The Hybrid Ideals of Chinese Elite Students:

An Ethnography Based on Lifeworld Interviews

Author: Linus Ragnhage
Supervisor: Marina Svensson

Abstract

The youth of China seems poised to put their mark on our world no matter our projection of the future. They find themselves bridging two civilizations, having their thoughts shaped by a society in which, due to a transformation of unprecedented speed, past and future value systems exist simultaneously, and they know that as China grows stronger in the economic and military sphere, it could be a question of time before it starts wielding some cultural and normative power, making these youths an important force. Surveys on them report of increases in nationalism and individualism as well as a large divide between the 80s-90s generations and their elders, but there is a lack of a more in-depth study of what lies beyond the –isms and these surface statements. In order to fill that gap, this paper presents and discusses data from interviews with Chinese elite students, revealing the heterogeneity and the diverse origins of the ideals they express. At first glance there is much contradiction and confusion in their lifeworlds, but it is here argued that, rather than just being signs of a deep chaos in the ecology of Chinese thought, they represent the emergence of a new marginal way of thinking, bringing forth a collection of more or less successful creative hybrid ideals, which are interesting as a phenomena unto themselves, as well as being possibly significant for the future course of global normativity.

Keywords: ethics, morality, China, youth, globalization, hybridization

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Foreword

Writing this paper was for me a great exercise in courage and endurance. It was far more exerting and more rewarding than any academic task I previously have been engaged in and I would like to thank everyone who took part in easing the aches of such a bumpy journey, from my patient supervisor to my inexplicably comfortable kitchen chair. My gratitude also goes out to the here anonymous students who took part in my interviews with great seriousness and much tolerance. It was when they listened to my questions, took a moment to think it over, and answered sincerely and with great clarity that I knew that this project would actually be possible to complete, that I had not embarked on a fool's errand. To see such young people open up a space in their mind to contemplate the inquiries of a stranger made me hopeful for the future and kept me conscientious during the process of theorization. I hope everyone involved feels like their voice came through with as little distortion as possible and that my simple mind did not turn their wise words into an incoherent mess. And with all those things said I think we are ready to begin our story.

1. Introduction

Unlike natural science, I believe that social science is not supposed to present us with a stable picture of the world or gather a series of facts from which we can deduce the future. Social science is rather, as argued by Flyvbjerg (2001), a method of improving our judgment as we lead our lives in an increasingly complex world. It is meant to make us more responsible, respectful, and reflective in our actions, including linguistic utterances such as an essay or a speech. If there is a reason for us to engage in social science at all, it is so that we can become able, not to predict our future, but to choose it more freely. As we grow more adept at interpreting the world around us, seeing all the possibilities that lie inherent in it, we will gain a greater capacity to control our journey through this social existence, and to recreate it according to our conscience, not let it drag us along into whatever historical pattern we already repeated a thousand times.

1.1 Research Problem and Purpose

> "Educated young people are usually the best positioned in society to bridge cultures, so it's important to examine the thinking of those in China" (Forney, 2008).

Chinese youth, as youth in most societies, constitute a remarkably fertile area of study for people interested in learning more about the society as a whole. In one direction, they are influenced by the current power holders in the country, the Communist Party and its closely controlled school system being a main conduit, and so will carry with them many of the discourses now acting on society. In the other direction, they are already synthesizing those influences with many others, such as values of globalization or of more independent intellectuals, through their contact with Western books and various opinions on internet forums, creating new patterns of thought and styles of discourse that they will bring with them into the future, where it could possibly become active as an action-shaping discourse. The higher the educational achievement of these youths, the more likely it is that their style of thought will be influential in the future (Zheng, 2007), and the more likely it is that they have been influenced by the latest government policy (Della-Iacovo, 2009).

I saw this potential in a study of Chinese elite students, but could find only survey-based material that explored their values, their morals, and their ideals. And while this kind of statistical studies are important and can increase our understanding of a new generation, I am

convinced that it needs to be supplanted with more qualitative data, engaging with the youths on a more personal level, seeking knowledge that is not easily expressed in multiple-choice questions, and that is also looking for characteristics of their thinking that they might not even be consciously aware of themselves.

1.2 Research Question

First of all I asked the widest questions of all in this context. *What are the ideals of Chinese elite students?* Knowing, however, that I would only aim at a small sample of around eight people, I could never claim that my data would be relevant for the whole elite student population. Making the question more specific and to the point, I came up with: *What are some of the characteristics that makes the new generation of Chinese elite students different from other groups in society?*

With this research question, it was not necessary for me to prove that my subjects where representative of their peer group, but I could instead focus on looking at what kinds of thinking where possible for them, what kind of hybrid constellation they had become/created, and what these qualities would mean if they were indeed present in the larger population. Furthermore, if I would happen to observe a large agreement of all eight subjects on some topics, I could point the way for further research by showing it quite possible that those characteristics are normal rather than marginal, making this paper a probing study, which at best will serve as the birthplace of a hypothesis.

There was also, all along, a more normative and less academic question in my mind as I planned and conducted my study. It was: *Are the Chinese elite students the kind of people who I would accept as possible leaders of a world which I will inhabit?* Due to its speculative nature I will not address it during most of the paper, but save it for section 4 where I will expand on why I think it is rather relevant in the current situation.

1.3 Disposition

The disposition of this thesis is simple. In section two, I present my methods and the logic behind my study. This leads to section three, which is the core of the paper. In it I will present the subjects of the study and the China they grew up in, go through the main terms that need to be understood to follow my argument, and then in three parts take you through what these student's ideals are like. I expand all this in section 4 where I engage in a more reflective and normative discussion on the significance of the material here presented.

2. Methodology and Claims of Validity

2.1 The Logic of This Study

To reach the type of students I was interested in, I used what is called the snowball method. I got in contact with some through friends, others through PKU professors, and some others by talking with people around campus. I reached about twelve people and interviewed eight of them, meeting them one on one for about two hours each. My sample is thus not seeking be to representative for all the youth in China, nor even for PKU students, but are merely meant as an example of thoughts and values among some people in the upper strata of Chinese society. The subjects were mostly not from affluent backgrounds. I attempted to get in contact with some students from the most wealthy families in China, who according elite theory would be more likely to influence the future (Zheng, 2007), but was informed that these had all gone to study abroad, a phenomena in itself worth studying for the impacts it might have on the ideals of the Chinese elite (Alia, 2012).

I will be mixing emic and etic perspectives on the subjects in this study, meaning that I to some extent use terms that are meaningful to the student themselves, often terms that they brought up and used, but adding further analysis through theoretical concepts like cultural hybridity (Burke, 2009) and governmentality (Jacka, 2009), bringing out sides of their values and ideals that the students might not be consciously aware of. It is important to notice that the conversations were conducted in English and that there might therefore be some difficulty ascribing any of the concepts as truly emic to the interviewees, but, according to the students themselves, the language barrier did not play too much of a disruptive role for our getting to understand each other, and I will therefore in this paper, following this caveat, speak of the interviewees as if their thoughts were actually in English.

The style of my interviewing is based on Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) description of lifeworld interviews. I describe the concept of lifeworld closer in section 3.2.2, but will mention here that the style involves allowing the interviewees as much space as possible to make their own point and use their own terms. I did not have any rigid structure to the interviews and they therefore diverge from each other quite significantly, where some of the subjects choose to focus more on moral or personal ideals, others found political or public ideals more important. I walked all of them through the most important points, however, so that some comparisons could be made. The general structure of the questions in my interviews can be seen in Appendix 1 of this paper.

I met with the interviewees in cafés, restaurants, and fast food joints, recording the conversations with a digital recorder that lay on the table in between us. Before turning it on, I engaged in some casual conversation with them about their studies and imagined futures to ease them into the situation and establish a rapport. Most of them were uncertain of what the interview would be like and were a bit apprehensive at first, but all of them showed a deep willingness to share their thoughts and have their voices be heard. I felt that all of them, towards the end of the interview, were thoroughly glad to have contemplated issues they had not considered before and to have been allowed to communicate their analysis of contemporary China and the Chinese people to a Westerner, especially one listening as intensively as a researcher doing his first field work. A few of them impressed me with their intricate thinking and I think it possible that I might meet some of them again for continued discussions if I ever return to Beijing.

2.2 Reliability of the Processing and Interpretation

The transcription was carefully done so that no meaning would be lost or distorted. Since I will not engage in language analysis, however, I did not care about every "uhm", "ehm", and repetitive "I mean", keeping only enough to capture some of their personal style. I also adjusted the grammar in some of the sentences to make the meaning clearer and to avoid creating a misrepresentative image of their intelligence just because they failed to apply the right preposition before a verb. All transcription was done by me based on digital recordings. If there is any confusion as to which word is spoken, I will indicate it clearly.

To verify that my interpretations of their statements are adequate or appropriate – though never final – I engage in a constant attempt at genealogy and hermeneutic interpretation, asking the question: *How did the students end up with these values and perspectives?* This will not be longwinded or exhaustive, but only short references to history and society. They will, however, enable me to switch between the part, which is the Chinese student's mind, and the whole, which is the underlying ideological ecology of Chinese society and its place in the global normative discourse, giving me a deeper and more accurate interpretation of the former.

2.3 Source Criticism

According to Kvale, the main way to assure objectivity in a qualitative study is to be sincere and critical at every step of the process, from interview design to writing up the paper. During the interviews, I tried to ask questions in different ways, gauging the sincerity of their speech,

looking for inconsistencies. It is, of course, difficult to discern whether these contradictions where due to them not telling me what they thought was the truth or if they were actually fragmented. My judgment was that, at most times, the latter was the case. I went beyond this linguistic approach by also examining their body language and their tone of voice, observing how their voiced changed as they went from speaking to me as a pure stranger to having established some confidence, and noticing how our postures became more and more synchronized as the conversation went along. I have discarded some comments from interviewees that I did not feel spoke sincerely at the time. Most of the quotes making it into this paper are from the middle section of the interview.

