Chinese. While in the West the first decade of the 21st century was defined by pessimism due to 9/11, the Iraq War, and the Great Recession, Chinese people are very optimistic that the 21st century will be the "Chinese century." The fruits of China's three decades of rapid economic growth are there for all to see: by 2010, the People's Republic of China (PRC) had the fastest computer in the world and the smartest students in the world, and it was enthusiastically entering the space age—just as the United States was retiring its fleet of Space Shuttles.¹

These headline achievements are the tangible result of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening policy, which, starting in 1978, shifted China's focus away from Maoist class struggle to concentrate on economic development. After lifting more than 300 million people out of poverty, the PRC passed Japan in 2010 to become the second-largest economy in the world. Reflecting on their country's recent economic success, China's policymakers and opinion-makers are now asking "what comes next?" How can the PRC convert its growing economic power into enduring political and cultural influence in Asia and around the globe?

We can see China's official dream of a strong and prosperous future in the party-state's three centrally orchestrated mega-events: the 2008 Beijing Olympics presented China as a soft superpower, the National Day military parade in 2009 reminded everyone that China also has hard power, and the Shanghai World Expo in 2010 was billed as the "Olympics for Culture, Economy and Technology." On the other hand, "Charter 08," co-authored by future Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo, was a powerful critique of the party-state's rule of the PRC. It argues that China needs to match its market-based economic reforms with democratic political reforms. On Christmas day in 2009, "Charter 08" earned this dissident eleven years in jail for "inciting subversion of state power." These two views of China's future—either as a powerful authoritarian state or as the world's next liberal democratic country—dominate discussions in the West.

Yet what do they leave out? What is going on in between the officials who parrot state policy and the dissidents who directly challenge the party-state?

Once you get below the surface of the baroquely choreographed debate between officials and dissidents that reduces complex situations to pro- and anti-communist party polemics, you can see how these two groups are involved in a dance for power and influence with a third group: citizen intellectuals. This new group, which I will describe in more detail in chapter 1, is an unintended consequence of Deng's reform and opening policy. While Deng's goal was economic reform, the "opening policy" has gone far beyond liberalizing markets to create much more space for discussion in China. The past two decades have witnessed an explosion of new social and cultural activities as the party-state loosened its control over daily life. The economic reforms, thus, have opened up a wide variety of cultural opportunities, ranging from elite literature to the popular culture of China's *American Idol*-like show *Go! Oriental Angel*.

If we widen our view of activism beyond dissidents to include citizen intellectuals—the bloggers, novelists, filmmakers, scholars, and artists who are thinking up new ways of being Chinese—then we can see the enormous energy and optimism of people who are busy building the future in China. While not political in the sense of directly criticizing the party-state, citizen intellectuals are certainly political in the broader sense of probing the boundaries of what is allowed (and not allowed) in Chinese society.

For many in China, we are entering the "Era of Peace and Prosperity" (*Taiping Shengshi*), a period when China will reclaim not just national strength, but also global power. Until recently, the term was primarily used to describe the apex of China's imperial civilization in the Tang dynasty (618–907); but according to cultural critic Chan Koonchung, the idea reappeared 2008 to signal that China's time had come—again.² Along with limitless possibilities, China faces many problems: enduring rural and urban poverty, runaway inflation, environmental degradation, a graying population, a housing bubble, and official corruption.

While Beijing is in many ways converging with the West in terms of technical and social norms, there is a hunger in the PRC for indigenous Chinese political and cultural models that are different from those that originate in Europe and America. The popularity of such nativist urges has been growing since the fantastic success of Beijing's 2008 Olympics, which showcased China as the top gold medal winner and the city of Beijing as a new center of global prosperity and order. The Olympics motto, after all, was "One World,



FIGURE 0.1 Olympic slogan sign at Beijing airport

Source: William A. Callahan

One Dream.” (see Fig. 0.1) That the Great Recession started in New York less than one month after the Beijing Olympics confirmed for many that China could be successful on its own terms, especially in comparison with America. Thus, the China dream is starting to replace the American dream in the global imagination.

New voices are also emerging in China as a result of the long transition to China’s new generation of leaders, who took control after President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao retired at the 18th Party Congress in 2012. This informal transition period, which spans from 2009 to 2014, has opened up new intellectual space as China’s new leaders, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, try to differentiate themselves from their predecessors. Hu Jintao, for example, didn’t start to consolidate his official policy narrative—“scientific development concept” (2004), “harmonious society” (2004), and “harmonious world” (2005)—until two years after he took power in 2002. As we will see in chapter 1, before he took office in 2012–2013 President Xi Jinping offered few clues about his policy priorities. Similar to Hu’s regime, Xi and others will spend the next few years coming up with new ideas to guide China’s long-term national strategy.

