Core Social Values in Contemporary Societies

Pan Wei

With the invention of the 'absolute' weapon in the nuclear age, the main approach with which civilizations compete for survival and development has changed. Systematic ideas in competition for popularity have more and more replaced advanced technologies of weapons hardware. The Cold War was the first war of this kind, won on the battlefield of ideas, or to be more specific, through the battle of core social values. The Russians failed, because they did not understand that.

One of the most important reasons for the rise of China in the mid-20th century is the establishment among the intelligentsia of a consensus around a set of core social values and their subsequent translation into the mainstream social values. However, with the development of a market economy and the growth of a pluralized society, China's pre-existing consensus on core social values is breaking down. Without some basic consensus on social values, our society would sooner or later suffer disintegration.

This essay intends to build an analytical tool for understanding social values. I will first define the term 'social value'; differentiate the 'core' and 'non-core' social values; and discuss their respective functions in society. Then I will extract from social values a seven-tier system of core social values, and explore the functional connections between the tiers, to show how a core value system collapses. Lastly, I will present a rudimentary idea on how a core social value system might be built or rebuilt.

Social values: definition, functions and types defining social values

Distinct from other creatures on earth, humans have ideas. The French attempt to construct a 'science of ideas' in the late 18th century failed to develop in any significant sense, but nevertheless left us the term 'ideology' which means something quite different from a science of ideas. Values are ideas, but not ideas in the general sense. Values are key ideas for human existence and development. They are the ideas about

right and wrong, by which humans understand shame and honor, ideas that foster dreams for a bright future.

It is impossible and unnecessary to construct a science of ideas, equally so a science of values. Like ideas, values are too numerous in kind, embedded in every aspect of human life. Values also bear many names, covering '–isms', orientations, attitudes, social psychologies, and so on. Each discipline of the social sciences and humanities may focus only on the values of its own field of interest. Philosophers are interested in the values on the true, the good and the beautiful. Anthropologists focus on the values of human reproduction. Psychologists study values concerning mental health. Economists look at the values affecting market mechanisms. Sociologists study the values related to transformation to modernity. Historians are interested in the values with which they describe and interpret historical events. In political science, '-isms' dominate, although few in the discipline will admit it.

I am concerned with values as all other researchers are. As a political scientist, I am particularly interested in the values underpinning social relations that affect the integration of a contemporary society. This essay studies 'social value', defined as the ideas of right and wrong in contemporary social relationships. Among social relationships, I will identify a few basic ones key to social integration, and then discuss the values embedded in them.

A 'society' is an entity where people interact. The relationships among people in the society are 'social relations'. The judgements of right and wrong about social relationships are 'social values'. Social values are evinced in the form of 'social norms', which are behavior guides popular in the society, and which lie deep within the people's consciousness.

Behavior norms are ideas stemming from the accumulated human experiences of social relationships over the ages. Ideas that smooth and lubricate social relations are translated into norms and common sense. The following examples of 'common sense' show some values of our time. Young people can enjoy disco parties, but should nevertheless not take drugs at them to enjoy the sense of 'high'. Since some U.S. state governments operate lotteries, it is permissible for Chinese provincial and central governments to run them. On the other hand, since lotteries encourage the expectation of easy money without work, no Chinese government of any level should operate lotteries.

Behavior norms are confined within social contexts and cultural traditions as well. Therefore, value judgements are highly relative across different nations. The so-called 'universal values', though often wrapped up in beautiful abstract concepts, are laden with the political and cultural prejudices of powerful and wealthy societies.[1]

Values are relative across different civilizations. However, every value points to a dichotomy between right and wrong, namely a sense of ethics. There is certainly a degree of space within the spectrum of judging the right from the wrong, which is often called 'value orientation'. To some scholars, value orientations may point in many different and uncertain directions.[2] For me, an orientation points in only one direction, right or wrong. Otherwise, we would be trapped in a mishmash of strange and irrelevant concepts. Even when there is a change in a society's value judgement, it is still a matter of right and wrong; only the wrong may no longer be considered wrong, or the right may no longer be considered right.

Functions of social values

The central point of this essay is to emphasize the role of social values in shaping social relations.

A social value or a norm of behavior is constructed on the basis of identity, namely the need first to define who one is.[3] Since he is a man, he should protect women. Since he is an old man, he should not go to discos. Since he performs leadership roles in government, he should oppose lotteries. Since they are my parents, I shall treat them with filial respect. Since they are my children, I shall raise them responsibly. Since I am a businessman, I shall do my best to make profits. Since I am a professor, I shall devote myself to teaching and research. Since we are Chinese, we do not simply follow the American way of life.

Once identities are clearly defined, and the related norms of behavior are established, social values should appear stable, lubricating the interplay of social relations to support social harmony. But where identities are confused, ethical behavior codes may well be forgotten; social values would then become unstable, and unusual behaviors may surface to disturb social relations. If men confuse gender differences, or professors consider themselves money-making machines, or indeed if government officials think they are businessmen for private gains, the society may well then fall apart.

As social values are judgements of right and wrong in terms of social relations, these latter must be the main sources of social values, and social change the main impetus for any change in social values. As technologies are progressing and the social division of labor is changing, a change will follow in society, hence a change of social relationships. Such constant change of social relations means volatile self-identities and unstable norms of behavior.

Most social values change passively, mirroring the change in social relations. The transformation of most social values, far from provoking turmoil in society, may discomfort only a few people. That kind of change in social values should not excessively arouse our concern. For example, the disintegration of traditional family values occurs smoothly and naturally when extended families evolve into nuclear families and further into DINK (dual income no kids) families. Similarly, the spread of advanced contraceptive methods and the principle of 'equal pay for equal work' remove the automatic link between sex and childbearing, which then radically changes social values on sex. With the breakthrough in communication technology, the IT industry has become a key industry and has given rise to a new information society. In such a society, people's attitudes towards work, employer–employee relations, leisure and entertainment, press freedom, teacher–student relations, government authority and so on, are refreshingly different from the small-scale family farm society and from the industrial society as well.