As described above, I then transcribed and analyzed sincerely and, finally, here in this paper, sought to write it up with as little distortion as possible, knowing that whatever narrative I applied to these interviews I would to some extent put my mark on the data, making it to some extent impossible to decide where the interviewees end and the interviewer begins. The end result here must not be seen as a bit of data excavated from the minds of people and presented as it truly is, but rather what we can see here is a truth constructed collaboratively by me and the subjects (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

2.4 Ethical Considerations

This being a paper on morals, and ideals, I had ethical considerations at the top of my mind at most times. I was very insistent on keeping the interviews anonymous to make sure the authorities in China could not trace them to their origin. I even took the precaution to never put their names on any audio file or text document. But, to my surprise, none of the students thought this necessary and all were very willing to have their name published with my material if it would be to any help. I still keep them anonymous. To a lesser degree, I also wondered if some of my questions would be too personal or enter into topics that they would find somehow disturbing, but, though I at times broke into mental landscapes that in the interviewees had so far remained unexplored, I saw no trace of any existential angst in them afterwards, and got positive feedbacks from many of them via email.

3. Thesis

As this thesis begins, it is surely conducive to our understanding to talk a bit about the background of the subjects and the country in which they have grown up. We will also go into some of the terms that will become central to my interpretation of what they are saying. The following presentation of the interviews will start off with quite straightforwardly showing what they said and what I thought it meant, and then, as we progress, I will add terms and concepts that reveal the narrative about them that I think most important, a story about the clash of moral cultures and the unusual individual perspectives that can rise from such a collision.

3.1 Setting the Scene

3.1.1 The Subjects

The students I interviewed for this study are all in between age 19 and 26. They attend Peking University (PKU), the highest ranked institution in China, and belong to three different departments. Three are female and five are male, but, though I spotted some small differences between the genders, there is not enough room in this paper to expand on it. I did not inquire into their precise family background, but those who spoke about it came from lower middle-class backgrounds, though their parents had sometimes worked themselves into better positions during their lifetimes. Many came from outside of Beijing and would therefore have to had scored very high on their college entrance exams to get admitted. Only the best (or the richest) can enter PKU and that gives them a kind of elite status that they are very aware of, as made clear by Subject 7: "I definitively have received an elite education and people regard me and my peers as elite persons." Most dream about becoming teachers or professors, but they all have different opinions on how likely it is that they will wield any kind of influence in the future.

Their personalities also differed wildly. Some of them were shy and drawn back and I had to slowly tease them out of their shell to have them assert what they believed; others were bursting at the seams with opinions and interpretations and I had to divert their flow of thoughts into the areas of my research that needed irrigation. Most of them, however, showed a great willingness to investigate their opinions and to look at possible criticisms of them. None of them were sure that they would hold the same values and espouse the same morality a few years down the road, but thought that some basic characteristics would remain.

3.1.2 Their China

From the very beginning of their lives, the values of the current generation of Chinese have been affected by the government, especially in the form of the famous one child policy. On the one hand many have led the lives of "little emperors" (Yan, 2006), languishing in attention and receiving everything they want from their parents, and on the other, having had to shoulder all the demands and the expectations that otherwise would have been shared by many siblings. This has made for a strong sense of individuality and entitlement, and also a fierce climate of competition. I could, however, not notice much of this cutthroat attitudes in the narratives of my interviewees.

The education system has gone through many reforms since 1978, the latest and most important for this paper being the transition to "quality education" or *suzhi jiaoyu* in 1999 (Della-Iacovo, 2009). This change occurred as a response to the previous exam-oriented system of rote learning, which was seen as making students unhealthy, unbalanced, and less capable of creativity. *Suzhi* here refers to well rounded quality in the individual, possessing wide skills, moral judgment, physical and mental health, and a nationalistic outlook. I learned from my interviewees, however, that *suzhi* can be defined very differently from how Western academic literature and the Chinese government has chosen to conceptualize it. Many of them claimed that one has many different kinds of *suzhi*, meaning that you can have low moral *suzhi* while having high professional *suzhi,* or that you can have high athletic *suzhi* and low intellectual *suzhi*. The discourse around this concept is huge and very influential, and I expected it to make up a large part of my paper, but it turned out that my interviewees were not so keen on using it and had such a varied idea of how to define it that I chose not to use it as a unit of analysis.

What you need to know now is only that this system of *suzhi jiaoyu* was put in motion to increase the competitiveness of China in the global market by raising its human capital and creating a China geared towards innovation as well as production, working with the techniques of governmentality rather than coercion. This was preceded by a decentralization of the school system, causing great inequalities in education across the country, and an uneven implementation of the new policies. The results of the reform was therefore very varied and most children during the late nineties and early naughties were exposed to a mix of educational ideas, seeing both a strong Westernization and a resurgent focus on traditional Chinese thought like Confucianism (Ai, 2009). Largely the results have also been seen as

quite successful in making the latest generation of students more nationalistic and more congenial to the continued dominance of the CCP.

The perspectives of the inquisitive students I interviewed, however, and that many others (Liu F. , 2011), have been widened by the internet, by the discussions and argumentations they have had on forums and other sites. Where PKU was once seen as a quite separate entity, more radically modernizing than any other, it is today much less cut off from the rest of China. Professors assured me that internet communication and increasing individualization had made universities in China more similar, and also PKU less radical, and that they would not expect a great divergence in views between schools anymore. Many of the interviewees report on their competence in getting around the Great Firewall of China and reading information that is kept out of the government controlled media. It also seems from what they told me that once at a college level there is little censorship in the classroom and the students in general feel free to express their thoughts and expect to hear the honest opinions of their professors, not fearing that it will have any bad consequences as long as it stays within the walls of the university. There is, however, also much skepticism of the Western media and their supposed objectivity and freedom, leading many of the students to constantly have to engage in complicated source criticism, seeing both the Party story and the Western story and balancing one against the other.

3.1.3 Previous Literature

It was not hard to find both monographs and articles about the values and ideals of the Chinese people; it seems a very popular topic, still a way of making clear the difference between East and West. Much of the qualitative research have, however, been eclipsed by a huge volume of writings on the economy and power politics of China. And I am on the side of Kleinman et al. (2011) and their book *Deep China: The Moral life of the Person*, in wanting to bring forward a more in-depth coverage of the people of China, trying to shed that unifying, one-size-fits-all kind of thinking about them that is hard for many to avoid because of the great traction such presentation might gain in the media.

The best surveys I could find on the ideals and values of Chinese youth was a couple of papers from Stanley Rosen (2009) and an anthology called *Chinese Youth in Transition* (Xi, Sun, & Xiao, 2006). The former contained some valuable indications about the new tendencies in youth thinking and helped me design my questions for the interviews. The latter

was conducted by a Chinese organization and I am very skeptical to the data it produced, but found it telling in itself, as a document of the relationship between youth and social science in China. It reported on the values and lifestyles of Chinese youth from a very exterior perspective, using only surveys and statistics even when discussing very intimate topics, and I got the feeling that the authors never actually considered a more in-depth, dialogue based, investigation.

According to Xi, Sun and Jiao (2006, p. 147), the Chinese college students of today have abandoned the fanaticism of past generation while also staying clear of more western-influenced styles of thinking, leaning more towards traditional thinking and values. They are not interested in sacrificing themselves for others, but rather concerned with development and self-cultivation, seeking to become well-rounded and of "high quality". The Chinese Communist Party is very popular among them with "83.22%" claiming that they are necessary for the future prosperity of China. They are, in general, future oriented but have adopted more traditional gender roles than many of their parents, believing that "a talented young man should match a beautiful woman" (Xi, Sun, & Xiao, 2006, p. 159). The authors also claim that the students put such importance on personal quality and moral integrity that those who do not act in a strictly prudent manner "are not worthy of love", which surely illustrates why I find skepticism as the proper attitude towards this study.

Stanley Rosen (2009) points out that there has been an increased pluralization of Chinese society during the thirty years since reform began and that unified belief systems and behaviors are not easy to find. Talking about people from wealthy coastal areas, he notices that four tendencies seem more common: an increasingly internationalist outlook, pragmatic and materialistic thinking, and a type of growing nationalism. 72.7% reported their belief system as "individual struggle", which goes well together with the search of personal development as stated above. 51%, however, identified with American cultural concepts, and, surprising even to the surveyors, according to Rosen, 61% identified with liberalism and 36% for a separation of powers in state. There is the question of how deep these values go, and how far they would stick to them. While 75% of the youths professed an interest in engaging in politics, they allowed engagement to be defined as merely expressing an opinion at the dinner table, with Rosen concluding that it is unlikely that these youth will take any significant political risk in the near future.

3.2 Clarification of Terms

3.2.1 Morality and Ideals

Morality is something absolutely essential to a social animal like man. Distinguishing it from values in general, morality or ethics – which I will here use interchangeably for the sake of simplicity – are evoked when a decision or evaluation brings forth your position in relation to your community or society. Deciding what style of food to prepare for dinner is usually not a moral dilemma; deciding what ingredients to put in it usually is. Evaluating which chair is most comfortable is not a moral dilemma; evaluating which political party should rule your country is.

Ideals, as I will use them here, are closely related to morality in that it deals with what we value, what we see as valuable in our lives. They deal more often, though, with our imagination of what the good is, rather than the specific dilemmas we might face, meaning that is not so much about what political party to elect but what kind of society you would like to see. It is our ideals that decide how we act in moral situations (at least as far as we are rational creatures, not limited to making judgments simply on the basis of our evolutionary past), and by learning about the ideals of others we can to some extent judge whether we would like to collaborate with them in creating the future or if we need to somehow compete. Ideals are therefore the ideal medium for us to see if the world that these students seek is compatible with the one you would like to inhabit and thus informing your attitude towards them.

3.2.2 Lifeworlds

The concept of "world", and later "lifeworld", has been used in phenomenology to describe a sphere of meaningfulness, the space in which everything arises in our experience (Heidegger, 1927, 1996). I will here employ it as a term of art that pertains to the interior, lived worlds of our persons of interest (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The lifeworld of morality or of ideals is then the experience they have of things arising as good or bad, right and wrong, and as something that ought to be done versus something that ought not to. The reason for using this concept rather than focusing simply on values is that I think it is important to understand that our experience of morality is rarely so simple as to fit in a single variable. When we gaze into our lifeworlds we do not see values as single entities floating in space, nor do we feel them as distinct things inside of us; rather we see regular objects, people, and situation in our lived

world turn valuable when put under certain light. It is important for any investigation claiming to investigate the deep nature of individuals to keep some of this complexity and three-dimensional structures, to present not a list of values or dichotomies, but actually reveal the space in which a person lives.

