
The Confucian China Model: A Cultural Relativist Perspective

El Modelo de China Confucianismo: Un Perspectivo de Relativismo Cultural

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Abstract: Despite the cultural difference, Latin America and China share similar historical trajectory of colonization and semi-colonization. This paper adopts the perspectives of cultural relativism and multiple modernities to examine how various actors in both regions have embarked on promoting Indigenous social, cultural and political movements in order to refine national identity and modernity, which deviates from hegemonic Western ideologies. This paper discuss Latin America's Indigenous people and nations asserting their rights to protect their traditional homelands, culture, and self-determinations. The authors then argue that a similar pattern exists in the debate China Model's distinctiveness and scrutinize how ethnic Chinese scholars may construct the China Model as its own form of "Indigenous" self-determination, cultural relativity, and equality. This paper examine how the discourses of China Models' proponents are in-line with asserting Chinese modernity that mirrors Latin American Indigenous movements to be recognised as sovereign and equal nations.

Keywords: Indigenous self-determination, multiple modernizations, Beijing Consensus, democracy, universal values.

Resumen: A pesar de la diferencia cultural, América Latina y China comparten una trayectoria histórica similar de colonización y semicolonización. Este documento adopta las perspectivas del relativismo cultural y las modernidades múltiples para examinar cómo diversos actores de ambas regiones se han embarcado en la promoción de movimientos sociales, culturales y políticos indígenas con el fin de refinar la identidad nacional y la modernidad, que se desvía de las ideologías occidentales hegemónicas. En este documento se analizan los pueblos y naciones indígenas de América Latina que reivindican sus derechos a proteger sus tierras tradicionales, su cultura y su autodeterminación. A continuación, los autores sostienen que existe un patrón similar en el debate sobre el carácter distintivo del modelo chino y analizan cómo los académicos chinos pueden construir el modelo chino como su propia forma de autodeterminación “indígena”, relatividad cultural e igualdad. Este artículo examina cómo los discursos de los defensores del modelo chino están en consonancia con la afirmación de la modernidad china, que refleja los movimientos indígenas latinoamericanos para ser reconocidos como naciones soberanas e iguales.

Palabras clave: autodeterminación Indígena; las múltiples modernidades; Consenso de Beijing; la democracia; los valores universales

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Multiple Modernities and Cultural Relativism

Modernization, as Shmuel Eisenstadt succinctly put, does not, and should not correspond to Westernization.¹ Multiple modernities is considered as way to better understand the contemporary world through the lens of continual constitution of multiple cultural programs by various social, political actors and social and intellectual activists. Therefore, anti-Western elements in non-Western societies, even commonly perceived as anti-modern in Western sense, should also be regarded as modern. The authenticity of modernization should be deconstructed under different national contexts with distinct cultural experience and developmental trajectories. The permeation of Western knowledge systems in non-Western countries has undermined local premises and has led to active participation of elites and intellectuals in rejecting aspects of the presumed Western hegemonic formulations of modernity.

Multiple modernities provides a conceptual framework to move beyond the conventional dichotomy of modernity between the West and non-West, and take traditions into account to understand the modernizing process of non-Western civilizations.² During the semi-colonial period, Chinese intellectuals, in favor of a shortcut of modernization, accept a wholesale Westernization by marginalizing and abandoning traditional Chinese cultures such as Confucianism and elements that were considered as backwardness of the feudal past. The success of East Asia development since 1970s illuminated the transformative effect and continuous relevance of Confucianism in distinctive modernization trajectories. Confucian traditions such as desirable government leadership, virtue, and practice of rites, familial state-society relationship was rejuvenated as salient features which steered East Asian development. Against this backdrop, the rise of China is inevitably accompanied by a surge of cultural revitalization to rebuild Chinese identity and even redefine modernity on Chinese terms.

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- 1 Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," In *Multiple Modernities*, ed. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 2, 14.
 - 2 Weiming Tu, "Implications of the Rise of 'Confucian' East Asia," In *Multiple Modernities*, ed. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 196, 201-202, 204-205.

Latin America has also been exploring the meaning of modernity on its own terms in different periods of time. Prominent political leaders, such as Simon Bolivar and Domingo Sarmiento in the 19th century, drew upon Western enlightenment values (mostly principles of the French Revolution), such as liberty and equality, to create a new Latin America.³ As industrial revolution was achieved in 20th century, Latin American intellectuals began to redefine and integrate traditional popular culture as roots to construct national identity, such as centering Samba and Tango as essential features of Brazilian and Argentinian identities. Modernity in Latin America is an ongoing cultural process in which intellectuals and artists invoke histories and traditions to advance the program of constructing national identity and modernity. Such conception can be coined as “tradition of modernity”, where tradition and the past are defined as modern traditions immersed in daily culture.

The conception of multiple modernities is therefore intertwined with cultural relativism, developed by Franz Boas who asserts that every culture, as an integrated system, is strongly influenced and shaped by its own environment.⁴ The meaning of specific cultures can only be grasped by putting the changing circumstances of different cultural context under scrutiny. As Ruth Benedict points out, every human society has developed distinctive cultural institutions which value and contemplate traits and ideas in different ways and different traits are interrelated and combined in a cultural complex.⁵

Melville Herskovits considers cultural relativism as a “tough-minded” philosophy which requires an empirical lens to scrutinize enculturative conditioning—recognize how people learn and assimilate culture, traditions and values surrounding them societies and the forces

3 Renato Ortiz, “From Incomplete Modernity to World Modernity,” In *Multiple Modernities*, ed. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 251, 254-255, 257-258.