Should social structures undergo rapid change, generation gaps in social values may arise among people of different age groups in the same period of time. If the older generation of leaders lags behind the tide of social transformation, but they still insist on inculcating conservative values into the younger generation, they may well reap antagonism from the latter. Similarly, if young men and women do not understand the necessity of respecting traditional values, and superficially ridicule the

values created in the glorious time of the Chinese revolution, this would certainly incur the strongest reaction from the elder people. Therefore, mutual respect, understanding and tolerance among generations must be the fundamental principle of dealing with the change in social values. It is also the principle for social harmony.

In China's karaoke bars, we could well find a rapid change in social values. There each generation of people sing their own distinctive kind of songs, boasting the superiority of their 'generation gap' with the others. And a 'new generation' emerges there every five years. However, some of the songs are sung by all generations, and no doubt will continue to be sung by generation after generation.

Types of social values

Chinese society is rapidly changing, but we need social solidarity as much as ever. Despite rapid social change, some basic social relationships should be kept stable and durable, for distorting such basic social relations could well arouse severe social conflicts. Accordingly, some basic social values should also be kept stable, for distorting such values could catalyze social conflicts. Just as unchecked murder, theft, robbery and fraud would poison social relations and disintegrate society, we must not allow any 'fashionable value' to justify behaviors as such. Some cultural symbols should be respected by all generations of our time, such as the soldier Lei Feng and National Anthem created in the 1930s. They represent the spiritual heritage of our nation, reflecting the core values of modern China, and have had a stabilizing effect on our social relations. When core social values crumble, the basic social relationships become conflictive, and society would tend to fall into disintegration.

There are two general types of social values, 'core' and 'non-core' ones. 'Core social values' are those reflecting basic social relations which need to be durably stable. In other words, social values that can sustain social harmony are core social values. As I will show in the next part, there are only a few kinds of core social values, seven kinds only. Apart from the core seven, all other judgements of right and wrong regarding social relations belong to the category of non-core social values.

Pluralistic non-core social values bring vitality to a society while integrated core social values prevent social disintegration.

Basic social relations 'should' be stable, and core social values 'should' also be stable. The core social values may well crumble in the face of a change of basic social relations, which would lead to a deterioration of these basic social relations. At no time should a radical deterioration of interpersonal relations happen, but it could happen when people lose the sense of morality. That is to say, the core social values have their own logic of change, independent of the change of social relations. The main purpose of this essay is to elaborate on the mechanism of the change of core social values, and the subsequent leverage it exerts on basic social relations.

In short, the change of non-core social values is reactive, depending on the change of social relations; and the change of core social values is proactive, deeply affecting basic social relations.

In our time of high-speed change in social relations and in an age when pluralism of values is worshipped, it is extremely important to differentiate core and non-core

56

social values. Social cohesion requires social values, and core social values make up the basis for social harmony. We should tolerate the evolution of non-core social values, but should openly and firmly fend off challenges to our core social values. In the arena of core social values, it would be a fatal mistake to continuously hold to the 'no debate' principle of the first decade of the reforms and opening up of society, which is an ostrich policy virtually allowing a few elites to stir up social discord.

The core value system and its tiers

The basic relationships of a society constitute its structural framework. If the framework falls apart, the society will collapse. What are the components of this framework of social relationships? Seven basic social relationships are identified here. For a contemporary society all are essential – there cannot be one more or one less. They are the relationships associating the following pairs: self–other, man–nature, individual–community, community–society, people–government, people–(state) nation and (state) nation–world system.

The corresponding views of right and wrong within the above seven types of relationships constitute the 'core values'. These core values make up an independent system infused with its own logic, like the concentric benches of a seven-tiered amphitheatre. From the innermost to the outermost, the construct is made up of the following seven core values: perceptions on morality, on nature, on groups, on society, on politics, on the nation and on the world. The very core of the construct is the universal morality of the human being, and the outermost tier is the perception on world affairs. This section focuses on describing each tier of the construction; and the next section will elaborate on the interconnections between the tiers.

Values regarding morality: the self–other relationship

The first tier of the core value system is formed from moral perceptions concerning relations between the self and the other. In human society, the most fundamental norms of behavior that may differentiate human beings from animals are a set of universally applicable moral principles. Since we are human beings, we do not endorse (i) murder (such as summary incarceration and indiscriminate killing of innocents); (ii) robbery (such as the seizure of farmers' land and making workers work overtime); (iii) theft (such as plagiarism and stealing state or collective property); (iv) fraud (such as lack of credibility); (v) abandonment of those incapable of caring for themselves (such as aged and disabled men and women); (vi) unrestricted sex (such as rape and sex with juveniles).[4]

Are we divided on these moral principles? Generally speaking, all peoples on earth agree with those moral principles. However, since the installation of the modern market system, hedonistic materialism and individualistic rationalism have prevailed, which have long been the target of criticism from moralists and religious leaders. In reality, the pursuit of material gains has always been a human instinct at all times. From the very ancient times onwards, farmers have been working for

57

better yields and businessmen for better profit. Even the Chinese sage Confucius, two and half millennia ago, argued, 'The desire for food and sex is the basic human nature' (*shi se xing ye*); and 'One does not object to the finest food' (*shi bu yan jing*). It is exactly the rational pursuit of material gains that has driven the progress of material production. Nevertheless, instincts are not values. Social values are ideas created by social elites to keep the 'society' together. Our moral principles require that no one should pursue material gains by immoral means at the expense of others in the society. Material gains are important, but the pursuit of these would be anti-society should it be constructed as an '-ism'. Individualistic rationality is important, but it also becomes anti-society once it is taught as an '-ism'. Instincts emphasize one's own needs; social values emphasize those of others. Moral principles are a stumbling-block in rationalist logics, for these latter reduce the principles of human society to those of a market mechanism, or even to the law of the jungle.[5] Our human society has been sustained by the teaching of moral principles which have been amassed over thousands of years across civilizations, and are universally understood as 'Justice' or 'Fundamental Law'. Being grounded in this common sense of justice, we human beings set ourselves apart from and above the animal world. No matter with what kind of justification, if we were to prize 'liberty' out of the law of the jungle, we would lose our sense of morality and risk sinking our society into a kind of animal world.