Choosing to work with lifeworlds here also means that I will not be using theories of moral development like that of Kohlberg (1981) or of Commons (2008). It might be of great use to engage the model of hierarchical complexity to assess what level of development the expressions of these students belong to, but it would require a large amount of space, and I choose in this essay to focus more on the lifeworld substance of their narratives rather than their structure and form because I find it to be more important for a probing study like this and because I do not want to impose too many theoretical frameworks on them that might not be applicable.

3.2.3 Hybridity

The beginning of what we call the postmodern era is hard to define precisely but is often traced to German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. He made it clear that the self was not a integrated unit, but a "starry heaven" influenced by its immersion in a diverse cultural background, where a single action can be determined by multiple motivations (Nietzsche, 2009, p. 215). It was this insight that set off his search for genealogies, the historical traces of our current thinking, about morals in particular. I think this postmodern image of the human psyche is at least partially true and will use it to describe the subjects of my study.

We need also see, however, that, while we are the children of a thousand thinkers, we are also constantly trying to integrate those many influences into a coherent whole, attempting to become one. This is where hybridization comes in. It is a term that originally was used to describe a type of synthesis of two different kinds of creatures, which has been re-appropriated by Peter Burke (2009) and others as a term signaling the coming together of two or more different strands of cultures in a group or individual. Hybridity will in my thesis be referred to as a middle step in a larger transformation, where the beginning is chaos and confusion and the end is integration and a new type of culture or individual. This means that we will see the ideals of Chinese elite students as currently being on the way to somewhere, but, as of yet, not having truly arrived there. One could argue that what the students are going through is not so much a hybridization as an Americanization or a Liberalization, but I think

that is to overemphasize one of their many influences. They are, in my view, not Chinese youths turning into Western liberals, but rather taking their own path, which might very well influence what is seen as appropriately cosmopolitan in the future.

In my use of the term hybridization it is also important to understand that this process is part conscious, part unconscious, meaning that to a certain extent their way of thinking is determined by the cultural background without them knowing it, but beyond that they are also persons of free will and critical thinking, actively shaping their own worldview. During the interviews the students demonstrated knowledge of how both governmental propaganda and Western culture can influence their current beliefs and that to some extent they are both victims and arbitrators of their confluence.

The last thing that needs to be said about the concept of hybridity is that it can easily be imbued with normative qualities. In my interpretation of it, it is essential for any hybridization to occur that there are two almost dichotomous ways of thinking available as raw materials for the process. It is also essential that these are in some way made less extreme by their unity, so that the hybrid ideal emerging from the process is more moderate than either of its progenitors. The laws of hybridization I stipulate are thus those of a negative and a positive charge cancelling each other out to create a neutral entity, which in its turn might encounter another dichotomous entity and hybridize with that one, growing more integrative and moderate as it continues. We will take a closer look at the normative implications of this in section 4, but for now let us continue to the empirical results.

3.3 The Individual and Society

3.3.1 What a Person Ought to Become

The question of what constitutes a good life has occupied the minds of great thinkers on all continents since we first realized we possess something like free will, the capacity to choose one future from another. When one is steeped in a certain culture, however, one tends to absorb a very particular kind of image of this good life, whether it is the life of freedom, self-development and material pleasures that comes with a neoliberal worldview, or it is the life of respect, responsibility, and suppression of individuality that comes with a strictly hierarchical worldview. It is therefore of great interest to us here to notice that the answers of these students are not of one kind. Instead, their individuality and unique perspective is what shines through as we discuss this topic, hinting to us that for Chinese youth today there are a

plurality of ideals floating around, as was reported by Rosen (2009), available for those who seek to find some order to their existence.

It is, therefore, near impossible to classify their answers in any strict, grid-like fashion. We can, however, see a tendency in some of the interviewees to focus on their own personal expectations, talking about a good job, a nice family, a cozy home, and having some time over for vacation, which would fit the neoliberal image of individualism quite well. Others chose instead to expand their perspective to include showing respect for one's parents and relatives, acting responsibly, which converges more with traditional Chinese thinking. Still others chose to focus on their responsibilities to society, their need to be a good citizen, to be polite to strangers, and to even have some sort of concern for the world in general (although it was really only one person who went as far as that), which could be interpreted in two ways: either they have some of the collective spirit left in them, acting out of duty for the whole, or they have embraced a more modern spirit of cosmopolitanism and are choosing this path out of a newfound compassion for people outside their immediate community. It is also relevant that many of them seek to become public servants of some kind, professors or otherwise. I notice, somewhat reticently, however, that, even though there have been reports of a rise in environmental awareness in China, none of these students chose to mention their relationship to the environment or nature, a very important issue for contemporary China (Liu & Raven, 2010); rather, they all equated questions of the good with either material issues or the relationships between human beings, betraying perhaps one of the weaknesses of a moral philosophy that never strays from the concrete, shunning the abstract.

Examples of the first kind[1]:

> **Subject 1:** "I just have a picture of the life. I will have a family and a husband and two children. I don't want so much money or so big house; I just would like my family to be in good health and be very happy every day. I can have my own career, my own job. I will work during the day and when I come home during the night I will do other things I like with my husband and with my children. It's very simple, I think. Also to go to other places two times a year. I think it's enough."

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[1] It is important to understand that few of these subjects remained in these "groupings" as the discussion continued. Both Subject 5 and 1 revealed to me that their careers choices were mostly due to the influence of their parents and that they would always choose their family before their own interests.

Subject 5: "Just one life not so busy, comfortable, have a wife and a boy, have some time to do what you want to do."

Examples of the second kind:

Subject 3: "I think of an actor. He will spend much time in his home and has good calligraphy, having much time with his wife and daughter. He will be much with his family and at the same is a very talented actor."

"I think the good person will think more of their friends and families, and of their mothers, fathers and grandmothers and grandfathers."

"I think the most important thing is to consider others, to do well to others, not disturb others."

Subject 6: "First, basically, we should have some necessities in life, like a house and a car. Second, we should have something to engage in, like a career. Third, we need good personal relations."

"Most important is being responsible, taking responsibility of ourselves, and being kind to others, because we are all related to each other."

Examples of the third kind:

Subject 2: "Generally, I think that the good life means that you would be a useful man to the society."

"I think that the most important characteristic is self-knowledge. I think knowledge is the supreme source of all other virtues, having it you will possess other values such as courage and confidence."

Subject 7: "We can divide this into two levels. One is for the person him- or herself; the good life for one individual is that he show his potential, that he is a positive and motivated guy, to seek for more potentials, and live more passionately, and feel happy all the time.

Level two is the relation between the individual and society. First of all he should not do harm to society, or to others. When we say one has a good life, we

are saying that he is doing good to society. And the good is to promote not only the state ability but also the progress of society. Maybe to help other grow, reach their potential, and to find happiness."

Subject 4: "I work for myself, then my hometown, then my own country; you know: family, state, the world; the traditional Confucian logic."

"First you should build yourself up to be a guy that owns the ability to be capable to do something. This is the very first thing we should mark with a good people. 'Good people' is different from good citizen, more hard to achieve; they need the ability to make judgments."

When asked for the qualities that a good human being possess their differences appeared in even sharper relief. They all gave completely different answers. The list became: tolerance, self-knowledge, politeness, warm-heartedness, confidence, responsibility, hard work, honesty. Each virtue supplied by a different interviewee, not repeated once, which would indicate that they have not been successfully exposed to any unified system of right and wrong during their education, or, at least, that the system of thought promulgated never was coherent or convincing enough to stick in the minds of above average students like the ones I talked to, which is encouraging in the face of accounts of the heavy propaganda the Chinese schools dish out (Zhao, 1998). One of the interviewees did lament the indoctrination of the common people, but it seemed not to be occurring on any larger scale than that of most liberal democracies.

As you can see from these quotes, there are some of these students who evoke Confucianism directly, and it seems that they draw from this tradition inspiration for another type of self-development than the one talked about as part of the individualizing, liberalizing wave.

Central in Confucianism for much of its history was the idea of self-cultivation, of constantly striving to come closer to the moral ideal, yet never having the arrogance to presume it will ever be reached (Angle, 2009). Some terms for this ideal has been *junzi*, the gentleman, and *shengren*, the sage, but I also heard one of my subjects mentioning *you suzhi*, which would mean something like "having-quality". I see this as being separate from modern accounts of self-development in that it focuses on increasing one's circle of care, reducing the focus one has on one's own self. The passage is from person, to family, to state, to the world, and

Confucius himself is recording telling the story of his own progress through life, with different stages being appropriate for different ages (Fung, 1976).

This idea of this style of moral self-cultivation has been promulgated as a possible idea for our current age by Western philosophers and political scientists like Stephen C. Angle (2009) and Daniel A. Bell (2008). I had expected this model of life to mostly be limited to such abstract speculations, but as I talked with my interviewees it became clear that several of them actually sought to imitate this model and had gone through great pains to do so. Talking about the *junzi*, I ask Subject 8 if she is trying to live up to such an image:

> **Subject 8:** "I have to say yes. But it is very hard. In Confucianism, *junzi* is not a result but a goal that everyone must pursue in their lives. So you cannot say: I am a *junzi*, you will say: I will try to be a *junzi*. And since no one is perfect you will have to improve yourself every day, try to find out what you really lack and try to improve yourself, try to help others."

And as we already saw Subject 4 saying above:

> **Subject 4:** "I work for myself, then my hometown, then my own country; you know: family, state, the world; the traditional Confucian logic."

Both these and at least two of the other students showed great seriousness in their search for greater moral capacity and their attempt integrating Western and Chinese values in order to live a life that was not only locally but globally good. I will go more deeply into their attempts at hybridization in section 3.4.