4 Franz Boas, “The Aims of Anthropological Research,” *Science (American Association for the Advancement of Science)* 76, no. 1983 (1932): 605-613, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.76.1983.605>.

5 Ruth Benedict, “*Patterns of Cultures*,” (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 24, 37.

behind that shape thought and behavior.⁶ Margaret Mead argues, that no culture can be taken out of context for comparison. Culture should be treated as a socially transmitted behavior that different behaviors should be attributed to different historical developmental paths within different societies.⁷ Elvin Hatch also calls for tolerance toward different cultures in the absence of a universal applicable moral standard to make judgements about how other people live their own lives.⁸

For these reasons, this paper defines “modern/modernity” as anything that is compatible in the present, regardless of it agrees with or contradicts Western knowledge systems, and “cultural relativism” as the non-ethnocentric intervention and acceptance of other cultures as legitimate ways of life, as defined by the people of the cultures in question. These definitions will be used to examine two non-Western cultures to argue for equality and legitimacy as worthwhile studies without comparison to Western knowledge systems. Together, multiple modernities combines “modern/modernity” and “cultural relativism” to shed light on how political and intellectual movements attempt to disassociate modernity from Westernization, celebrate traditions, and appropriate modernity on any given country’s own terms.

Sino-Latin American Relationships

For better or for worse, China’s recent history of rapid development has seen an ever-increasing mutual interest with Latin America over the decades in terms of investments, politics and China’s infrastructure

6 Melville J. Herskovits, “Tender-and Tough-Minded Anthropology and the Study of Values in Culture,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1951): 22-31, <https://doi.org/10.1086/soutjanth.7.1.3628648>.

7 Margaret Mead, “Reviewed Work(s): Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism, by Melville J. Herskovits and Frances Herskovits,” *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 5 (1974): 1326-1330, <https://doi.org/10.1086/225685>.

8 Elvin Hatch, “The Good Side of Relativism,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 53, no. 3 (1997): 371-381, <https://doi.org/10.1086/jar.53.3.3630959>.

projects, especially after the 2008 financial crash.⁹ This new abundance of opportunity for Latin America and its various forms had potential for social and economic risks and conflicts, which needed to be mitigated.¹⁰ For example, *China and Sustainable Development in Latin America: The Social and Environmental Dimension* explores the mutual conflicts and interests in Peru, Argentina, Columbia, Bolivia, Mexico, Chile and Brazil.¹¹ Each example demonstrates some attempt from both the China side and Latin American side to create a mutually beneficial relationship.

However, less tangible, but equally important for mutual respect are cultural (soft power) exchanges. One of the most visible Chinese cultural exchanges sometimes comes in the form of various Chinatowns.¹² In the context of Latin America, Chinatown can conjure up the image of Havana's *Barrio Chino*, due to the long and varied history of migration and social variation that has existed since its founding.¹³ However, there are more modern Chinatowns developing and sprouting in other Latin American Countries. For instance, in 2012, Costa Rica's capitol, San José, founded a new Chinatown to represent the city's increasing

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- 9 Margaret Myers, "China and Latin America," *Great Decisions* (2020): 65-66, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27161569>.
 - 10 Rebecca Ray, Kevin Gallagher, Andrés López, and Cynthia Sanborn, "China in Latin America: Lessons for South-South Cooperation and Sustainable Development," in *China and Sustainable Development in Latin America: The Social and Environmental Dimension*, eds. Rebecca Ray, Kevin Gallagher, Andrés López, and Cynthia Sanborn (Anthem Press, 2017), 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1jktqpm.5>.
 - 11 Ray, Rebecca et al., eds., *China and Sustainable Development in Latin America; the Social and Environmental Dimension* (Anthem Press, 2017), 1-360, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1jktqpm>.
 - 12 Bernard P. Wong, "Introduction: Chinatowns Around the World," in *Chinatowns Around the World: Gilded Ghetto, Ethnopolis, and Cultural Diaspora*, eds. Bernard P. Wong and Chee-Beng Tan (Leiden: BRILL,2013), 1-11.
 - 13 E.g. Adrian H. Hearn, "Chinatown Havana: One Hundred and Sixty Years Below the Sufrace," in *Chinatowns Around the World: Gilded Ghetto, Ethnopolis, and Cultural Diaspora*, eds. Bernard P. Wong and Chee-Beng Tan (Leiden: BRILL,2013), 163-186.

cosmopolitan and world-citizen status.¹⁴ Although a failure in the long-run that left everyone displeased, this is still a milestone in furthering Sino-Latin American interests and exchanges.

However, there is one glaring unequal status in this arrangement. In the economic interest, it is noted that both the Chinese and the various Latin American countries were attempting to work towards a mutually beneficial, respectful, and equal relationships.¹⁵ However, the cultural exchanges are taking place on Latin American soil and mostly involve Chinese culture migrating overseas. The reverse is far less common. This is an unequal soft-power exchange with Latin America taking a lower position and deprives China from potentially valuable lessons that could stand to better Chinese society. Therefore, this paper aims to expand on the idea of importing aspects of Latin American cultural movements to the Chinese context to develop a more mutually beneficial relationship of cultural lessons and exchanges.