Values regarding nature: the man–nature relationship

Air, plains, mountain ranges, rivers and oceans, animals and plants, all constitute the physical environment in which we human beings live and develop, and they closely relate to the life of each individual. Therefore, the relationships formed between individuals and nature are a part of basic social relations. Human attitudes and perceptions towards nature have a profound impact on other social values. Do we have disagreements about how we perceive the individual-nature relationship? Since the advent of modern times, educated people have abandoned superstitious, meta-physical and religious understandings for natural phenomena. Instead, we turn to the natural sciences for explanations about nature, and keep asking 'why'. It is because of this modern scientific spirit that we have achieved such a tremendous material prosperity as humanity has never experienced before. In the past three centuries, modern sciences have brought us more knowledge than over the previous ten thousand years. If we identify ourselves as 'modern,' respecting scientific discoveries in the context of the individual-nature relationship should be a core social value, on which we should build our formal education system and place our hope for progress of knowledge. Elites lead social trends. If elites stopped identifying themselves as 'modern,' losing faith in sciences and turning to superstitions for interpreting the man-nature relationship, superstitions would become prevalent and impinge on other types of social relations, filling our society with strange ideas and practices. Modern civilizations go hand in hand with faith in science when accounting for the relation of man with nature.

Values regarding community: individual-group relationships

From the biological perspective, the survival of any living being is dependent on a group of certain size; and the existence of a group constitutes a prerequisite for the survival of an individual living being. Biological knowledge also tells us that groups and group structure are more important than individuals, and that the survival competition among groups hinges on the complexity of group structure. Man belongs to society. It is the group that endows individuals in it with outstanding status. Individuals who do not identify with a group or community are 'free', but they are also inimical to society as being a cause or result of social fragmentation. An individual obtains freedom and creativeness only within a community, in his service to or contributions towards the community's survival and development. This outlook on individual-community relations is a core social value for all societies; and its expression is found in various religions across the world. However, with regard to this core social value, serious disagreements have emerged in today's China. Intellectuals are debating whether individual or group interest should take precedence. Some argue that the unselfish soldier Lei Feng represents a person contrary to human nature, while ultra-selfishness represents the true human nature. This indeed reflects the tendency towards pluralized values in our society. The tenet 'my interest always first' derives from society, but it is anti-society by nature, harmful of social order and harmony. Some Chinese intellectuals justify today's extreme individualism through the Western literature on the supremacy of individual freedom. However, contrary to the traditional Chinese society where the interests of the individual family were considered supreme, group collectivism always characterized European societies, from ancient Greece to the Roman Empire, and to the medieval age. Since the arrival of the industrial era, labor coordination, social discipline and regulations have become an even stronger nexus for social relationships. Factories and offices are organized like military units, which have greatly boosted industrial production and spawned important innovations for the rise of a powerful West. Words such as hierarchy, discipline, obedience, authority, common will, etc., which had been alien to the Chinese until modern times, have become part of the genetic substrate in the Western civilizations. The term 'Civil Society,' of which there is still no clear equivalent in Chinese translation up till today, emphasizes the public life of individuals in a 'society,' so as to become citizens or 'civil.' Because of this strong tradition and the reality of group collectivism, defining the boundary between public and private life and respecting individual rights is a perennial topic in the West. Things are dramatically different in Chinese society. Traditionally, independent, free, and selfish farmer-families prevailed; and they had only a very feeble sense of a 'public' sphere, leaving public affairs to be the concern of only a few elites. That is why in the year 1900, China's 450 million people were defeated by merely 20,000 foreign soldiers pieced together from eight countries, and were forced to pay the war reparation of 450 million taels of silver, equivalent to the price of 46 Alaska purchases. Likewise, in most developing countries today, collectivism or group consciousness is much weaker than in developed countries. Therefore, modernization in developing countries largely means building, strengthening and enlarging the consciousness of community; by so doing, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea have been

lifted to the rank of developed countries. In China today, communal 'socialism' is the symbol for the value of collectivism. With this core value, instead of individualism, China has achieved remarkable progress in modernization.

Values regarding society: the community–society relationship

In the modern market system, competition takes place among different social groups, and the relationship between groups is of a competitive nature, following the pattern of 'the survival of the fittest'. However, a state of nature is not necessarily appropriate for a human society. A global village infused by the spirit of universal fraternity is our ultimate expectation for the future. In the present time, freedom of competition between social groups is essentially limited, effectively by the interests of a greater community. Above small social groups there are larger ones, with the nation as the largest. The contemporary era has seen the boundaries of Chinese group identities extend outwards, from descent groups to village, to county/city, to province, and to the whole society of the nation. Beyond our nation, there are still broader 'international communities'. The care for the interests of the largest community, our national society, is a core social value, arising out of the reality of the extended boundaries of group identity and the interdependence among groups in a society as well. As international competition takes place primarily between nation-states, the interests of a society within the boundaries of a nation-state reign supreme, transcending group or community interests. Market competition among social groups may trigger class struggle and group conflict. Thus, we respect the market mechanism only on the precondition of its complying with the regulations aimed at preserving the interest of social integration. Germany by law adopted a 'social market economy', which was recently further revised as a 'social-eco market economy'. The term, which has become a core social value of the German nation, implies that the German social interest as a whole and the interest in environmental protection outrank group interests in market competition. Based on this core social value, every group or community must comply with nationally unified laws and regulations. In today's China, the concept of nationwide 'socialism' is the symbol for this core social value, maintaining the consciousness of the society as a whole, above the group or community. Nevertheless, severely challenged by the emergent belief in the 'almighty' market mechanism, there is no longer a consensus on this core value in the China of the present day.