3.3.2 What China Ought to Become

Beyond the good life of ethics and morality, there was always the study of the good society, how the state ought to be structured, and how rulers ought to rule. Whereas the students' differences in regards to the individual good were substantial, here they are largely in agreement, diverging mostly in the way, and order, they present it.

I had originally intended to ask the subjects for their idea of what was likely to happen in China's future and then ask what they saw as the ideal future, comparing these two in order to elucidate the difference between their expectation and their desires, but this blew up in my face in a most fruitful way. Whenever I inquired into future, they would conflate the probable

and the ideal, in the first case by insisting that they could only speak for themselves, from their own point of view – which is perfectly reasonable to do – and in the second case by arguing that it is not pragmatic to speak of ideals or images that are not connected to reality.

It is possible that this, for me, surprising position has something to do with the different uses of future tense in Chinese and English. According to some material I found, there is in Chinese not so much a future existing "out there", possible to imagine on its own, but it is rather connected to the present and always need be related to it (English-Lueck, 1997). (It is worth adding that when I asked them about their dreams about their personal life they also answered with images of the future that they thought very likely to come true.) Whatever the reasons, the outcome is that I have a section on political ideals, which is not distinctly about prediction or about projection, but more of a combination, a probable/desirable story of the future.

It is not strange to see that Chinese youth today believe that they future is about to yield great changes. They were born into a country in the midst of one of the materially and socially most substantial transformations in the history of mankind, and it would be more odd if they believed that they were approaching a stasis. What they all have in common is that they judge China as becoming "better", a term that, of course, can mean very many things, but to these students symbolize increased material wealth, improved mental health, a more effective rule of law, additional power to the people, less restriction on free expression, and what seemed to be the two most significant things of all to them: reduced corruption and reduced inequality.

> **Subject 6:** "I think there might be a big revolution in society, a big change in the next 50 years. The government be more open and more transparent and corruption should be reduced. If we try hard it might happen."

> **Subject 2:** "I think the market economy will still thrive in China. Even though that some politicians in China will argue that we should go back to the Mao period. I think that the idea of fairness will be more emphasized. Because, I think, the Chinese has a tradition of valuing fairness and equality even more than Westerners. And actually, we don't mind if the government interfere in many things in order to ensure fairness and to redistribute money. I think, maybe, the socialist model will play a more important role in the future."

Subject 8: I think, in 15 years, everyone in China will live a better life materially, but people might face more confusions in the mental life, in morality. Their values will be so different from each other so it will be a big challenge for the Chinese government to establish a value system that can be accepted by most of people.

Subject 3: "I think [China] will be more like a Western country. ... I think our party will change, because the leaders are changing their minds; they know what is better, but the problem is that their thinking cannot deliver to lower part of the country [local government].

China will become more equal, and more fair. I believe we will have more freedom. … I think, at the same time, China will conserve some of its traditions. Chinese culture is really precious."

Many of them emphasize, rather passionately, that a better education system is the most important part of the process to accomplish these improvements, referring often to an improved moral education, as some way to instill new trust in society. But, though they have some faith in this, they also lament the influence that the currently rich and powerful yield and the improbability that they will give up any of their power voluntarily, and in this their very bright hopes for the future seem to get a little muddled. As said by Subject 7:

Subject 7: "I think the freedom of speech will be completely open. And the rule of law should be laid down, be founded. I sense that if society is going to be stable, the gap between the rich and poor should be narrowed. We can do that; we can go toward a brighter future.

It is a hard problem, though. A small benefit group is already formed within the Communist Party. So where are these people going when the society is processing. It should be a very difficult problem, for they have enjoyed a very good quality of life and control many enterprises and they have very good education overseas, second generation or third generation. Now they are not learning to do reform, for it will definitely harm their benefit."

When I invite them all to imagine waking up as the leader of China and then ask them what they would do as a first act of power, they, as with the question of virtue above, all respond in

their own quite unique ways. One or two respond that the leader of China does not have any real power to do anything by himself, leading us to a discussion of the splits in the Communist Party. One of them cleverly respond that the first thing she would do would be to resign from power, initiating an election for a successor of the people. One went into a technical account of how institutions like the National People's Congress must be professionalized and not be filled with filthy rich CEOs who has no other person's interest than their own in mind. But the most popular response continued to be: crack down on corruption, do something to raise the common people's morality, and seek to, by some means, reduce the debilitating inequality in the country.

At times they go quite far, contemplating the complete fall of the current administration and way of thinking:

> **Subject 7:** "The one party state situation is not going to last for a very long time, I think."

And there are more than one who think that the global will increasingly be more important than the national (more on this in section 3.4.2):

> **Subject 6:** "I don't think there will be a very strong idea of nationality in the future; it's more about the individuals instead. The nation is an abstract idea and as we go to other countries we will learn that we have much in common and this is more real, I think."

Already here we begin to see some of those hybrid ideals mentioned in the title. There is a clear sense in most of them that what they seek is rule of law, people's rule, and increased equality, but all along they voice a strong skepticism of what these concepts really mean, and to what extent they are products of Western culture. They do not want these modernist ideals to trample all over Chinese tradition, instead they seek some new amalgamation, where the people's will is increasingly respected and where there is increasing order in society, but where family relations and moral commitments still can come to hold an important position.

If you wanted to put a face to the patterns of thought that I discerned from the interviewees, you would be hard put find someone better than Han Han (2011), the writer and race car driver, who in December 2011 made three blog posts that outlined a more moderate stance on

his views about freedom, democracy and revolution, claiming very much in tune with what we have heard here:

> "The issue is not to deal with the Communist Party this way or that. The Communist Party is just a name. The system is just a name. If you change the people, everything changes. Therefore, it is more important to seek improvement. Rule of law, education, culture ... there are the basics (Han, 2011)."

3.4 Hybrid Ideals

Thus far we have had a general oversight of what my interviewees, the subjects of this study, imagined the good life and the good society to be like. I will now turn to more specific concepts within morality and politics, focusing on areas where they seem to hold rather paradoxical positions but where they have begun a hybridization, both consciously and unconsciously.

3.4.1 Individuality and Confucius

For two and a half millennia the voice of Confucius has affected each new generation of Chinese youth in some way or other. It is important, however, to notice that Confucianism has been lying dormant in official and public discourse for most of the last century (Ai, 2009). After the fall of the last emperor, Chinese intellectuals sought to emulate more Western ways of thinking and behaving, and as Communism rolled in with its anti-traditional systems it was no longer seen appropriate to place such an emphasis on ancestors and hierarchies as Confucians always have done, but the strongly collectivistic tendencies in both the systems probably made the transition easier (Yan, 2011). During the Cultural Revolution, in the sixties, the Mao government even sought to eradicate both ancient literature and the intellectuals who studied them, taking to the extreme the attitude they had shown since the May forth movement in 1919. With the reform and opening transformation that occurred after 1978, there was no longer as strict control over what to read and write, but capitalism and progress were now the leading instincts and though studies resumed, few Confucian voices managed to be heard on a national stage (Ai, 2009).

During the late nineties and early part of the twenty first century, however, especially during the Hu/Wen administration, there was a noticeable return of traditional thought to the fore (Hartig, 2011), when there even was for while something called *ruxue*, "Confucianism fever",

which according to Ai (2009) was largely outside of government control. In time of great progress and transformation people will often develop a certain nostalgia, a sense of loss of the past, and a need to regain some of that rootedness and structure that ancient culture provided so well. It is likely that the change in rhetoric of the top leaders is mostly a cosmetic improvement, an attempt to use the vocabulary of Confucianism, such as "harmony" and "virtue", to bring some substance the increasing focus on national pride in Party rhetoric (discussed below), and to instill a sense of balance in a society that was, and is, growing increasingly unequal. But the Confucian texts also made their way into the classrooms, and some parts of the generation born in the late eighties or early nineties – as shown in this study – have now grown up to become young adults with a deeply instilled connection to the words of the ancient scholars.

It is hard to say exactly where the generational shift should be drawn, especially since school reform in China is happening largely on a provincial basis (Della-Iacovo, 2009), but one of my subjects, aged 26, seemed to feel distanced from this new generation, claiming not to have read much Confucian literature in school, while all the people younger than 24 admitted great influences from traditional texts. That would place the line somewhere around those born in 1987, people who were around twelve or younger when the educational reform of 1999 began, a limit that fits quite well with the 80s-90s barrier shown to be influential also in the self-identity of many Chinese students (Liu F. , 2011). Six out of eight of my interviewees fit into this group and can be seen as reflecting the thinking among a new generation of Chinese intellectuals who has been exposed to both traditional and more liberal ideals

Going through the literature on the identity formation among Chinese individuals, the greatest change during the last decade appears to be the rise of the individual, the sense that one's values come from what oneself *is*, not from the relations one *has* (Yan, 2011). Fears about moral decline has been a public concern, and youth today are reported to have a very different sense of filial piety, pre-marital sex, and self-sacrifice than have earlier generations. As in every other increasingly liberal and market-driven society, however, the loss of previous moral values has to some extent been ameliorated by new cares and concerns. Traditional cultures in general are unconcerned about strangers, placing their trust in those they already know. But as modernity progresses one is less likely to remain rooted in one place and so will learn to trust strangers, and even care for them to some extent in order to keep the society going.

This kind of non-relational moral concern has been on display in cases like the reaction of many youths to the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, where thousands of young volunteers spontaneously flocked to the area in order to help the victims, and in the spectacular rise of the popularity of NGOs and charity work. However, it has largely been conspicuously absent during the many food safety scandals where some companies did not care if others got hurt as long as they themselves made some money, and during a famous episode where a baby was hit by a car in the street and no one in the crowd even attempted to help it (Yan, 2011).

This topic is deeply personal, intellectually difficult, and very emotional for most of my subjects. They hesitate for a long time, thinking it through clearly, before they answer my questions of their different loyalties to self, family, state, and world. We can see here that to a large extent they are part of the neoliberal tradition and consider themselves as independent people, responsible for themselves only:

> **Subject 6:** "If there is a conflict between America and China, then it might have nothing to do with me."

> **Subject 7:** "Family is important and we should learn to appreciate that parents helped us grow … but first of all we are a person, we are a self, and we should learn to choose for ourselves, to live our own life, and if we cannot live in a way we think is right, following our potential, then we cannot be called an independent person."