Worldwide, Indigenous Self-determination Movements and China

In much of the world, Indigenous people have developed knowledge systems to cater to their own unique situations over thousands of years that are distinctly different from the dominate, European-derived cultures and knowledge systems. The on-going push-pull of being in a society as a (usually of lower status) minority versus fighting for recognition of their own identities, cultures, and languages from the perspectives of cultural relativism, self-determination and recognition for equality with their European-style counterparts are a daily affair for Indigenous people.¹⁶

14 Monica Dehart, "Costa Rica's Chinatown: The Art of being Global in the Age of China," *City & Society* 27, no. 2 (2015): 183-207, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12063>.

15 E.g., Ray, *Latin America*, 1-360., etc.

16 E.g., Philip Weeks ed., "They Made Us Many Promises": *The American Indian Experience 1524 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Wheeling Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2002), 1-329., etc.

In South Africa, the Khoisan, led by Chief Khoisan SA, protested in front of Pretoria' Union Buildings to be recognized as South Africa's First Nation after archaeologists confirmed they have been present for thousands of years.¹⁷ A member of New Zealand's Parliament, Rawiri Waititi (Māori), was kicked out of Parliament's chamber after continuing to speak in the meeting while wearing a traditional *pounamu* (green pendant) instead of a tie, which he referred to as a "colonial noose".¹⁸ The Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Six Nations) issues identification documents, including passports, to its citizens for international travel as non-American and non-Canadian citizens.¹⁹ Even the Academia has had its say on Indigenous issues in education, climate change, social work, anthropology, health philosophy, etc.²⁰

- 17 Khanyi Mlaba, "Why South Africa's Indigenous People Have Camped for 2 Years at the Foot of a Statue of Nelson Mandela," *Global Citizen*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/south-africa-indigenous-khoisan-recognition/>.
- 18 Samantha Dick, "The Scandal Rocking NZ Parliament Over a 'Cultural Noose'," *The New Daily*, February 10, 2021, <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/world/2021/02/10/nz-parliament-maori-attire/>.
- 19 "Haudenosaunee Documentation Committee," *Haudenosaunee Confederacy*, accessed on January 30, 2023, <https://www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/departments/haudenosaunee-documentation-committee/>.
- 20 Gregory Cajete, "It is Time for Indian People to Define Indigenous Education on Our Own Terms," *Tribal College* 18, no. 2 (2006), 56, [https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/is-time-indian-people-define-indigenous-education/docview/231690336/se-2](https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/is-time-indian-people-define-indigenous-education/docview/231690336/se-2;).; Gregory Cajete, "Indigenous Science, Climate Change, and Indigenous Community Building: A Framework of Foundational Perspectives for Indigenous Community Resilience and Revitalization," *Sustainability (Basel, Switzerland)* 12, no. 22 (2020): 1-11, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12229569>.; John K. Mooradian, Suzanne L. Cross, and Glenn R. Stutzky, "Across Generations: Culture, History, and Policy in the Social Ecology of American Indian Grandparents Parenting Their Grandchildren," *Journal of Family Social Work* 10, no. 4 (2006): 81-101, https://doi.org/10.1300/J039v10n04_04.; Michelle Kahn-John (Diné) and Mary Koithan, "Living in Health, Harmony, and Beauty: The Diné (Navajo) Hózhó Wellness Philosophy," *Glob Adv Health Med*, 4, no. 3 (2015): 24-30, <https://doi.org/10.7453/gahmj.2015.044>.; Suzanne L. Cross, "In Honor of the Lessons of the Elders," *Reflections* 10, no. 2 (2004): 26-34, <https://reflections narratives of professional helping.org/>

Overall, every sector of society around the world has seen a share of the Indigenous voice and action try to reclaim what Western hegemony sought to erase and suppress.

Latin America is just as active and involved in Indigenous and Non-Indigenous inter-group relations as their counterparts elsewhere. For instance, in 2009, Bolivia saw the Indigenous people of the Chaco region fight for their rights to protect their traditional homelands from non-Indigenous interests, such as cattle ranching.²¹ Another example stems from the Covid-19 pandemic.²² In Mexico, when Covid-19 preventative health measures were implemented, this restricted the gathering of people who normally would have carried out larger-scale, sacred traditions. Not being able to carry out sacred cultural practices exacerbated an already-strained relationship between Rarámuri and Ódami Indigenous people and the non-Indigenous people and government. Even overlooked Peru sees its fair share of Indigenous people asserting their autonomous and self-determination.²³ In 2004, the Awajun and Wampis attempted to negotiate a national park to be created as a method to formalize their autonomy as nations to be protected from non-Indigenous encroachments. The national park's end size was shrunk from the original agreement by President Garcia's government. The situation worsened in 2008, with the arrests of Indigenous leaders who protested against decrees they viewed as a threat to their rights as Indigenous people and their quest for recognition in self-determination. Lastly, one of the fastest growing religions in Latin America is Santa Muerte (the Skeleton Saint, Saint Death), who is

index.php/Reflections/article/view/1234/1044.