Values regarding politics: the people–government relationship

Relationships among people make up a society; and government manages society. How should people and government relate to each other? This is an issue of political value, a core social value by its obvious importance. All great civilizations in history feature their own distinct political civilizations as their nucleus. Political civilization could find its expression in political systems, which rest on social structure and political values. The differences in social structure decide the differences in political sys-

tem. Some political systems have the same apparent legal structure, but they are very different in actual operation. Russia under Boris Yeltsin introduced a Western liberal democracy, but its operation in reality was close to that of Colombia or even that of the mafia in Sicily. Japan has adopted liberal democracy, but half of the representatives in Japan's Diet come from traditional families of political influence; and nearly all ministers are sons and grandsons of ministers. The Japanese Prime Minister, usually a son or a grandson of a previous minister, is elected by approximately 700 Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) members. And among these 700 votes, only a few key members decide the outcome. Japanese politics is, to be sure, not purely a matter of pedigree, but neither is it purely a matter of elections. Similarly, the election procedures specified by law in Chinese villages are rather different from those that operate in practice. It is because of their political values that elites in developing countries are eager to mimic Western polities which may well be incompatible with their local social structures. Political values embody the basic ideas on how the people should relate to government, particularly the ideas about how government officials should be chosen, whom the government works for, and what could restrict the government's power and correct its mistakes. If the political values of social elites are too 'Western', and incompatible with the local social structure, the people–government relationship might decay into chaos, and the society could disintegrate.

In today's world, the prevailing political value, in the name of democracy, primarily supports elections, choice of direction and majority rule. Its logic goes as follows: people are gathered together in competitive social classes and interest groups, among which government power should be openly auctioned, allowing the representatives of the most powerful class or group to take over key government positions, so as to protect and promote their group interests. This political value, present in many developing countries, has turned out to be a catalyst for intense struggle among people and between people and government. In history, some other countries smoothed over class conflict with a two-party parliamentary system; in China a dual or multiple-party environment created wars, not between social classes or interest groups, but of each against all others. With a distinctly different political value, the Chinese invented a very distinct political system which has allowed her to stand independently among the world's major civilizations.

Traditionally, China was a country governed by an elite grounded in Confucian principles. Currently, China is led by the vanguard group called the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Between the two, there is a clear line of inheritance in political value, compatible with the inherited social structure. The vanguard party could decay as the Confucian elite did, but so could various kinds of democracies. We are not ignorant of the current legitimacy problem among liberal democracies, neither of the tragic results of democratization in many third world countries where politicians have hijacked votes and caused rifts in their societies. Political values do vary; they need to be compatible with local social structures. The self-consciousness of one's national culture depends primarily on the self-consciousness of the national political civilization. Only by sticking to an independent political value could the Chinese nation possess an outstanding political civilization compatible with its unique social structure. We may plant the dragon seeds from the West in the Chinese soil, but we need make sure that we do not harvest simply fleas.

Values regarding nation: the people–nation relationship

Modern nations came about with the building of the 'nation-state'. This is a political concept referring to all the people within a country's territory, regardless of their racial or ethnic backgrounds. The American nation, the Chinese nation, the French nation, the Russian nation, etc., are all examples of modern nations. The nation is the basic unit in respect of world-wide competition between peoples, in which various kinds of civilizations rise and fall. That is to say, a nation-state is the ultimate place of safety for a modern people; and caring for one's own nation is a very noble feeling, like caring for one's own home town. The Jewish people who built Israel after World War II have perhaps the best understanding of that. Large nations enjoy some natural advantages in competition. Driven by competition from large nations, regional cooperation organizations have become a new vogue, and Europeans are even trying to build a large union, a kind of United Sates of Europe, so to speak. Whether they will definitively achieve it is another question. Having fought courageously in the last century, the Chinese people founded the modern Chinese nation-state, which is the largest nation in the world, and the security guarantee for all the people within its territory.

Therefore, in all contemporary countries, loyalty to the modern nation, or in other words patriotism, should be a part of the core social values. This core social value is universal, but the objects of loyalty are all different, and may be conflictive. We in China champion patriotism inside the nation, and nationalism in giving priority to national interests when dealing with other nations. China used to have consensus among the elites on this core social value, which sadly no longer exists today. Some intellectuals advocate nation nihilism in the popular media, confusing national identity, mocking historical symbols of patriotism and pitting 'universal' ideologies against the proper feelings for our nation. And they strangely also advocate sympathy for ethnic-based nationalism in the name of 'freedom'. It is true that the modern nation is a rather recent political invention, hence vulnerable to the divisive powers of race, ethnicity, religion, language, culture and natural geographical boundaries. However, compared to the various kinds of ethnic chauvinism, be they Han, Tibetan, Uygur, or Mongolian, for example, patriotism is a much more noble and modern value, supporting the home for all Chinese.

Values regarding world affairs: the nation–world relationship

The current world system consists of a concert of nation-states. Since a world government will not emerge in any foreseeable future, a latent state of anarchy continues and the law of the jungle prevails. That is why every nation-state builds its own military force for the purpose of security. As we find ourselves in such an anarchic world system, dominant hegemonies and resistance from those subject to hegemonic domination constantly occur, although some nation-states often try to adopt a flexible middle stance. The current international trade and financial systems are fair in appearance, but the daily news is enough to show us that these are clearly riven with political and military stresses exerted by the powerful. In this world of implic-

it anarchy, since no one single nation-state can master the world and no one can guarantee its own security alone, the politics of alliance has become a constant game among nations. However, the world system is not, after all, an animal world; a nation-state consists of human beings who do generally have a sense of right and wrong. But outlooks on world affairs are closely related to the game of alliances and to the nation's consequent destiny, and hence become a core social value. The most fundamental basis for alliance is national self-interest, while a shared cultural pedigree may facilitate the choice of partners in an alliance. One's outlook on world affairs should be decided by one's position in the world system, by whether the nation is hegemonic or suffering the domination of others. Hegemonists certainly have their own discourse justifying their behavior, and those dominated also have their justifications for resistance. Which discourse people subscribe to should depend on the nation's actual position in reality, and a mistaken role-identification could lead to defeat. The most tragic thing is where a dominated nation subscribes to the world views of the dominant, dreaming of becoming part of them, while having to carry out a resistance struggle in order to survive with its identity intact. Iraq was not anti-American, and was one of America's closest allies during the Cold War, sharing to some degree the American world view of progress and modernity. Iraqi political and military leaders entertained the hope of Iraq becoming a US ally. Even on the eve of the US invasion, the Iraqi national television station was still airing an American Hollywood movie. Yet, the country's oil and geographical location was subject to the covetousness of predators; and Iraqi resistance to perceived oppression was unavoidable. Iraq's internal vulnerability derives from its leaders' confused identity. Therefore, the people of a nation, its intellectuals in particular, should possess a clear understanding of the nation's position in the world system, and decide their identity in consequence of that. Moreover, a large nation like China should certainly have its own world view, a kind of internationalism. Every move China makes affects the world as a whole. The point is, however, what kind of internationalism should it adopt, aligned with those who are dominated or those who are dominant? We used to have consensus among people, but this no longer exists.