> "You can choose some certain pattern that exists in the world or you can follow your own pattern. I don't have a very concrete belief in what is good and what is bad, but I choose to believe in my sense, my sense of humanity, and if there is something opposite or controversial I try to figure them out."

But when pushed to choose between their loyalty to their family and the loyalty to their own personal dream, seven out of eight eventually chose to go with their family, and many of them told me stories about how they were currently on paths that were largely of their parents making, acting out of duty and responsibility, not out of a neoliberal self-interest. Further,

when asked if they had felt guilty recently, and, if so, about what, the majority of answers where in reference to some lack of attention to their parents or near relatives[2].

> **Subject 8:** "I am not so good to my parents. I am a little bit selfish. I will ignore their feelings. I always feel a bit sorry for that."

Symptomatic of the transition to an individualized society is the replacement of responsibilities with rights, and it is widely reported of the increased cases of people standing up to the (local) government demanding what is rightfully theirs (Yan, 2011). The interviewees in this study, however, had clearly developed to a stage where rights were very natural for them and they took for granted the freedom of speech and of the right to life, liberty and security of person. But they all saw problems with taking these rights as naturally given and were quite accepting of limitations on rights for the sake of society, some were even suspicious of activists like Liu Xiaobo or Ai Weiwei for being too idealistic and not understanding the need for slow progress[3].

> **Subject 2:** "Basically, I think I am free. If we make the comparison we will see that China is not as free as the West, but personally I do not think it is very important."

> **Subject 7:** "Every person whether you are elite or ordinary should have access to the safety of the food, safety of the transportation, and to the right of the votes, right of the education."

> "What we are going to do, our choices, are in a greater process, so we might have our individual values against society but I don't want to deliver it out in one or two years. I think it is a gradual process, so I don't like to be very active protester like Ai Weiwei or Liu Xiaobo."

In line with the theme of this paper, we must further notice that they have retained, or brought back, a sense of responsibility that many observers reported missing (Yan, 2006), but also that

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[2] Perhaps even more interesting was the fact that most were insistent on that their feeling was not guilt but only a slightly bad feeling. They would not describe it as guilt because that would entail that they thought their actions were truly reprehensible, but they had an understanding of why they acted in such a way and thus did not find their moral impropriety a sign of lack of moral character.

[3] It is worth noting here that they also thought it stupefying that the government would go so far as to lock the dissidents up, and considered ignoring them a much more intelligent response. Arrest was seen as an overreaction, betraying weakness, causing more harm than good.

most of their sense of duty is compatible with their otherwise individualized identity, symbolizing their attempts at hybridization.

> **Subject 3:** "I think I will care more about other people's lives, because I like to see a society where all is happy and free. And if the whole society lives in harmony then it means myself is also in harmony."

> **Subject 7:** "My mother even encouraged me to emigrate to the US and live a very happy life, with family life and enjoy a good environment, but I feel I have a social responsibility to have some impact on China."

> **Subject 2:** "I think we are obliged to make a contribution to our community. What it is depends. I will be a scholar … I will not take real action, but just write down, to urge."

> **Subject 4:** "Since I chose to be a teacher I think my biggest responsibility is to teach my students well in the future, to teach them right and wrong."

> **Subject 3:** "I think our responsibility is to give our own opinion. Our opinion on whether society now looks like the society we want it to be. If everyone makes their honest opinion on society, then leaders will know how to make it better."

These are examples of very different sense of responsibility, from acting your part as best as possible, through contributing your point of view, to a real sense of commitment to the greater good, but through them all there is still a certain lack of direct action, they all believe in the connection between spread of knowledge and societal change, that they need not step up to the plate themselves but that the government will eventually yield to reason.

3.4.2 Nation, Culture, and Globalization

Concurrent with his transformation of the economy, Deng Xiaoping began in the late 1970s a reassessment of the Maoist ideology. From this, a general suspiciousness of Communist ideology began to crop up, leading eventually, according to Zhao (1998), to the events on Tiananmen Square in 1989. Following the chaos of the massacre and the split it had created in the Party, an intense need arose for a new banner for people to flock to and for the political voices to unite around. Nationalism was seen as the only valid candidate, having shown itself more resilient than both socialism and capitalism in parts of the world like the Soviet Union

and Yugoslavia. The Chinese term *aiguo*, which literally means "love of the state" and which is maybe better translated as patriotism, became the core of future political propaganda and was promoted heavily as a central part of the moral education of the Chinese child (Zhao, 1998).

It is highly likely that we could see the effects of this during the buildup to the Olympics in 2008, when large groups of Chinese youth in cities all over the world spontaneously rose up to counter the anti-Chinese demonstrations of human rights activists and Tibetan separatists (Nyíri & Zhang, 2010). A shrill rhetoric echoed through the internet forums and young Chinese men who tore down Tibetan flags or protected the Olympic torch as it was carried through the cosmopolitan streets were hailed as heroes, and any attempt at a voicing a moderate opinion was met with shouts of condemnation. It seemed to many observers that nationalism was growing strong in China and the raising of the red flag in squares across the world was seen with some fear.

It is obvious that most of my interviewees also are very proud of China, of its current accomplishments, and of the more important role it is carving out for itself in the global community. It is also true that most of them believe that America and other Western powers are attempting to stop China's rise, and they believe that much of the human rights discourse is actually code for the projection of American hegemony. They seem to hold a conviction that China would not act in such a manner, that China is more polite and respectful, and of a more peaceful nature, setting up themselves as a contrast against western militarism and expansionism, thinking that China would not have any interest in waging a war abroad unless it was in self-defense. And in this sense they are patriotic.

It is very important in this context, however, to understand what it is that these students actually mean when they are speaking about China and nationalism. Where an American would likely focus on the political system, the state entity and the constitution, it seems that my interviewees, in accordance with traditional Chinese thinking (Chun, 1996), identify more with the culture, their history and their values.

> **Subject 6:** "For me it's more about culture. The government and culture is different. Culture is more about society, and government is more about politics."

> **Subject 7:** "It think it's more cultural, not national. I don't only have a national identity together with the other people inside China, but overseas people in

Singapore and other places, so when we say that there is ethnically Chinese and also culturally Chinese, it is not the government and the law I feel with but the culture."

Subject 4: "For several thousand years it was Chinese culture that pulled China forwards. After several things has been solved we will return to it. Every Chinese person has their own dream about their culture; they want to be stronger. China is the dragon. This dragon will fly into the sky."

The first and the second quote makes clear the difference between the idea of the cultural unit and the political unit, and in the third we see an example of what many would interpret as a nationalistic view, but observe that they go on to show that it is not political or military expansion that is in their minds.

Subject 6: "I don't think China will be a leader in the future. I don't think there will be a very strong idea of nationality in the future; it's more about the individuals instead. The nation is an abstract idea and as we go to other countries we will learn that we have much in common and this is more real, I think."

Subject 4: "China will not be an empire. But as time passes China will have closer relations with other countries. Maybe the so called cultural influence will be stronger."

It is well worth recognizing here, though, that the idea of what constitutes Chinese culture or "Chineseness" has always been highly disputed in both political and intellectual spheres (Chun, 1996), and needs to be constantly clarified. But for our purposes in this investigation it is sufficient to see the clear differentiation these students make between the nation-state of the government, and the cultural sphere of Chinese historical tradition. Zhao (1998) and others would argue that the latter is actually constructed by the former, but this could be contrasted with the idea that "cultural nationalism rather than state nationalism better explains the contemporary discourse on *ruxue*" and the claim by Ai (2009) that this *ruxue* discourse, as mentioned above, was largely born outside the control of the Chinese government.

The interviewees also seemed to be very different from the youths who marched with their red flags before the Olympics in that they are generally opposed to any kind of shrill rhetoric, any

kind of radical or extremist position, and are in their identity construction not very prone to preferring their own in-group to others without rigorous circumspection (Zhao, 1998). They are thus not really nationalists, for their care is not about where borders lie or who should rule; instead they are concerned that Chinese culture should receive its proper place in the global canon, for it to get the respect it deserves. And, finally, they want the Western discourse on values not to reject them or their ideas as mere results of brainwashing by the Chinese state but as possible sources of valid criticism of the current hegemony and its one-sidedness.

This makes a lot of sense when you combine it with the fact that these students are also developing in the direction of liberalism and globalization, reducing their identity as purely Chinese and taking a very liberal perspective on the world that seeks a well-balanced system of equal powers, rather than any sort of preponderance on their own in-group.

> **Subject 3:** "I hope China will not be a counterpart [try to become what the US is now], but that they can be equal and have a balance between China and the US. And I hope other countries can be stronger. I hope the international world will not be controlled by one or two countries. Although I think China will be strong, I want other countries to be stronger, too."

> **Subject 7:** "For myself, I feel more connected to American guys, not to Japanese or Korean. For the recent 30 years, China is almost always learning from the US, so when I grew up I learned a lot from the US, so it feels natural to think American."

> "Inevitably we are going to be more and more similar, the ways of thinking, the values we hold. There might not be that many different cultures in the world after globalization."

> **Subject 4:** "We will send something of our culture to America and they will send something to us."

This is where their divided minds become obvious once again and hybridization is their only means of continuation. They see themselves as opposed to US hegemony, but also find they are deeply connected to the US. They love China and want to see it increase its influence, but don't want to upset the delicate balance of the global world. Often my interviewees found it

difficult to present a pure ideal, to stray too far from pragmatic thinking, but in this area they were highly idealistic, believing that it is indeed possible for peace to ensue as the balance of power is redistributed. They all utter concerns for conflict and some even for small wars, but all think that it will work out for the better.

They are here seeking a global institutional pluralism of a Habermasian kind (Bohman & Rehg, 2011), a thinking fitting the clumsy term glocalization, but it seems they have not yet worked out how they will do with local cultural precepts that interfere with global political situations, a similar problem to that of the public and private sphere in individual societies. They want to integrate with the global order, yet have skepticism of the values of democracy, the morality of human rights intervention in sovereign territory, and some other things that at the current time would be expected from a liberalist. This stance reflects also a similar tension in the position of the Chinese government at the moment, showing that though different in many ways there are still deep connections between this specific group and the greater intellectual community. The process of hybridization is still on-going in both these cases and only time will tell where they will end up.