- 21 Penelope Anthias, "Introduction," In *Limits to Decolonization: Indigeneity, Territory, and Hydrocarbon Politics in the Bolivian Chaco* (Cornell University Press, 2018), 1–2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1w1vjh7.6>.
- 22 Juan Jaime Loera González, "Indigenous People's Self-Determination in the Context of COVID-19 in Northern Mexico," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 17, no. 4 (2021): 524-531, <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801211058546>.
- 23 Roger Merino, "Rethinking Indigenous Politics: The Unnoticed Struggle for Self-Determination in Peru," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 39, no. 4 (2020): 513-528, <https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.13022>.

thought to be a reincarnation of the Aztec goddess, Mictecacihuatl, who oversaw the ancient festival day of death.²⁴ Today, locals ask Santa Muerte for her blessings in their personal lives and for the betterment of society throughout the year and have designated Día de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) as her reclaimed festival.

These examples show Indigenous communities negotiating an inherently unequal world of trying to assert their rights, protection, and recognition as Indigenous people in first colonial, and then post-colonial settings, that are inherently Western or heavily Western-influenced societies designed to favor the non-Indigenous interests that built them.

China and Its Own Indigenous Relationships with Ethnic Minorities

One thing that should be noted is that Latin American's Indigenous-post-colonial relationships may relate to China's ethnic minorities.²⁵ In China, scholarship in Indigeneity has been on the non-Han ethnic minorities. For instance, there was a 2021 study on the Mosuo people that lived in the borderlands of Yunnan and Sichuan. The study examined them as tourist destinations viewed by the Han majority as "authentic relics of traditional life" in juxtaposition to the actual situation were the Mosuo themselves consume modern technology and participate in being tourists themselves in other locations just like any other modern, cosmopolitan citizens.²⁶ Another argument is the concept of *Yuanshengtai* (原生态), which is China's alternative to the discussion of "Indigeneity" since it embraces traditional Chinese values

24 Duncan Tucker, "Santa Muerte: The Rise of Mexico's Death 'Saint'," *BBC*, November 1, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-41804243>.

25 The authors wish thank Prof. Stephen Chiu Wing-Kai for this helpful suggestion (private correspondence).

26 Lei Wei, Junxi Qian, and Hong Zhu, "Rethinking Indigenous People as Tourists: Modernity, Cosmopolitanism, and the Re-Invention of Indigeneity," *Annals of Tourism Research* 89, (2021): 103200, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2021.103200>.

and customs, such as harmony with humans and their environments.²⁷ Much of China has embraced this as state-sanctioned cultural discourse on “Chineseness”. However, the same logic as the previous study is still prevalent (i.e., that the non-Han, ethnic minorities embody the idea of living relics of true “Chineseness” from a bygone era). However, as such arguments are already somewhat published, this paper aims to show how the Han majority, China as a whole and its cultural (Han) traditions can learn from Latin America’s Indigenous people to push for equality with Western societies on an international scale.²⁸

Secondly, much like many of the cited, aforementioned Indigenous scholars who argue for their own cultures in self-determination, this paper was written by authors born and formally educated in The Great China for the purpose of examining Chinese politics from the perspectives of cultural relativism and self-determination. Although it should be noted that Hua grew up with a Mestiza elder. This background means that Li and Hua are uniquely positioned to argue for Chinese “Indigeneity” learning from Latin America.

Thirdly, although seemingly unrelated, there are multiple similarities between (Han) China as a whole and the Indigenous discourses/movements. Firstly, is that both Indigenous people in Latin America (and elsewhere) experienced historical trauma from colonialism and devastating imperialistic expansion at the hands of European powers.²⁹ This is not all that different that China’s

27 Yu Luo, “An Alternative to the ‘Indigenous’ in Early Twenty-First-Century China: Guizhou’s Branding of *Yuanshengtai*,” *Modern China* 44, no. 1 (2018): 68–102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26588720>.

28 E.g., Luo, “*Yuanshengtai*,” 68–102.; Wei, Qian, and Zhu, “Rethinking Indigenous People,” 103200., etc.

29 E.g., James Mahoney, *Colonialism and Postcolonial Development: Spanish America in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-34.; Michael D. Coe, Javier Urcid, and Rex Koontz, *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs*, 8th ed. (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2019), 251-258.; Peter V. N. Henderson, *The Course of Andean History*, Diálogos Series (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 333-334.; Ross Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*, 2nd ed. (USA: University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 2006), 84-193., etc.

“One Hundred Years of Humiliation”, in which China experienced several invasions, military defeats, unequal treaties and imperialism by neighbors and Western powers.³⁰ Even if today’s Latin America is ruled by Western (style) systems and a mixed population and China is still predominantly Chinese without the same ethnic and cultural mixing seen elsewhere, there is no doubt that China’s population, Han or otherwise, has continual, historical ties to their land with language, culture and beliefs, etc. which are distinct from Western knowledge systems, and more aligned with traditional Indigenous philosophies.³¹ Not to mention that like their Latin American Indigenous counterparts, China and the Chinese people must navigate the same push and pull of a world dominated by Western systems due to Western hegemony and their traditional Chinese, culture. Therefore, this paper, written by Chinese scholars on their own culture, is inspired by Latin America’s highly active, dynamic role in Indigenous discussions by applying the theories of multiple modernities and cultural relativism as an argument for why (predominantly Latin American) local and national level Indigenous movements can provide lessons and a platform China. The world can use to construct a Sino-world coexistence of mutual understanding and respect. However, unlike other studies of Chinese Indigeneity, this paper seeks to examine China as a whole, with the Han majority being as much a part of the Indigenous self-determination movement as their ethnic minority counterparts.