To sum up, I have identified seven tiers of core social values in contemporary societies, which embody judgements of right and wrong on seven basic social relationships. With regard to each and every one of the seven tiers of values, namely, on morality, nature, community, society, politics, the nation, and the world, the consensus in China is broken due to divided and confused understanding among intellectuals. How then did this come about?

Interconnections among the tiers

Popular discussion of social values in China focuses on people losing the sense of morality. How could people of the same generation suddenly lose a universally possessed sense of morality? The installation of the market mechanism and the consequent change in social relationships do not of themselves provide an effective explanation, since market mechanisms have existed throughout the world without necessarily degenerating human morality.

The change of non-core social values is dependent on social relationships and reflects the transformation of social relationships. Social relations change, and the changes in social values follow. The Yugoslav nation-state collapsed, for nowhere could the core value of a Yugoslav nation find a sound foundation. However, core social values demonstrate a quality of independence and an independent logic of change. Once there is a change in one or some of the core values that is not supposed to happen, we need to examine the internal logic for this shift. Independent of the change in social relationships, the internal logic of core values impinges on and leverages social relationships. When a core social value changes, policies associated with it also change, followed by changes in society. In other words, the collapse of a Yugoslav national consciousness occurred first, and then came the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Distinct from changes in non-core social values, the changes in core social values assume an active pattern, and this pattern is capable of destabilizing social relationships that are supposed to be stable.

The previous section of this article has examined a seven-tier core value system. We may use this artificially constructed 'system' as an instrument for understanding the logic of change in core social values, which is independent of the transformation in social relations. That may help in explaining why a society may suddenly lose the sense of morality, which clearly occurred in Russia in the 1990s and Iraq of the past few years, while it did not happen among the Japanese after Japan was defeated in 1945. The findings here are twofold: the loss of core value in the outermost tier of the system may trigger off chain reactions inside, even as far as the nucleus of the core value system; and the collapse of this system of concentric circles usually starts at the outermost tier, the outlook on world affairs.

The weakest outer tier

The value judgement or outlook on world affairs is the exposed and weakest tier of the core value system, which makes it vulnerable to attack. Complex international affairs are relatively remote from people's daily lives, and beyond the immediate concern of the general public. To a large extent, the outlook on world affairs of the mass of people is shaped by the elites for whom these are a matter of concern. Once the judgements of the elites shift, the general public will follow suit. For example, the United States has been adopting a seemingly astonishing Middle East policy, almost unconditionally supporting Israel even at the cost of alienating all the Islamic countries. The only sensible explanation for that curious policy is the influence of the ethnic Jewish Americans, who comprise less than two per cent of the total American population. The vast majority of American citizens take little interest in international affairs whereas American Jews wield a strong influence in policy making and implementation regarding the Middle East. Similarly, the lay publics in China also rely heavily on particular specialists to form their opinions on international affairs. Once the political and economic elites of China identify with the US-led world system, dreaming of acquiring the elusive status of a 'stakeholder' in it, the world becomes no longer divided between those wielding hegemony and those without; rather, it is perhaps the US-led civilized 'international community' that is waging a battle

against the perceived anti-civilization and anti-progress 'rogue states' in order to chart a new and progressive world order. To reach a bargain or compromise in the reality of international relations is one thing, while to project a particular outlook on world affairs is another. The latter does matter; it matters in the sense that the core value affects the nature of the bargaining, and determines the identity of a position. Upon losing the sense of discriminating between Romans and Germans, the once glorious Roman Empire was not far from its demise. Similarly, once the distinction between the Chinese and outsiders (*hua yi zhi bian*) disappeared, even the political system of the Chinese empire could no longer be sustained. The collapse of the former Soviet Union did not stem from the military or economic areas, but from the collapse of the Soviet outlook on international affairs, from the outside tier of the core value system. In 1975, the Soviet economy was running well and Soviet confidence was high; but that was a critical year with a seemingly trivial event signaling the start of a process of slide. By signing the Helsinki Final Act with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe ('OSCE'), the Soviet leaders submitted to the Western outlook on world affairs. As some of the Soviet elites abandoned their previous perception of the world system and started entertaining the idea of a single international community, the Soviet core value system was on the track of disintegration, leading to the collapse of the Union after three-quarters of a century.

The loss of the value regarding the nation

The loss of world outlook may trigger the loss of the value regarding the nation. Assuming that the US-led world system symbolized justice and progress, the culprit in any conflict with the US would be patriotism of one's own, which then becomes branded as 'ultra-nationalism'. In less than15 years after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, the Soviet leaders' group under Gorbachev abandoned the principles embedded in their world outlook. Its then No. 2 leader Shevardnadze even openly switched sides. Seen from this standpoint, the breakup of the Soviet Union was a mathematical certainty. China has the same problem. Some Chinese intellectuals frequently attribute the Sino–US tensions to China's unwillingness to identify with the 'mainstream' international mechanisms, and they blame China's 'ultra-nationalism' for the conflicts. For hegemonic countries, on the other hand, identification with the internationalism of their camp is not at odds with patriotism. Patriotism in the US is widely believed to be the most intense in the world of nations. Almost every household flies the national flag on the American national day. Similarly, for subaltern countries, identification with the internationalism of anti-oppression is also not at odds with patriotism. To a very large degree, China in the era of Mao resembled today's America where internationalism and patriotism smoothly merged together. Things become radically different, however, if elites in hegemonic nations identify with the discourse of those suffering external dominance, and elites in dominated nations identify with the discourse of the hegemonists. In that case, patriotism is always in tension with the kind of internationalism in which they believe. Noam Chomsky is not considered patriotic in the United States, while the 'new thinking' against patriotism has become a fad in China. Seemingly impartial, China's main-

65

stream media, together with academia, are providing forums for fanning among the public the flames of deconstructing patriotism.