3.4.3 Universal Pluralism

Each time I approached the topic of world politics, we were drawn into the discussion of universal and relative values. It seemed very important to many of the interviewees that Chinese values did not seek to be universal, as opposed to Western, and in particular American, values. China would, according to them, never go out into the world in the style of Christian missionaries or human rights workers to try to impose their thinking on cultures that were radically different from themselves. Human rights and democracy and freedom all sound quite good to them, but they remain abstract concepts that always need to bend to the winds of reality; and though they find much solace and order in Confucianism they have no sense that it would be applicable to people in general.

> **Subject 3:** "I don't really like the values of the Christians. Sometimes they are not so tolerant about people who really worship the god. They think that everyone should be Christian. I think we must be more tolerant about it."

> **Subject 7:** "China should be more responsible for the world, but it might not follow the US pattern. The US pattern is to always promote the universal value and they believe that freedom and democracy is universal value and they always

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promote this to other countries. But the practice of these, so called, universal values might not work so well in some countries in South America or Asia. China might not be promoting these universal values but they are definitely going to respect others."

Subject 6: "Values are about the abstract, and you live in the real world. If you stick to the abstract, you will be confused."

Subject 6 goes to the heart of what is distinctly Chinese about these claims. There is a pragmatism and a worldliness to most of their ideals. The country they grew up in was built on the ruins of Mao's idealism, and during their youth they have through the state media been heavily exposed to the worst parts of the US tendency to hide its realism behind idealism, which both must have had some influence in scaring them away from any attempt to dictate eternal or global truths about good and bad. In response they have turned to the ideas of cultural sovereignty, provided mainly by the Chinese state, and the pluralistic image of postmodernism, available in academia. They are not of one mind here, however, and, though they are skeptical of many of the values believed universal in much of the West and the techniques used for disseminating them, they express the need to unite the world behind something, avoiding international anarchy and/or a complete separation of cultures. This sentiment arises when, as we saw above, there is talk of international cooperation, or, as below, when there is talk of democracy.

Subject 7: "I mean, democracy is a word that originated in the West. And I don't believe in universal values but I definitely believe in some shared goodness from the original humanity. It might be that some universal values are original. I am not sure if China will become a democracy or not, but it is definitely going to become more like a democracy. It is the happiness of the people, all the people, that is important."

The idea here is not to do a faithful copy of democracy from a relatively successful Western country; it is rather to get to the heart of what democracy stands for: the rule of the people. When one sees this one can begin to question whether elections are the appropriate way to accomplish this, or whether democracy is appropriate at any time in history and at any price, and some of the interviewees do just that. The same goes for concepts like human rights,

where they believe that there are some part of it that might be universal, but that much of it is also remnants of the culture which gave birth to them.

> **Subject 6:** "I suppose there is a true good, but there are many different ways to achieve it."

Some express a fear over where the country is going at the moment when it comes to tolerance and openness to different values, referring to the kinds of fervent nationalists we saw in the section above. When talking about the common people of lesser education Subject 7 says:

> **Subject 7:** "They are not conscious, because they have been influenced by the government education saying that this is wrong, this is absolutely wrong, and we are absolutely right. So they don't learn to appreciate the different values or different kind of things. The only thing they know is how to defeat something, not how to appreciate something."

Both Subject 6 and 8 stress that moral education is the way to solve this, but that there indeed is a paradox inherent in this thinking that must be solved. For if you are to tell people with one voice that it is right to be tolerant to other value systems, are you not then promulgating a very specific value system? Is not the word multiculturalism an oxymoron in that it is actually one type of culture whose characteristics are that of accepting other cultures? Not necessarily:

> **Subject 8:** "I don't mean that they should establish values directly, but they have encourage some atmosphere or something to help people, to establish some values, they have to promote something. Not mean that: you have to accept this, but you have to encourage people to accept something, promote how to be a good person, how to be kind to each other, and what is your attitude to Chinese history and tradition."

There is an attitude that one can combine the universal with the plural and achieve some kind of universal pluralism. We can, once again, see the same ideals reflected by essayist Han Han (2011), saying: "Universal values should be implemented in accordance with current local conditions." This as part of a debate about universal values that has been going on for the last three or so years in China, where the Western ideals of human rights and democracy play the role of the universal (Qi, 2011). If this was purely the case then the argument for a

hybridization occurring also in this area of thought would be quite convincing: they are clearly combining modern, universal Western values with traditional, pluralistic Chinese values. But I don't think this is the only perspective to take. We must see that when they try to make sense of the universal values they use the term "li" from Confucianism, which means something along the line of "universal order", "coherence", or "the pattern of nature" (Angle, 2009), and we must see that the thinking behind the phrase *li-yi-fen-shu*, meaning "one principle, many manifestations", has existed since Neo-Confucian times (Liu S.-H. , 2011). At the same time I hesitate to accept traditional Chinese society as pluralistic in any way similar to what we have come to mean by the term in postmodernity. I would therefore conclude this section by saying that while there is a hybridization going on here, it is near impossible to trace the origins of the basic ingredients involved. Whether from Greece or China, however, an amalgamation of some kind is going on, and there are hints that some kind of universal pluralism is emerging from the process.

3.4.4 Equality, Government, and Failed Hybridization

In this fourth and final part of the hybridity section, we will take a look at the balance of hierarchy and equality in these students, whether they accept some kind of difference, natural or otherwise between people, or if they have embraced a liberalistic or postmodern ideal of radical equality.

With China's inequality now higher than that of the US and constantly on the rise (Asian Development Bank, 2007), the debate about fairness and justice touches the heartstrings of the students, and talking to them about it reveals that there is not much consensus on this issue, putting them all along a spectrum of perspectives. Some of them land quite far to the right (seen on a Western political scale), claiming that we are born with different qualities and that it is only natural that inequality should exist – although perhaps not to the extreme extent that is currently present in China. Subject 8 represent this view.

> **Subject 8:** "If everyone has an equal chance to compete for something it is fair. Everyone has different talents, some people will be more talented, some people not. But if you accept the values of fair competition, you have to accept the result of difference [inequality]."

"Of course, people who are good at business will be richer than others. So the difference will be bigger. Of course something really unfair will happen. But it's unavoidable."

At the other end of the spectrum lands someone like Subject 2, who is seem most influenced by socialist ideals of all the students.

> **Subject 2:** "The Chinese has a tradition of valuing fairness and equality even more than Westerners. And actually, we don't mind if the government interfere in many things in order to ensure fairness and to redistribute money. I think, maybe, the socialist model will play a more important role in the future."
>
> "Naturally people have different qualities. In society government should serve to compensate the people with lower quality."

Notice here that both of them promote the same theory of human nature, that we indeed are quite different. It is only that one thinks that it should be allowed to proceed and one thinks that it needs to be redeemed. Also quite far to the left is Subject 7, but he has less belief in the inherent capacities of man and believes that if the injustices of society could only be fixed, then a relative equality would ensue (not a hundred percent equality, he points out, but not too far from it).

> **Subject 7:** "People are created equal, but once they are born they interact with different education, different background, so they are educated as they are grown up differently."
>
> "I sense that if society is going to be stable, the gap between the rich and poor should be narrowed."
>
> "When I say we should have a balanced point between equality and inequality, now we have more inequality. We should promote to the equal."

Subject 4 and Subject 6 are not sure if birth or education are more important in deciding a person's talents, though the former leans towards birth and the latter education. Both believe that inequality is a big problem, but the latter thinks redistribution is a possible solution while the former thinks that what is needed is a change in policy. The role of the government is another factor that fragments these students. Subject 4 thinks that Deng Xiaoping's policies

made the current situation happen, while Subject 8 thinks that they were necessary and that this state of inequality must continue for some time for the sake of efficiency.

> **Subject 8:** "The Chinese government must do something to change that kind of situation, but it needs time. Efficiency and fairness are not goals we can accomplish at one time. Maybe some things will change in the future, but in today's China we must accept that some unfairness will happen."

The divisions continued within their selves. For even if most subscribed to an idea of fairness as equality of opportunity, they were still deeply affected with the current inequality in China and wanted to find a solution, and some even told me stories about their personal experiences with the stark differences in society.

> **Subject 6:** "When I return to the countryside I can see old friends who remain the same as they used to. They have no opportunity to make change. In the city they have better resources, better education, better transportation, and better opportunity go overseas, to live or study well. But if you are from the countryside there is no hope, there is nothing."

The reason for this split was that the government and its massive corruption was seen as the main cause of this problem, but at the same time they all felt that no individual had real power to change anything, and that the government was therefore the only solution to the problem. About half of them thought the government incapable and in need of change, and the other half thought the central government capable while the local government was incompetent. Most, however, wanted to let people free to compete and create a meritocratic hierarchy, but that ideal was obstructed by excessive nepotism, and the only way to reestablish the original state would be through just that nepotistic system. I see their problem.

> **Subject 4:** "It is the government's responsibility. We ordinary people, what can we do? If there is some issue with fish we can stop eating fish, but if all food goes wrong, what can we do?"
>
> "I think raising taxes will not fix the problem, because if you raise taxes in China, then the government will get the money. Wealthy people and poor people will get poorer all together."

> **Subject 7:** "They are not good people. Every government official and politician is always doing service for themselves."

Can we say, however, they have here entered into a state of hybridization? I would like to argue that we cannot. The reason for this is that the conditions that made their opinions moderate, even transcendent, in the previous three sections, no longer holds. Their previous success was due to the fortunate circumstances that Confucianism and neoliberalism worked as counterpoints in those debates, and they had some identification with both sides, striving, thus, for a unification of differences, achieving – or progressing towards – a fruitful synthesis. In the question of equality, however, we find that both Confucianism and neoliberalism allows for a meritocratic hierarchy, and a counterpoint in this debate can only be found in a social liberalism or in socialism. Most of them, though, have distanced themselves from the latter, and found the former very suspicious; so, they end up here with a more one-sided, more internally divided, position.