The ambiguous situation created by this long informal leadership transition has opened up opportunities to discuss China’s future direction, in part, as a way of influencing the PRC’s new rulers. Here citizen intellectuals have been quite successful: In his first public speech as leader of the CCP, Xi

Jinping declared, “Now, we are all discussing the China Dream. In my view, to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream of the Chinese nation in modern times.”³

While previously the debate among citizen intellectuals was marked by a clear division between China’s New Left, who celebrated state power, and the Liberals, who criticized it, current debates show no clear direction. In other words, even China’s elite is unsure about the country’s future—which makes it an even more fascinating topic.

In the face of these uncertainties, citizen intellectuals express an abundance of hope that China can find its own way to become prosperous and powerful. Artist-activist Ai Weiwei’s reaction in October 2008 to the spreading global economic crisis is typical: “I am very optimistic. . . . I think that it’s very important for everyone to see that we’re entering a new world, a new condition, and a new structure, and to see the possible potential damage. It’s a very, very exciting time and I think that everybody will learn something from it.”⁴

Although the American dream might be in trouble, philosopher Richard Rorty’s way of thinking about political possibilities can help us understand how new visions of the future are emerging in China: “You have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately want it to become, as well as what you know it to be now. You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual.”⁵ Although a pragmatic nonideological approach to economic development has defined the PRC’s reform era, the Chinese are incurably idealistic about their “dream country.” We should not be surprised that many Chinese—from Xi Jinping to people on the street—express their aspirations and anxieties in terms of “The China Dream” itself.

To get a sense of the various dream countries—and dream worlds—that are proposed by officials, dissidents, and citizen intellectuals, I think we need to take a new approach. The standard operating procedure for political scientists who study Chinese government policy is to gather facts through elite interviews and to survey China’s “restricted” (*neibu*) publications. Yet, over the last decade, I have found that trying to acquire “secret knowledge” from well-connected sources has often led me away from important new developments in China. Most interlocutors, for understandable reasons, either tell me what they think foreigners want to hear or tell me what the party-state wants outsiders to hear.

Rather than try to eavesdrop on the Politburo’s secret discussions, in this book we will listen in on what Chinese people are saying to each other in

public space; indeed, often what they are yelling and screaming at each other in the mass media and popular culture. Although there is harsh censorship of direct criticism of the party and the leadership, there is also a very broad space for people to think about different ways of being Chinese.

Often this is not just an intellectual exercise; for many citizen intellectuals, their work reflects their life choices and even life styles. Han Han, who as China's top blogger is one of the party-state's most eloquent critics, is not a member of China's literati elite; rather, he is a high school dropout who pursued his personal ambition to become a professional race car driver. Han thus is seen by many as the voice of the first generation of one-child policy children who were born in the 1980s (known as the "post-1980 generation") and who grew up in the reform era's environment of increasing prosperity and freedom. Han's sense of China's future possibilities echoes Rorty's "dream country" hopes: "my country right now is not good enough. So, even though I am a weak individual, the only thing I can do is to try to help make the country that I dream of."⁶

Justin Yifu Lin, who as the vice president and chief economist of the World Bank from 2008 to 2012 became the top formulator of the emerging "China model" of economic development that combines authoritarian state governance and free market capitalism, also has a fascinating life story that shapes his views. When Lin abandoned his Taiwanese army post and swam to the mainland in 1979, he became one of the few people to actually defect *into* the PRC. Leaving his pregnant wife behind, Lin left Taiwan because he felt that Beijing had a better chance of building a strong and prosperous "China."

While Han dropped out of China's elite society to pursue his China dream, Lin swam in to pursue his. By seeing how social, historical, and political contexts inform the work of citizen intellectuals such as Han and Lin, we can join China's lively conversations about where the PRC should go in the 21st century.

This broad view of Chinese politics enables us to better explore the grand aspirations and deep anxieties of a wide variety of officials, dissidents, and citizen intellectuals. Rather than try to discover the one true Future China, it is important to appreciate the plurality of many possible Chinas and the tension between these competing China dreams; indeed, ideas and influence grow out of the discussions among officials, dissidents, and citizen intellectuals. Although they may not talk directly to each other, these people are involved in a raucous debate over the direction of China's future. Analyzing the party-state's official documents is still important; but the goal also is to

consider what the films, novels, art, and blogs of China's unofficial futurologists can tell us about what it means to be Chinese in the 21st century.

While analyses of the "Chinese Century" focus largely on economic growth, I think that it's necessary to see how China's rise presents a challenge of ideas and norms, in the drive to build a new world order. While officials in Beijing often talk about the "win-win opportunities" of China's "peaceful development," many others see close links between the rise of China and the fall of America. Books such as *When China Rules the World: The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World* (2009) graphically describe how Beijing is constructing an alternative modernity for a post-American world order.⁷

This is more than an academic issue. Henry Kissinger's *On China* (2011) and Chinese strategist Yan Xuetong's *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (2011)⁸ show how discussions of China's destiny are informing how elites in China and the West conceptualize the future world order in terms of Confucian China versus the democratic West.