The China Model

The discussion of the China Model began with the idea of the “Beijing Consensus”, a term coined by Joshua Ramo to describe what he considered a distinctive strategy underlying China’s economic success.³² Ramo argues that China’s development strategy comprises three theorems: valuing innovation,

30 Zheng Wang, “National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China,” *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 783–806, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29734264>.

31 E.g., Kahn-John and Koithan, “Hózhó Wellness Philosophy,” 26. Etc.

32 Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2004), 1-6.

placing sustainability and equality first, and finally, self-determination. It also emphasizes flexibility and pragmatism in its application to allow China to adapt to different situations in the development process based on the country's internal dynamics.³³ However, the distinctiveness of the China Model has been challenged in several ways. For instance, Chen Zhiwu argues that China's economic success was largely the result of its integration into the global economic system and trade regime established after the Second World War.³⁴ In addition, China's economic development has modelled many aspects of the capitalist free market economy, such as privatization, liberalization of the trade regime, and opening the domestic economy to attract foreign investment.³⁵ The involvement of the state in China's economic development also resembles the kind of state-led industrialization and infrastructural development in Latin American countries like Brazil during 1960's and 1970's.³⁶ Naazneen Barma and Ely Ratner share Ramo's argument that the pragmatic and flexible approaches to development underlie China's economic success.³⁷

While these studies offer an engaging debate regarding the distinctiveness and the appeal of the China Model, what is often overlooked is the social

33 Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus*, 11-12.

34 Zhiwu Chen, *Meiyou Zhongguo Moshi Zhe Hui Shi (A China Model Never Existed)* (Li's Translation) (Taipei: Eight Flags Culture, 2010), 16-62.

35 Scott Kennedy, "The Myth of the Beijing Consensus," *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 65 (2010): 461-477, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670561003666087>.

36 Arif Dirlik, "The Idea of a "Chinese Model": A Critical Discussion," *China Information* 26, no. 3 (2012): 277-302, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09220203X12446289>; Shaun Breslin, "The "China Model" and the Global Crisis: From Friedrich List to a Chinese Mode of Governance?," *International Affairs* 87, no. 6 (2011): 1323-1343, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2011.01039.x>; Suisheng Zhao, "The China Model: Can It Replace the Western Model of Modernization?," *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 65 (2010): 419-436, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670561003666061>; Yasheng Huang, *Zhongguo Moshi Daidi You Duo Dute (How Unique is the China Model?)* (Li's Translation) (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company, 2014), 5-11.

37 Naazneen Barma and Ely Ratner, "China's Illiberal Challenge," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 2, (2006): 56-68, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/draft-chinese-illiberalism-subhed/docview/212203859/se-2>.

constructive nature of the idea about the China Model itself, in which political and cultural values are embedded in the discursive construction of such a model. More specifically, instead of simply being a label that describes an objective analysis of the successful experience regarding China's development, the idea of the China Model is sometimes used to articulate certain Chinese values as part of the source on domestic political legitimacy, which is similar to many Indigenous groups in the Americas, such as Awajun and Wampis in Peru who used their ideas of traditional identity and culture to advocate for political legitimacy Peru should recognize.³⁸

This paper reviews the recent works of ethnic Chinese scholars who have advocated a distinctive China Model from a Chinese perspective and shows that instead of portraying the China Model as a replication of Western and East Asian developmental paths the Chinese scholar proponents argue that recent Chinese development has followed a distinct cultural path as a system of Confucian cultural and political values. Therefore, the Confucian China Model qualifies as its own section of the Indigenous self-determination and decolonization movement.

Incompatibility Between Western Values and Chinese Traditions

Incompatibility between the socio-political values in the West and Chinese political culture is conceptualized by Chinese scholars to open the discursive space to reposition Chinese cultures as the center of the China Model. The ways Chinese society is organized, how political power is arranged, and the source of political legitimacy are different from the West, and such differences make it inconceivable for contemporary China to directly import a Western political model, especially one based on liberal democracy. This argument mirrors those the Indigenous Americas use to their fight for self-determination, recognition and equality with the ruling post-colonial societies and governments.³⁹

38 Merino, "Self-Determination in Peru," 513-528.

39 E.g., Jeff Cornthassel and Cindy Holder, "Who's Sorry Now? Government

Chinese society is perceived by Chinese scholars as an extension of the family unit in which the state is regarded as the eldest patriarch, above all Chinese families and society, and is morally responsible for preserving Chinese national unity.⁴⁰ Chinese society as an extended family means that the distinct public-private dichotomy in the West is not found in China. Based on a presumed non-conflictual and classless Chinese society, a distinct Chinese legal tradition different from Western legal systems emerges. Chinese virtual law is characterized as a non-confrontational approach to settle disputes with the emphasis on the flexible role of gentry and communal leaders in taking people's relationship and social norms into discretion. Such virtue law tradition, as Chinese scholars argue, entails advantages such as appeasing both plaintiff and defendant in the lawsuit instead of constant appealing with grievances.