The loss of the value regarding politics

The loss of outlook on nationality may trigger the loss of the value regarding politics. Were we to preach national nihilism, and believe in the supremacy of the interests of the international community over national interests, seeing patriotism as an outdated value, then our national political value would have to give way before the so-called 'universal' political values. If we lose the value of the nation-state, we will lose consciousness of the national political civilization, and frivolously challenge it with so-called 'international mainstream' values without caring for our own social structure. Patriotism is not necessarily related to a particular political value. But it obliges us to make national interests supreme and no talk of 'universal' political values should blind us to that. Moral principles are universally accepted, whereas values underpinning people–government relations have not been so, either in the past or today, and will not be so in the foreseeable future. As long as human societies feature different social structures, political values and political civilizations will be varied and colorful. For instance, China's *minben*-ism or 'People First' doctrine is radically different from the Western 'democratic' doctrine.[6] Neither the majority principle nor the principle of neutrality is a universal political value. The political values of the Roman Empire could not be applied to China's Han Dynasty, or there would not have been a Chinese civilization. The case of China and the former Soviet Union is another prime example in this regard. Democracy was implanted in Afghanistan by American soldiers, but the harvest has been a country of warlords and the largest drug production fields ever known. In China, Mao did not follow any 'international mainstream' political values, neither did Deng. They were confident of the Chinese way. Gorbachev, however, was scared by the 'unavoidable universal', into following it, but in doing so failed the Soviet Union and personally became a figure of derision. With the recovery of the value relating to the nation, the Putin government is beginning to cherish a political value independent of Western ones. Although being harshly criticized in the West, the Russians are now back on their feet, and are again being treated seriously by other powerful nations. Sun Yat-sen, the founding father of the Republic of China, grew up in the West and identified with Western political values. However, having seen the Western invasion of his country and China's decline, and with a solid belief in nationalism, Sun's political values changed dramatically. For the national liberation, he sought inspiration from traditional Chinese political values, *minben*-ism in particular, as well as all the others that fitted into the Chinese social structure.[7] How can a democracy be achieved in the absence of national sovereignty? The Chinese society is not composed of social classes and interest groups. The overseas Chinese societies, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, basically follow the same pattern. In those territories the principle of rule by majority vote is divisive and anti-modern by nature, for the votes tend to be grouped by ethnicity and localities instead of by classes and interest groups. Nothing but national interest should be our criterion for learning and absorbing political values from the West, whether they relate

to the power struggle among classes by means of violence or to certain voting procedures. That is to say, without the self-consciousness of one's own nation, there cannot be the self-consciousness of the nation's political civilization and of the nation's culture. With the awakened self-consciousness of the nation, we could easily understand that a beggar could not become a master of his nation simply by obtaining a voting paper. In today's China, the political value is the most controversial issue; and intellectuals are very confused about this and battle fiercely with each other. In the debate, emphasizing ballot boxes represents the 'new thinking' compared to the traditional meritocracy. For those who champion 'universal' political values, the Chinese political civilization was, and still is, nothing but authoritarianism, from a loose authoritarian rule to an ever stricter and worsening one up till today. However, they are faced with a challenge from the general public: by exactly what means has our nation in history and modern times achieved its prominent status among the world of nations and civilizations?

The loss of the value regarding society

The loss of political value may trigger the loss of the outlook on society. Since political values are perceptions of right and wrong regarding the relationship between government and the people in a society, they are logically related to the value regarding the society as a whole. A government regulates its society. It is the political value that dictates the essential means by which a government manages social affairs. It is possible that even with a government, the cohesion or harmony of the society may still not be achieved; but without a government, no cohesion of the society would ever exist at all. Differences in political values lead to differences in the general social outlook among educated people. Thus, political values bear a close relation to the outlook on society as a whole. That is to say, divided political values lead to confusions in the values relating to society. Once the society value is pluralized, it becomes extremely difficult to maintain the integrity of the society. In China, social integration is highly dependent on the consensus regarding the nationwide socialist value, which requires group competition to comply with the interests of the society as a whole. When the consensus on political value is broken, the socialist society value is broken too. Today in China, inter-group competition is assuming a virulent pattern, manifested by the fact that many groups are wantonly advancing their own interests at the expense of the entire society, and that the norms designed to standardize inter-group competition are hard to implement. Worse, the general public has taken for granted and become apathetic to behaviors such as annexing public property for the interests of a restricted group, pursuing profit at the cost of serious pollution of the environment or ignoring central government decrees to protect the interests of a specific locality. We are now witnessing the fact that the collapse of political values is leading to the demise of social values, encouraging unregulated inter-group competition.

The loss of the value regarding community

The loss of social outlook may trigger off the loss of the value relating to the group or community. If the interests of the society are considered of nil worth, the group or community interest may also be sacrificed, and the spirit of collectivism cannot be sustained. In the past 15 years or so, we in China have frequently witnessed the same recurring set of circumstances whereby leaders of groups steal from the group they lead, disillusioned members or employees of the group lose enthusiasm for their work, leading to once highly profitable businesses going bankrupt. Managers of those failed collectives justify their behavior by quoting our leading economists: the companies fail because their property rights are not 'clearly defined'; and only privately owned property has the nature of 'clear' property right. Those economists further argue that only by owning the company can managers cherish the sense of responsibility. This logic has prevailed in China, driving state and once collectively owned companies into failure, which was then followed by the radical privatization and 'Manager-Buy Out' (MBO) policies, suddenly leaving 60–70 million urban people unemployed. However, are the joint-stock companies privately owned or collectively owned? If they are privately owned by shareholders, the shareholders show their 'sense of responsibility' by selling their shares upon any rumor of the company's bad performance. Yet professional managers do their job without owning the property they manage. School teachers do their job without owning their schools. Military officers do their job without owning their soldiers and weapons. And our country's Premier does his job without owning the country. It can be seen that the loss of the group or community value could lead to the indefinite inflation of individualism. Human societies are made up of individuals who are connected by groups and communities. Should naked individualism displace collectivism and become the dominant value, what this could lead to is rampant antisocial feelings and practice as well. Every day in China's media we read news about crowds of apathetic bystanders who do nothing when witnessing theft and robbery, or fail to help the injured and dying victims of criminal attacks. Should we allow this tendency to further develop, we will not be far from a war of all against all, which is unavoidably followed by the rule of tyranny. Thus, we need to preserve our modern community or group value, namely, collectivism or communal socialism. That is to say, the prevalent value in China should be the principle that the strong help the weak, the rich help the poor, and we bring our old and young together so that we may sail forward in confidence, however turbulent the sea.