3.5 Reflections on the Results

And, thus, we reach the end of the story of the eight PKU students. I have shown you most of what I observed, and shared most of the insights I gained during the process. In the beginning I asked the question: *What are some of the characteristics that makes the new generation of Chinese elite students different from other groups in society?* Let us now therefore go through what it is that we learned and see if the answer to this question has been provided, and if there are some further comparisons to be drawn, lessons to be learned from reflecting on the interviews once again.

3.5.1 Three Lessons Learned

Firstly, I would like to point out the great qualitative differences between my results and those of previous surveys. Remember that in the earlier studies the majority of youths was said to identify with liberalism, individualism, and nationalism, and put their trust in the Communist Party (Rosen, 2011). None of this would be denied by any of my interviewees; in fact, if I gave them a questionnaire, they might replicate the percentages of the general youth population quite faithfully. Notice, however, that the important factor is the meaning of these terms for the students. Many did trust the Party, but mainly the central parts, not the local – a mindset that the central government actually has been promoting (Cai, 2008) – and the rest still put their faith in the Party mostly due to the lack of credible options. They were

nationalistic, but it turns out not in the way one might image and not like the loud mouthed youths of Olympic protesting; they showed loyalty to the culture rather than the state and shunned direct dichotomies of "us and them". They saw themselves as individualists, but the majority would give up their personal dream for their family, and saw to some extent their individual struggle as a means to improve China and the world. And they found much to like in liberalism, but also much to be suspicious of, like the possible ethnocentricity of its values, its unbending idealism, and the morality of international intervention. The statistics gave us an outline, but it would be near impossible to understand what the figures actually describe without supplying an image of their ways of making meaning, of their lifeworlds.

Secondly, it is interesting to see the slight divergence that exists between the results of this study and much of the previous qualitative literature. Where other researchers still report mainly on the transition from idealism to materialism, and from collectivism to individualism, telling the stories of increased care for strangers while seeing a reduced sense of traditional responsibilities (Kleinman, 2011), I observed that the interviewees in my study had already begun a transition from materialism to atavism, to a search for ancient wisdom which could supplant the often hollow structures of modernity, and, further, had gone on to hybridize the two, ending up with a style of thinking that was unique to them as a group. This is probably due to the fact that it is only with students of relatively high education and of a certain age that these patterns of thought can yet be discerned. If this becomes a larger trend, however, and if the reabsorbtion of Confucianism can lead to a successful hybridization for a larger group, then we are bound to see more studies with similar results start popping up soon. A similar attitude is, however, as already mentioned, available in the recent writings of public intellectual Han Han (2011), who in his discussion of democracy makes this remarkable demonstration of a radical moderateness:

> "If there is a revolution in China in the future, I will stand with the side which is weak and vulnerable. If this side should grow strong, I will stand with its opponents. I am willing to sacrifice my personal views to ensure the co-existence of different groups. This is everything that you should be seeking for (Han, 2011)."

Thirdly, I think it important to reiterate the great heterogeneity of the interviewees. A theoretical mind will often fall for the temptation to focus on similarities rather than differences, simply because that makes for more impressive narrative. But it is another duty of

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a qualitative study to not hide the reality of individuality or the reality of the mosaic of beliefs within one single person. The results reported herein are not definitive or conclusive; they are not the only perspective to take on these students, nor do I provide a final analysis of what they have said. They are just a group of people with a certain collection of beliefs. I am the one calling them hybrids, judging their opinions as moderate, seeing their statements as part of a larger pattern of cultural interaction, but we have still been able to shed some light on *what some of the characteristics are that makes the new generation of Chinese elite students different from other groups in society*, although we can never claim that it is more than one perspective, open to revision, perhaps hiding as much as it reveals.

3.5.2 Counter-Arguments

It is, however, crucial to notice that, though I am not making a strong case for my perspective being the only accurate one, it is the very purpose of this paper to convince you it is a useful perspective. So let us therefore look for a moment at the possible problems with my picture and see if I can show why they are, in my view, not very damaging to the core issue.

A concept that we so far has only touched upon with the utmost lightness is the lack of care that these students have for the environment. It was common for them to say that it was alright for the government to pursue another twenty years or so of industrial policy in order to ensure growth and stability for China, and only then, as immeasurable damage has been done to the land, air, and water, is it time to think about the issues of pollution. This must be seen as a moral deficiency in a twenty-first century intellectual, a divergence from the cosmopolitan ideals that I have ascribed to these students. What does this mean? Is this a sign that they have indeed fallen for the propaganda of the government in some areas of thought, or can their attitude in some sense be justified and deemed to be fitting with the rest of their ideals?

Before answering these questions, let us compare this with some other possible problems. Confucianism is, when we reflect on it, only one of China's many traditions. If there truly is a search for a lost past with which to restore the emptiness of the modern and postmodern present, then why have the students not reached for Daoism or Chan Buddhism? Could it be the case that these students have merely absorbed exactly that information which the CCP would have liked them to absorb? Confucianism has, after all, often been interpreted as a system of thought that works for the current regime, promoting stability and order and the

"harmonious society" to such an extent that inequalities are allowed to fester and all kinds of revolutionary movements quenched without remorse. Is it this kind of state sponsored Confucianism that the students have dictated their love for to me and that I foolishly accepted as a genuine individual exploration?

Let us look at one more aspect before I respond, for it is also of interest to notice that, when I asked them to imagine what they would do if they were imbued with the power of the leadership of China, they, in general, revealed a severe lack of imagination. Subject 4 even professed that he thought that his education has interfered with his ability to contemplate such a thing. Subject 3 did say that she would immediately give up the power, which was an inventive answer, but primarily served to escape making any direct decisions. Were they here escaping the very idea of correcting the policies of the CCP? Were they so deeply embedded in a system of top-down governing that it was not possible for them to imagine a scenario where they, as young students with newly shaped minds, could bring some new ideas to the group of aged men currently in power? If this was to be the case, surely I could not refer to their ideal as having been hybridized; rather they would be mere continuations of an age old tradition of intellectuals in service of the state, having been allowed to enter into their current elite positions in the educational hierarchy due to their conformity and their willingness to reproduce the ideological message of the CCP.

Alright. I think we have built up the discussion to a point where you might have some serious skepticism regarding the original position of this paper, so it is now time for me to give you some answers and bring you back to my side of the field. First of all, I must agree that the students are indeed immersed in a system of both capitalist and one-party propaganda that it is hard to escape from. And, though they in many areas of thought reveal themselves as wise beyond their age and education, there are many aspects of the world of thought that their critical thinking has not reached into. But, from my point of view, none of this diminishes the fact that they have achieved a level of creativity and individuality in their ideals that far exceeds what is intimated by statistical surveys and my preliminary expectations. The Confucianism they promulgate is partly one that seeks to harmonize society, but also one that is clearly against inequalities of opportunity and one that looks at a corrupt official as someone who does not deserve his place of power. And, though they disagree with the radicalism of people like Liu Xiaobo, they are advocates of a transition to democracy, free speech, and a strong rule of law. Further, and most clearly separating them from CCP lackeys and nationalists, they are in general cosmopolitan, finding their identities spread over the

globe, disconnected from the Chinese party-state. They believe that the concept of harmony not only applies within the borders of China but also in the global community, that no single country should grow too strong, and that China therefore should not viciously pursue its own self-interest.

The lack of environmental concern is indeed a large gap in their morality, but I think it can be understood from their special type of hybridity. From the West they have been absorbing the modernist values, of democracy, the market, and rule of law, and from Chinese philosophy they have absorbed traditional values of family relations and societal roles. Being aware of these two value systems simultaneously they become postmodern people with paradoxical values that they then seek to hybridize into a coherent whole. But in this process there is no need for a change to occur in all values at once. Nor is it certain that those values that are connected with the rise of postmodernism in the West, such as environmental concern, will necessarily arise in any person entering into this condition. However, it is not impossible that they will soon develop some kind of Confucian environmentalism, where concepts like natural order and harmony will have to refer also to living in a balance with nature globally. This is often how I have seen Chinese philosophy interpreted in the West, and it would not surprise me if this was already underway in the minds of some Chinese youth.

When it comes to their lack of imagination in the thought experiment of being a ruler, I find more reason for dismay. The strength of their own individual wisdom is still heavily suppressed by the force of the collective. Almost none of the students believed that a single person can make a difference. When I asked what they could possibly do to bring about the change they longed for, they mostly answered that they could do very little, that they, at best, could communicate with their friends and future students and inculcate them in their new thinking, and so slowly, person by person, transform the moral landscape of China until democracy springs naturally from the earth. The question is if this passivity arises from a suppression of individual expression by a Communist party, or if it is due to a realistic appreciation of the utter unlikelihood that an single individual can effect change in a country of 1.4 billion people. The latter probably has some influence on them, but I think that youthful exuberance could probably have dispelled such a harsh reality if it had not been the case that the former was also going on. This issue brings forth in sharp contrast the fact that even if you transcend the ideals of your society by taking in those of another and bringing them together in a new hybrid form, you are still very much settled in your current situation, in the difficulties it presents, and the capacity to take new perspectives does not necessarily mean

that you will achieve the capacity of to take new action. This paper has been a study of ideals and I have argued for the uniqueness of the ideals of these Chinese elite youth. It is, however, clear to me that their progress is still very limited and has yet to be translated into the realm of action. But that doesn't mean that they have not developed in some way, that they have not accomplished something by their hybridization.

3.5.3 The Power of the Margin

> "[T]he powerless can revive traditions, creating a new basis for legitimacy that cannot be easily challenged by the state" (English-Lueck, 1997, p. 36).

Then there is the question of whether the kind of thinking that I found in these students will actually be able to prevail, to stay with these youths as they grow older and possibly enter positions of power, to spread from them to others, to become policy, or if it is doomed to be a marginal system of thought, perhaps forever only a hobby for college students, rinsed out of them as they enter the market of public power and face the hailstorm of material reality. Many of them have the intention to go abroad and how that will affect them I do not know. The youths raised inside the ecological sphere of thought we call China will also face competition from the children of the power elite (Zheng, 2007), a group almost exclusively educated in the US and the UK, possessing immense influence due to their established networks of contacts and their family wealth. According to some of the interviewees, the students who have lived abroad will not be interested in Chinese politics, but will focus on business. Several professors I talked to, though, did not agree, and saw the returning power elites as a great source of influence in the future. This is surely a fertile ground for future research.