This argument that (Han) Chinese culture is a basis for not adopting Western system mirrors the idea of Indigenous movements and their push for recognition for their culture and land. Whether it is Indigenous people of the Chaco Region of Bolivia or the push to recognize Santa Muerte as a re-incarnation of pre-Columbian religion,⁴¹ the overall theme if that to be wholly true to oneself, one must have the space and acceptance to engage in cultural practices that others may find objectionable without condition to adopt an unwanted foreign process. In China's case, this push to reject Western systems is because Western systems are viewed by China as in-compatible with Chinese culture. Not unlike their Latin America Indigenous counterparts, China is pushing for recognition and legitimacy for their own cultural and national

Apologies, Truth Commissions, and Indigenous Self-Determination in Australia, Canada, Guatemala, and Peru," *Human Rights Review* 9, no. 4 (2008): 465-489, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-008-0065-3>, etc.

40 Wei Pan, *Dangdai Zhonghua Tizhi: Zhongguo Moshi De Jingji, Zhengzhi, Shesbui Jiexi* (The Contemporary Chinese System: An Economic, Political, and Social Analysis of the China Model) (Li's Translation) (Hong Kong, China: Joint Publishing Hong Kong and the Advanced Institute for Contemporary China Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2010), 93-94, 119-20.

41 E.g., Anthias, "Introduction," 1-2.; Tucker, "Santa Muerte," *BBC*.; etc.

sovereignty, which is very much in-line with why Indigenous people push to have their traditional homelands made officially recognized, such as Peru's Awajun and Wampis, who advocated for their own national park.⁴² In China's case it is simply on a global scale to have a recognized space to be wholly, completely and unapologetically Chinese without condition.

Confucianism in the China Model

Chinese scholars' interpretation of a Confucian China Model is more assertive than previous work of East Asian economic development which attributed economic modernization to Confucian values such as work ethics and education.⁴³

42 Merino, "Rethinking Indigenous Politics", 522-525.

43 Adrian Chan, "Confucianism and Development in East Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 26, no. 1 (1996): 28-45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472339680000031>; Ambrose King, "State Confucianism and Its Transformation: The Restructuring of the State-society Relation in Taiwan," In *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons*, ed. Weiming Tu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 228-243.; Ambrose King, "The Transformation of Confucianism in the Post-Confucian Era: The Emergence of Rationalistic Traditionalism in Hong Kong," In *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons*, ed. Weiming Tu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 265-276.; Gregory K. Ornatowski, "Confucian Ethics and Economic Development: A Study of the Adaptation of Confucian Values to Modern Japanese Economic Ideology and Institutions," *The Journal of Socio-Economics* 25, no. 5 (1996): 571-590, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1053-5357\(96\)90018-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1053-5357(96)90018-2); John Wong, "Promoting Confucianism in Socioeconomic Development: The Singapore Experience," In *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons*, ed. Weiming Tu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 277-293.; Kwan-ok Kim, "The Reproduction of Confucian Culture in Contemporary Korea: An Anthropological Study," In *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons*, ed. Weiming Tu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 202-227.; Mineo Nakajima, "Economic Development in East Asia and Confucian Ethics," *Social*

Although the Asian Values Debate in the 1990s saw Confucian values to be underlying reason for the economic miracle, Chinese scholars put forth the discourse of a distinctive Chinese political modernization where the Chinese Communist Party has evolved as a Confucian ruling party that inherits Confucian traditions, such as meritocracy to nurture elitist cadres as vanguard similar to traditional Confucian-scholar officials in Imperial China. Due to the Confucian traditions, they argue that China succeeds in cultivating its own version of political modernity in a sharp contrast with Western liberal democracy.

Meritocracy stresses achievement and competence through perseverance. A meritocratic party system, as argued by the Chinese scholars, is supported by another Confucian idea—people-centered (*min ben*) politics. This Confucian notion has had an important position in the Party’s political discourse since Hu Jintao’s administration, as reflected in frequent references to “putting people first” and people-centered politics to describe the governing principle of the administration. The idea behind people-centered politics is that the legitimacy of the state is not based on popular mandate through voting and elections, but it is a function of the state’s capacity to benevolently govern in accordance with the society’s needs.⁴⁴

The essence of Chinese people-centered system has its emphasis on outcomes more than procedures in Chinese public governance. Delivery of substantial outcomes regarding the public interest is far more imperative than democratic procedures of political participation for consolidating Chinese political legitimacy.⁴⁵ Chinese scholars even

Compass 41, no. 1 (1994): 113-119, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003776894041001002>; Seok-Choon Lew, Woo-Young Choi and Hye Suk Wang, “Confucian Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism in Korea: The Significance of Filial Piety,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2011): 171-196, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23418836>.

44 Tianjian Shi and Jie Lu, “The Shadow of Confucianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 4 (2010): 123-130, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2010.0012>.