The loss of the value regarding nature

The loss of the group or community value may trigger the loss of the outlook on nature. In a modern society of production through cooperation, isolated individuals are vulnerable, facing challenges from every aspect of social life. Those who lack the belief in group and society have no spiritual home, and have to beg 'miracles' from various god-like figures. Individual interests are best served through the knowledge of science, achieved via cooperative interaction of the group, society or even the entire

68

world of humanity. Where group identity is absent, the belief in science is ungrounded and offers little hope for easing individual anxieties. And where the belief in science is dissipated or rejected, witchcraft of various types prevails, and modern individuals revert to 'traditional' attitudes controlled by superstitions. Following the collapse of the collective spirit and the emergent prevalence of individualism, superstitious practices of various types have swept contemporary China. For example, the Central China Polytechnic Institute located in Xi'an, Shanxi Province, used to have a total enrolment of about 200 students up to 2004. To increase the enrolment, the institute set up an altar in the vice-president's office and even invited a sorcerer to perform magic. It was reported that in 2005, the total enrolment reached 600, and 1,500 in the year 2006.[8] This blatant appeal to superstition even happens in a particular institute of science. Now, many government officials and businessmen resort to fortune telling to satisfy their desire to make a fortune or receive a promotion, for they no longer trust their own group or community. Obsession with 'lucky numbers', such as 88 and 66, and avoiding 'bad numbers', such as 14, 13 and 4, has become a nationwide fad. New residential buildings do not mark floors with 'bad numbers'. I live on the 4th floor where the elevator and post address show the 5th. It is natural that the loss of the value relating to community is accompanied by the loss of the scientific spirit, which is accompanied by a widespread recourse to anti-scientific beliefs.

The loss of the value on morality

The loss of a set of values relating to nature and community may trigger off the loss of a moral outlook. Where humans lose their trust in the community or group, as well as the belief in scientific knowledge, 'society' would become a concept devoid of any meaning, and the moral values that regulate social relationships would appear like empty vessels. In that case, meaning is reduced to the level of helpless and vulnerable individuals who possess no identity with any group, or proper understanding of the physical environment around them. People without morals are the most terrifying creatures on earth, and widespread loss of the sense of morality is the worst scenario any country could face. The animal instincts of human beings would then be liberated, and the law of the jungle would prevail. Before the age of science, of course, religious beliefs filled in the human spiritual need. However, a modern society cannot rely on religions to guide people's cooperation in any meaningful production, and should not allow religious beliefs to divide people in the workplace. That is to say, in order to preserve the moral principles, we need battle against naked individualism to safeguard our values on the scientific understanding of the nature, as well as our identity with community and groups.

The logic of the core value system

The core social value system of a modern society consists of seven tiers. From outside to inside, they are its outlook on world affairs, nationality, politics, society, group, nature and morality. A few conclusions may be drawn from the above analysis.

The outlooks relating to morality, nature, group and society are basically universal and fairly solid. But starting from the morality value, the universality and solidity of each of these outlooks begins to diminish one by one as we proceed from the inside to the outside. The outlook on politics is a tipping point in terms of universality and solidity. Political values are not universally applicable, as we already see their great varieties in reality and history. Political values are also vulnerable to challenges, they are not solid. However, a nation's political value is vital to its social integration. It is the focal area where civilizations compete with each other for survival. The outlooks on the nation are clearly not universal; each nation cherishes a nationalism of its own. Though they emerged only in modern times, and remain vulnerable, they are nevertheless the linchpins upon which the survival of nation-states depends. The outlooks on world affairs are the most pluralistic and vulnerable. Yet, it is the fall of the first domino that precipitates the collapse of the entire system.

The collapse of a core social value system starts from the outermost tier, from outside to inside, from outlooks which can change easily to those that only do so with difficulty. The outlook on world affairs may change extremely capriciously, the occurrence of which offers observers a clue to predict a more significant change to follow. Being a tipping point where universality and solidity are maintained or lost, the outlook on politics occupies the most strategic position in the entire system. Once we see pluralism prevailing in that area, it indicates that the value system is teetering on the brink of collapse. A widespread crumbling of moral principles is, of course, the clearest indicator of the system collapse in a society.

In the nuclear age, the most cost-effective means of competition among great nations is attacking the core value system of the adversary, and victory could be achieved without the use of force. The attack usually starts from the external tier of the core value system as it is the most vulnerable domain and the easiest to break down. The attacked nation is in danger of failing and losing its status as a competitor as its core value system is being broken down from outside to inside, until ultimately it risks the widespread loss of the shared sense of morality. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the subsequent situations are eloquent about the remorselessness of this logic. So does China's history of rise and fall throughout the ages. Certainly, a deconstructed system of core social values could be reconstructed, with new elements added for its renaissance; and the failure of one country at one time does not preclude it from a chance of future recovery. Nevertheless, the logic that a core social value system collapses from outside to inside applies to all the relevant cases in history.

In all countries, pluralized core social values are the prelude to the arrival of surging turbulence within the society. In most of the developed countries, at least at the time when they are strong and stable, we can clearly observe the system of core social values. In most of the underdeveloped countries, particularly at times of internal instability, we could not find a system of core values as they are all 'pluralized'.

The remaining puzzle, then, is how a core social value system might be built or rebuilt. While this is an important dimension for understanding the logic of the core value system, I have only a few very rudimentary hypotheses concerning the conditions for its construction.

First, a system of core social values is undoubtedly created by a general consensus among elites. The formation of a general consensus among elites in the nation is, therefore, the first condition. By 'elites', I mean people such as political leaders at all levels, professors of humanities and social sciences in major universities, managers and employees of mainstream media, and leaders of important enterprises and research institutions. While they may and often do disagree with each other, most of them are likely to agree on the very basics.