This book's goal is to challenge popular English-language books that assert stereotypes of China's civilizational challenge to the West because, as Howard W. French notes, they seldom get beyond Beijing's "official cant" and often "read like a compilation of ideas gleaned by the water cooler at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the state's official think tank."⁹

The new trend of Chinese-language books about China's future shows that we need to look beyond such official plans for the future to see what Chinese people are telling each other—rather than see what they like to tell foreigners. Once you enter the Chinese discourse, you can see that simplistic formulations of the China model versus the American model actually obscure the fascinating debate about China's future. Although exotic Chinese ideas are part of this discussion, so are the more familiar discourses of socialism, statism, nationalism, and even liberal democracy. Rather than assuming that Confucianism has replaced communism, we need to appreciate the dynamic tensions among socialism, democracy, and indigenous ideals in the PRC. Indeed, one of the debates is over how to understand the Chinese term *wen-ming*: does it refer to the conservative values of China's ancient "civilization" or does it mean "civility" in the sense of people caring about each other in a democratic civil society?

The spirited discussion about the PRC's future direction highlights how the problem of "how to understand China" challenges not only outsiders, but Chinese people as well. Since even officials can't agree about the meaning of the China dream, the future is up for grabs.

The Future Returns to China

Why should we study China's futures? Or the China dream? Predictions of China's economic growth, for example, have consistently been wrong, grossly underestimating the rate of change. Perhaps the only accurate prediction we can make is that futurologists' forecasts will be wrong. But as futures studies pioneer Jim Dator tells us, "any useful statement about the future should appear to be ridiculous."¹⁰

In spite of the problems inherent in forecasting, many Chinese intellectuals have caught the futurology bug. The past five years have seen an explosion of futures studies activity among officials, scholars, and citizen intellectuals. In 2010–2011 much discussion took place in public space about the party-state's 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–2015). In addition, scholars and citizen intellectuals have published dozens of consciously futuristic studies: *China's Future*; *China: Moving Towards 2015*; *China in 2020*; *2025: The China Dream*; *2030 China: Towards Common Prosperity*; *China: 30 Years in the Future*; *2049: Believe in China*; and *China Shock*.¹¹

It is important to study the future not because the various forecasts are necessarily "true." Chinese futurology is important for political rather than epistemological reasons: The emergence in the PRC of new ways of thinking about the future is part of the shift in normative power from the West to the East. Futures studies thus is important not because it is true, but because it is new in China. As in American and European futures studies, knowledge and power are interlinked in Chinese futurology, where the objective is not just to know the future, but also to control it.¹² These futuristic plans and dreams are important because they can tell us how Chinese people relate to their past, present, and future as well as how they interact with people in other countries in the present.

You can get a sense of the energy of Chinese futurology by reading books by outsiders; John and Doris Naisbitt's *China's Megatrends: The 8 Pillars of a New Society* (2010) is part of this optimistic trend when the authors proclaim 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."¹³ 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 Martin Jacques's *When China Rules the World* was translated from English into Chinese, in 2009 the Naisbitts published *China's Megatrends* in Chinese—and only later 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 shows two significant trends in Chinese futurology: (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 (through the party-state's Five-Year economic development plans) to having many different people dreaming about many different futures. Thus, the battle for the future is not necessarily waged only between China and the West (as we are incessantly told), but also takes place within the PRC itself among different groups of Chinese intellectuals.

In the 20th century, the future was located outside of China. The country was weak after suffering imperial encroachments from the West and Japan as the Qing dynasty slowly died out at the turn of the 20th century, in what Chinese call their “Century of National Humiliation.”¹⁴ Many intellectuals lost faith in China's traditional way of organizing economics, politics, and society. After China's republican revolution unseated two millennia of imperial rule in 1911, activists and intellectuals looked abroad for modernity. The “New Culture Movement” (1915–1922) consciously imported the exotic Western entities “Science” and “Democracy” to cure the ills of China's “backward” traditional culture. After the communist revolution in 1949, New China was 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 (1958–1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China presented itself to the globe as a revolutionary model of the future—but the tragic results of these mass movements underlined the PRC's failure to embody the future for itself, let alone for the rest of the world. With Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening policy (1978), the West—and especially the American dream of consumer prosperity—became China's model for the future. For the children of China's “post-1980 generation,” who were born under the one-child policy, the China dream is not only to pursue the American dream in China. As a Chinese teenager in the northeastern city of Dalian declared, “it's my dream to live in a nice suburb in America!”¹⁵

Many Chinese analysts likewise take America as the standard of modernity, development, and the future; as historian Arthur Waldron writes: “If one were to name a single metric by which the Chinese government judges itself, it would be the United States.”¹⁶ As we will see, the main goal of many Chinese futurologists is less to achieve a utopian society than it is simply to surpass the United States economically, militarily, and politically. Futurology in China