On the whole it would take another essay to make an accurate assessment of the place of the thinking of these elites in the future. As I keep pointing out, however, it is not my place to prognosticate, nor is it possible for us, the author and the reader, to remain objective observers. We have seen here that a marginal way of thinking is expressed by a small group of students. We do not yet know how influential it is, how many it has reached. We only know that in some way it exists and I think that this knowledge sets us up for a choice. Whether we are Chinese or otherwise, we become aware of a possible path into the future, and we are by this knowledge forced to either follow it or to stray from it. This is the power of social science, the power to bring our freedom into clear view, and if these students are as

sensitively positioned as I think they are, then it is the very future of the Chinese moral identity that is at stake in the choices that they make and the choices we make regarding them.

4. Discussion: Further Significance

An individual event is never separated from the larger processes of reality. When we look upon a small group of people like the youths of this study, we can see first only them, only their words and what we think they seek to express. But as we listen closer, as we let our minds climb the strands of historical and present influences, we find ourselves suspended in a great network of ideas, and the opinions of a single person might take on unexpected significance. So far in this essay we have not strayed far from the core of our motif, the expressed ideals of the interviewees, but in this section we will climb out of what can be directly perceived to that which can only be inferred.

I see the lifeworlds of this group of Chinese elite students as indicative of two larger processes that are deeply intertwined. The first is the rise of the glocalized individual (Meyrowitz, 2004), the person who is growing more appreciative of their culture, their roots, and simultaneously assuming a more global identity, not innately attached to a certain state or system. These hybrid people will act on a very different morality and have quite different ideals. The interviewees make this plain when they long for both more individuality and a deeper unity with their family, focusing equally on their responsibilities as part of a collective, and their rights as separate individuals, and in their attempt to preserve their own tradition while also being fully aware that some of it must change to facilitate a deeper global integration. It is the very act of hybridity, of being bathed in the multicolored light of many cultures that forces us to stand back and say that none of our pet ideas can be completely right but that, at the same time, they have many things in common, many points where we can agree and collaborate. In *Deep China: the Life of the Moral Person*, Yan claims that:

> "The post-Mao society simultaneously demonstrates premodern, modern, and postmodern conditions, as does the changing moral landscape in both ethical discourse and moral practice" (Yan, 2011, p. 72).

And it is precisely this that I observe as the distinct opportunity for those growing up in China, at least if they have access to all the different systems of thought, and are bright enough to not reject any of them based on stereotypes. This is not only the case in China, and I suspect that if I expanded my research to other countries, I would see similar examples of successful integration and hybridization in many societies. What drew me to China in the first place, however, is that only this rising giant currently has enough power to begin a reversal of

value transference, bringing Confucianism or other traditional ways of thinking into the West (Hartig, 2011), reawakening the moderns to their own one-sidedness, which brings me to the second process that we can infer from these students.

That is: the possibility of an increasing multipolarity in our current global normative ecology. Where for a long time Americanized interpretations of the virtues of free trade, democracy, and human rights have ruled the international arena, we now see the rise of competing narratives, competing forms of right and wrong, of good and bad. The rebalancing of economic and military power is inevitably beginning to cause a corresponding redistribution of normative power. Politicians are naturally attracted to this possibility of influence, and we can see the Chinese president Hu Jintao using Confucian rhetoric in speeches and expanding the Confucius institute abroad as a means of presenting Chinese culture as a valid counterpoint to the global values of modernity (Ai, 2009). Appropriating Confucius in this way allows China to give a reason beyond pure self-interest to why they choose to oppose policies of intervention and certain human rights regulations, but is also indicative of larger changes in the narrative of international relations. As we can see in the interviewees, however, this case is not best understood only as a new force rising to oppose a previous hegemony; it is not a clash of cultures that need to result in a Darwinian struggle for a single master system. The students did not reject the Western values completely; they only sought to root out their virtues from their faults, and to reintegrate the modern with the traditional.

What lies at the heart of both these processes? What is it that we need to look at to see where the wind is blowing? I would like to argue that it is ideals, morality, and values; they allow us to enter into someone else's lifeworld, to see the world through their eyes, and to judge whether he/she and I can share a reality together. I told you earlier that there was a question of a more normative nature that guided my interest in these elite students. I promised to return to it in the end discussion and here we are. It went: *Are the Chinese elite students the kind of people who I would accept as possible leaders of a world which I will inhabit?* This question was born out of the often hyperbolic rhetoric from commentators like Niall Fergusson, who in his documentary series on China (Sherwell, 2012) – and to some extent in his academic writings – presents the Chinese progression towards world dominance as near inevitable, and while he tells us this story he keeps reiterating how different we are, that he feels like an "alien" stranded on a different planet when he enters China. I think my research and that of many others begins to show, however, that these very narratives are part of the trouble. We should not ask whether China, the US, or Europe will dominate the world in the future; we

should merely ask what kind of values the people who lead us into the future will have. And as I sat down with a group of people in China who might have a tentative chance to make a mark on the future of Chinese thought, I was gladdened by the moderation and inclusiveness of their morality, their ideals. They were not anything like the Chinese youths I had seen in the media, or in the academic literature for that sake, and I found myself, as a Westerner who has been deeply influenced by the East, sharing so many of their views that the sense of the Chinese as "other" melted away.

There is here thus a possibility of shifting perspectives, of seeing people for what they think is good and right rather than for what political entity they might be subsumed in. It is, however, up to us to open our eyes to it or not. The West can continue to see China as a threat and try to "lock" it in or try to transform it into a carbon copy of itself, with the same type of democracy and system of rights, believing those to be the only reasonable ones; China can see the US as a repressive hegemon and therefore put all their effort into military and economic struggle to overcome it, surpass it, and to set its own stamp upon the world; or we can allow ourselves to look at the many things we have in common, the values and ideals we share, and attempt to enact a world were those are brought into the light as guidelines for future endeavors. I do not mean here to be overly idealistic and proclaim what is to come, but only, in line with my introduction, to open up a space of contemplation from which can arise a slightly improved judgment, and through that make improved conceptualization of self and other possible.

We have here learned that somewhere in the capital of the world's fastest growing economy lives a group of students who view the world in this way, who have these kinds of values and ideals. Probably they are a minority, outnumbered by those of nationalistic fervor and those who merely struggle for their daily bread and those who greedily consume as others starve. But I think that just knowing these people exist somewhere, in unknown numbers, makes it crucial for us, as people aspiring to wise judgment, to ask ourselves how we should relate to them, what we could learn from them, and, ultimately, what their existence means for how we should proceed into the future.

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Appendix 1 – Interview Questions

The following is the last edition of the notes I carried to the interviews. I used it more as a guide than as a script and the variation between the interviews was great. It might, however, give you some sense of what I asked and in which order.

Prologue: What is your age and current education etc.? Before I impose on you my perspective, what does morality mean to you?

Part 1 – Moral Images

The Good Life: What is a good life, a life that is not just attractive but something to admire? How about your personal image of your own best future? What qualities does a good individual possess? What professions/hobbies/types of relationships/moral behavior? Are you trying to be as good as possible?

The Future Society (Local/Global): Next 50 years of Chinese history? Role in global society? What would you do if you had the power in China and could change the course of the future? Utopia?

Do you think your generation and culture has something unique to bring to the world when it comes to looking at the world, to thinking about what to do, what is right and wrong?

Part 2 – Moral Structures

Fishing for Emotionally Loaded Topics: If China does not have enough oil and the Middle East chooses to decrease its exports, what do you do? If Taiwan votes for full separation from China, what do you do? If Chinas political system hasn't changed at all in 10 years, what do you do? If the baby lies in the street hurt and you know you might be accused if you help, what do you do?

When every drop of water used in Beijing is a drop lost for farmers in the west, how do you react? People are being killed on the streets in Syria, you have the military force to stop it, what do you do? A writer is speaking out for democracy, urging for revolution, and some people begin to listen, as the state, what do you do about it? Death penalty; yes or no? Rule by virtue or law?

Hearing these stories, how do you feel? Can you give me an example of a time you felt guilty? Which is worse: being lonely or being poor, physical abuse or theft, betraying your family or giving up on your dream, breaking a law or going against your conscience?

Fairness & Responsibility: What does fairness, justice, mean to you? What about the current inequality in the country? What responsibilities do you feel you have towards your community? What rights do you have, where can the government not intrude? Who would you say is responsible for taking care of something like the food safety problem (government, individuals)?

How much freedom do you think the government has to interfere in people's lives? Do you feel like people the same age and in the same field as you are more like competitors or collaborators? Do you think some people are better than others or are all people basically equal?

Care & Empathy: Do you feel some kind of unity with the 1.3 billion people that make up China? How about the 7 billion of the Earth? In your story of the future, how much room was given to self/family/state/environment and did they play a positive or negative role? Do you think it important to imagine the perspectives of others, or do you mainly base your thoughts on your own experiences?

Personal Motivation: Do you have some goal that guides your actions? Do you find your life meaningful? Do you believe in a greater power giving life meaning? Do you wish your life situation could be different? If so why?

Part 3 – Moral Contexts and Reflections

Reflections: If you reflect upon what we have already said, do you find that you said anything you hadn't thought about before? Do you have anything to add? What is most important to make an action moral, the intention or the outcome?

Representativeness: Do you think that you talk for all Chinese youth when expressing your views here? Do you feel representative of some special group (intellectuals, youths, men/women)?

Influences: The values you have told me about here, do they come from inside you or have you mainly been taught them by school or parents? What/who is their origin (Chinese

intellectuals, the government, the West, old, new)? Do you think you will stick with these values through your life or will you change?

An Outside View: Are what you think is moral also moral for say, the less educated, rural people, or minorities? Taking their perspective, do you think you appear moral? Are there universal values or is all morality relative, or third?

Possibility for Understanding: Do you think we have understood each other during this interview? Do you expect there to be more similarities in peoples thinking in the world in the future?