Second, the general consensus among elites is reached through open polemics. When certain ideas become mature and solid, overwhelming the others, they will conquer the authorities of the time to become mainstream. If the debate is not permitted, building and consolidating a system of core values would be an impossible mission.

Third, the spread of core values to the general public depends on the capacity of elites to communicate with the mass of the people so as to cause the ideas to be taken up by the key institutions, major groups of people and popular public places. By 'capacity of communication', I mean the timely adjustment of concepts and expressions, and direct answers to people's current concerns instead of eluding them, so as to keep the discourse fresh, lively, penetrative and popular among the general public. Isolated from the people without the capacity to bring its values into the mainstream of society, a system of core values is little more than a daydream.

Fourth, to consolidate and perpetuate the system, the elites must invariably and firmly protect the cultural symbols that represent the core value system. Those symbols do have real stories behind them, and may also be combined with romantic imagination; but they are much more than stories, they are spiritual heritages for formal and informal education, and they are songs to be sung from generation to generation.

Pan Wei
Beijing University

Notes

1. Anthropologists may well have made the most valuable contribution to enhancing public understanding of the relativity of social values. Shweder (2000: 234–61) refutes the views of other contributors and ridicules the moral maps drawn by the first world countries.
2. The American sociologist T. Parsons employs the five pattern variables to describe value orientations that affect people's choice of action in traditional societies and modern societies. According to Parsons, self-orientation in traditional societies and collectivity-orientation in modern societies is one pattern variable. The creation of this pattern variable is very insightful in terms of social evolution even though this variable's emphasis on collectivism has been criticized at a time when capitalist individualism is emphasized. See Parsons and Shils (1951).
3. The connections between people's identity and norms of behavior were first discovered by European sociologists in the early 20th century when they were studying 'culture'. Emile Durkheim viewed culture as a system of 'symbols' composed of two categories shared by all members of a society. The first category of culture is identity, that is, collective consciousness of identity. The second category is the corresponding norms of behavior, that is to say, values. So our organic 'solidarity' is maintained by these two sets of symbols, or culture. For example, people attend social gatherings and rituals and

worship the objects, the symbols of our society. But these symbols provide the mutually disconnected elements in our social life with a platform for people's identity. Organic solidarity thus comes into being. The existence of collective consciousness is predicated on the existence of individual consciousness, but is different from individual consciousness. The collective consciousness subsumes individual consciousness, characterized by strong social norms and well-regulated social behavior. The collective consciousness does not require each individual's social behavior to be well-regulated. Instead, it pursues the consensus on people's attitudes, beliefs or values in an abstract sense. See Durkheim (2003, 2007). Durkheim's argument that culture can be defined as a set of symbolic systems shared by all members of society is inherited and extended by Parsons and Geertz and becomes an important foundation for post-WWII anthropologists and sociologists to define culture (Parsons and Shils, 1951; Geertz, 1973). Samuel Huntington (2004) even elevates the identification with Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture to the rise and fall of America.

4. Why these six? It is because these six points constitute the basis of social justice. The six points outlined here mesh nicely with the Ten Commandments of the Bible. By carefully examining tribal norms, religious codes, natural laws and laws in the modern sense, we may find all such codes contain those six points. It could also be argued that laws of various types in modern societies contain the element of justice. Without the presence of the six points, human societies would cease to exist. To a great extent, we could regard the six points as the most fundamental code of ethics, or the Basic Law in short.

5. The German scholar Michael Baurmann (1996) opposes this. Defending liberalism, he argues that the market per se could create codes of ethics and make people follow them. If his explanation is valid, the teaching of humanities could well be dispensable.

6. Minben-ism means that the very reason for the existence of government, regardless of how it comes into being, is to serve the livelihood of the people as a whole; and should be displaced by whatever means when it no longer serves the welfare of the people. This political value, which originated more than 4,000 years ago, has continued to be the most important source of legitimacy until today. In China's most ancient book, we can find such sayings as 'The God's ears are the people's ears, and 'The God's eyes are people's eyes'; and 'People are the roots of the state; a state is in peace when people are not disturbed.' Essentially, the Chinese society, based around agriculture, was even, undifferentiated and highly mobile in social status, not a home for the hierarchical stratification of social classes or interests groups. At that time the Chinese could not accept as a political value the principle that winning the right to govern through greater power is legitimate. Instead, they expected a supra-party government of neutrality to honestly serve the people's welfare as a whole. Therefore, the civil service, selected through strict examinations on ethical codes and through constant evaluation of performance was invented, the bureaucracy of which prevailed throughout China's history. Based on this minben-ism, the traditional Chinese political system amazingly survived dynastic changes, and lasted for about 2,000 years until the beginning of the 20th Century, the longest among all political systems in the world. With a different social structure, the political value of democracy originated in Europe, providing legitimacy to the principle that government power should be auctioned in the marketplace to the representatives of the most powerful group(s). And this political value also has a very long history. Neither government of neutrality, nor that of the pork barrel is universally applicable.

7. Sun Yat-sen developed the 'San-Min (three principles) Doctrine', which includes nationalism, social wellbeing (he defined it as socialism), and people's rights. Considering Sun's doctrine together with his policy of 'allying with the Soviet Russian and Chinese Communist Party and supporting workers and peasants' and with his political platform of three stages: 'marshal law, authoritarian rule, and constitutional government', we may well find that Sun's political value was fundamentally different from that of the West, but fitted into the then Chinese reality.

8. Beijing Evening News, 9 October 2006.

References

Baurmann, M. (1996) *Der Markt der Tugend: Recht und Moral in der liberalen Gesellschaft*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Durkheim, É. (2007) *La Division du travail social*. Paris: PUF.

Durkheim, É. (2003) *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. Paris: PUF.

Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic Books.

Huntington, S. (2004) *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Parsons, T. and Shils, E. A. (eds) (1951) *Toward a General Theory of Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Shweder, R. A. (2000) 'Moral Maps, First World Conceits and the New Evangelists', in S. Huntington and L. Harrison (eds) *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 234–61.