45 Yunhan Zhu, “Zhongguo Moshi Yu Quanqiu Zhixu Chongzu (*The China Model and the Restructuring of the World Order*) (Li’s Translation),” In *Zhongguo Moshi: Jiedu Renmin Gongheguo De Lishi Nian (The China*

assert that the Confucian, people-centered doctrine, focusing on outcomes and the practice of good governance, is far superior to Western democracy and poses unprecedented challenges to Western concepts of human rights which only emphasize civic and political rights, but not the rights of people's livelihoods".⁴⁶

This argument that the China model is unique in that society is and should be people-centered mirrors Indigenous ideology and critique of Western society. For instance, a common theme is that one exists in a community and as a member of that community, one is responsible to learn from elders and look after the community for now and the future, as seen in the Indigenous concept of "Seven Generations".⁴⁷ This is one of the biggest differences Indigenous scholarship points out for when Indigenous societies are compared to their colonial and post-colonial, Western (style) worlds.⁴⁸ Often this is to point out differences that affect inter-group interactions (such as Mooradian's article)⁴⁹, but may also be applied as a lesson for general society to learn from (as in Kahn-John (Diné) and Koithan's application of traditional teachings in well-being).⁵⁰ In China's case it serves as a form of legitimacy that the state promotes social well-being as a whole instead of adopting a Western-style system of government which may be incompatible with this local view.

In sum, as opposed to attributing China's rapid economic growth to any conventional economic model, these scholars refine an ethnic Chinese modernization narrative that it is culturally relative to China's

Model: Interpretation of People's Republic of Sixty Years (Part Two) (Li's Translation), eds. Wei Pan et al., 998. Taipei: Zhizhi Academic Publishing House, 2014), 998.

46 Weiwei Zhang, *Zhongguo Zhenban: Yige Wenming Xing Guojia De Jueqi (The China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State)* (Li's Translation) (Hong Kong, China: New Century Press, 2011), 128-9, 135.

47 Mooradian, Cross and Stutzky, "Across Generations," 81-101.

48 Cross, "Lessons of the Elders," 26-34.; Kahn-John (Diné) and Koithan, "Diné (Navajo) Hózhó," 24-30.; Mooradian, Cross and Stutzky, "Across Generations," 81-101.; etc.

49 Mooradian, Cross and Stutzky, "Across Generations," 81-101.

50 Kahn-John (Diné) and Koithan, "Diné (Navajo) Hózhó," 24-30.

political system, in which a benevolent Confucian government follows people-centered economic and political values, that provides China with a unique leverage in achieving its economic success.

The Party's Assertion of Distinctive Chinese Modernity

Much like its Indigenous counterparts, China has long been using cultural relativist arguments to break away from Western normative standards which Chinese leaders consider increasingly restrictive. For instance, during Xi's era, the Party has actively curbed the infiltration of Western values with a directive titled "Concerning the Situation in the Ideological Sphere" that forbids the discussion and dissemination of Western ideologies such as press freedom, civil society, citizens' rights, and independent judiciary.⁵¹ On the other hand, Xi triumphed Confucian people-centered politics and virtual law to pronounce the fifth Chinese modernization—the modernization of the national governance system, before reiterating the Chinese modernization path is the distinctively and advantageously less violent and brutal modernization path does not come at the expense of other nations compared to its Western counterparts.⁵² Xi stresses such violence,

51 Benjamin Carlson, "The 7 Things You Can't Talk About in China," *Toronto Star*, July 1, 2013, https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/06/30/the_7_things_you_cant_talk_about_in_china.html; Chris Buckley, "China Warns Officials Against 'Dangerous' Western Values," *The New York Times*, May 13, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/14/world/asia/chinese-leaders-warn-of-dangerous-western-values.html>.

52 "Xi Jinping: Laoji Lishi Jingyan Lishi Jingshi Wei Guojia Zhili Nengli Xiandaihua Tigong Youyi Jiejian (*Xi Jinping: Chinese Historical Experience, Lessons and Warnings Can Provide Useful Reference for the Modernization of National Governance Capabilities*) (Li's Translation)," *People's Daily*, October 14, 2014, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/1014/c64094-25827156.html>; "Xi Jinping Zheyang Chanshi Zhongguo Shi Xiandaihua (*Xi Jinping Explained Chinese Modernization in These Ways*) (Li's Translation)," CCTV, February 3, 2023, <http://politics.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2023/0203/c1001-32617262.html>.

deprivation imposed on other countries and modernization exclusivity will not be adopted by China, in its modernization process.⁵³ Recently, Xi explicitly states that “Chinese modernization has broken the myth of ‘modernization equals to Westernization’” by presenting an alternative imagination of modernization which helps developing countries to broaden their paths towards modernization.⁵⁴ In this regard, by framing the China Model with Confucianism, both Chinese scholars and Chinese leaders are congruent in redefining the narrative of China’s modernization from the perspective of cultural relativism.

In terms of the principle of rule of virtue and ethics that Chinese scholars emphasize, Xi consistently stresses that the Party should insist on combining the rule by law with rule of virtue which emphasize self-discipline of Party cadres.⁵⁵ The Confucian principle of responsibility is to nurture an environment of rule of virtue where Party cadres should be self-constrained, maintain self-discipline and live up to the standard of an ethical role model.⁵⁶ In 2019, Xi’s new directive put the inheritance of Chinese

53 “Xi Jinping: Zhongguo Xiandaihua Bu Zou Zhimin Lueduo de Laolu. (*Xi Jinping: China’s Modernization Will Not Follow the Old Path of Colonial Plunder*) (Li’s Translation),” Now News, March 15, 2023, <https://news.now.com/home/international/player?newsId=510777>.

54 Jiashang Zhu, “Xi Jinping Tan Zhongguo Shi Xiandaihua: Dapo Xiandaihua = Xifanghua Misi (*Xi Jinping on Chinese Modernization: Breaking the Myth of ‘Modernization = Westernization’*) (Li’s Translation),” HK01, February 8, 2023, <https://www.hk01.com/%E5%8D%B3%E6%99%82%E4%B8%A-D%E5%9C%8B/864849/%E7%BF%92%E8%BF%91%E5%B9%B3%E8%A-B%87%E4%B8%AD%E5%9C%8B%E5%BC%8F%E7%8F%BE%E4%B-B%A3%E5%8C%96-%E6%89%93%E7%A0%B4-%E7%8F%BE%E4%B-B%A3%E5%8C%96-%E8%A5%BF%E6%96%B9%E5%8C%96-%E8%BF-B7%E6%80%9D>.

55 “Xi Jinping: Jianchi Yifa Zhiguo He Ji De Zhiguo Xiang Jiehe (*Xi Jinping: Insists on Integrating the Rule of Law and the Rule of Virtue*) (Li’s Translation),” *Xinhuanet*, December 10, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-12/10/c_1120093133.htm; “Xi Jinping Lun Yifa Zhiguo-Shiba Da Yilai Zhongyao Lunshu Zhaibian (*Xi Jinping on Rule by Law-Important Excerpts Since the 18th Party Congress*) (Li’s Translation),” *Dangjian*, August 29, 2014, <http://theory.people.com.cn/BIG5/n/2014/0829/c367653-25568411.html>.

56 Minjie He, “Ji Jiang Fazhi You Jiang De Dhi (Shenru Xuexi Guanche Xi

Confucian tradition like benevolence and people-based principle as one of the core objectives, and attempted to deepen the moral education in school to nurture the ethics and virtue of students.⁵⁷ Overall, the promotion of virtue and ethics has been penetrated into Chinese society.

This breakaway and rejection of Western values as universal is also one of the biggest reasons for the Indigenous movements worldwide. Who can say that cattle ranching is more important than respecting traditional homeland boundaries in Bolivia's Chaco region?⁵⁸ The Indigenous self-determination movements argue for co-existence and equality. Therefore, Chinese ideas of economic, cultural, philosophical rights that exist in China's own political system as a driver of a unique developmental path may co-exist with the respect and protection of Chaco regions' Indigenous homelands with ties, cattle ranching, and Western democracy. There is no one way to be oneself and one should not force or be forced upon an unwanted practice or intrusion.

Conclusion

The cultural relativist argument discussed in this paper is evident in the idea of multiple modernity, which encompasses the belief that modernization should not be regarded as synonymous with Westernization, but multiple paths to achieve different forms of modernity based on the culture, traditions and development of individual countries.⁵⁹ More importantly, by framing the China Model using a

Jinping Xin Shidai Zhongguo Tese Shehui Zhuyi Sixiang) (*Both the Rule of Law and Rule of Virtue Should be Emphasized (In-depth Study of Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era)* (Li's Translation)," People's Daily, March 16, 2018, <http://lianghui.people.com.cn/2018npc/BlG5/n1/2018/0316/c417507-29870658.html>.

57 "Zhonggong Zhongyang Guowuyuan Yinfa" Xin Shidai Gongmin Dao-de Jianshe Shishi Gangyao ("Implementation Outline for the Construction of Civil Morality in the New Era" Issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council) (Li's Translation)," *Xinhua*, October 27, 2019, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-10/27/content_5445556.htm.

58 Anthias, "Introduction", 1-2.

59 Nilüfer Göle, "Snapshots of Islamic Modernities," In *Multiple Moderni-*

cultural relativist perspective, Chinese scholars and political leaders converge on an ideological project to reposition Chinese Confucian cultures for the purpose of advancing a Chinese modernization discourse that challenges Western ideological hegemony.

Instead, because cultural relativism in China mirrors much of the Indigenous movements around the world, whether the people hail from Mexico, South Africa, Australia or elsewhere,⁶⁰ it simply makes sense for China to learn from a very Indigenous-post-colonial involved region, such as Latin America. The biggest difference is that Indigenous people usually have local or national level movements or compare themselves to the West or each other. In this case, this paper sets out to compare China, especially majority Han population, with these Latin American movements and argues that since they all follow an international pattern of decolonization and self-determination, China could draw lessons from Latin America's Indigenous movements to push for recognition of China's own cultural practices and sovereignty as peoples, nation and a unique culture worthy of co-existence with the world, especially in contrast the Western hegemony.

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60 Cortassel and Holder, "Who's Sorry Now?," 465-489.; Loera González, "Northern Mexico," 524-531.; Mlaba, "South Africa's Indigenous People".

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