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China's *Glee*

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By William A. Callahan

Since mid-2009, China has become much more assertive in world affairs, taking positions that challenge the US and Europe on numerous fronts including climate change, exchange rates, nuclear Iran, cyber security, and human rights. This list of problems came as a surprise to the many experts who for the past decade have been telling us that China's peaceful rise demonstrates that Beijing has been socialized into the international system as a responsible actor.

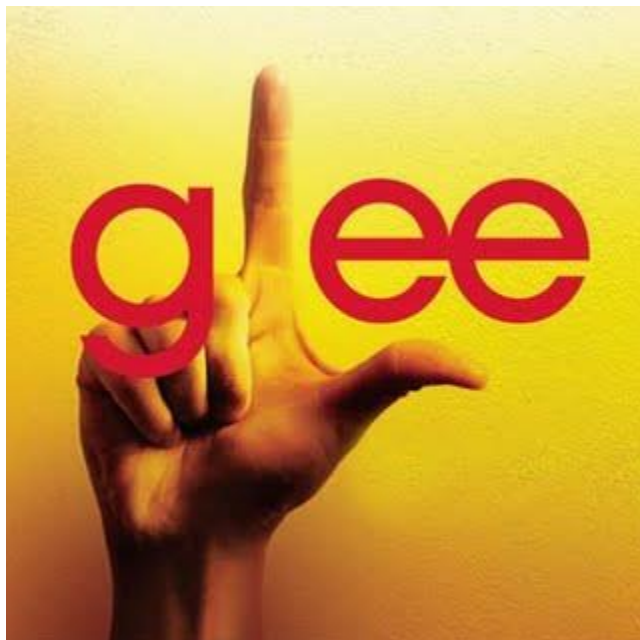
Yet recent events suggest that 'responsible stakeholder' is not China's preferred goal. The PRC is in the midst of a transition, shifting from trying to fit into the international system, to confidently – even arrogantly – asserting itself as the newest great power.

Martin Jacques, author of *When China Rules the World*, [tells us](#) that we shouldn't be surprised at China's new assertiveness: it is merely returning to a Chinese-style of global governance. We need to understand this new situation in terms of China's own concepts about foreign relations, rather than Eurocentric theories of diplomacy. Thus along with economic power shifting from West to East, he and others argue that intellectual power is shifting from Europe and America to China.

I agree that a change is taking place, but am not convinced that it is a grand continental shift from a Western to a Chinese world order. Rather, what we are witnessing is a dramatic transition from the PRC's elite political culture (Marxism and/or Confucianism) to the global popular culture that China shares with the rest of the world.

Simply put, Beijing is not presenting a distinct 'China model' of development and justice; the PRC is joining the world society of consumers who not only purchase computers and televisions, but also consume the images and roles that are presented on-screen in film, TV and video. China's new worldview thus is shaped more by media products than by grand ideologies.

To understand China we need to look beyond Marxism, Liberalism and Confucianism to cultural phenomena such as *Glee*, the fantastically successful American TV show that is conquering the world with its mix of song and dance, comedy and drama.



For those of us who are stuck in the elite mode of understanding world politics (or don't have teenage kids), I'll summarize the remarkable *Glee* experience; the program has won both popular and critical acclaim, including the Peabody and Golden Globe awards for best television show.

In many ways, *Glee* is a typical American high school drama that pits cool kids against losers – here a collection of geeks, gimps, drama-queens, minorities and other 'outsiders'. These teenagers are all experiencing rapid and dramatic transitions. They know they are changing, but aren't sure what they are changing into, or even what they want to become. *Glee*'s spin on this familiar dramatic formula is to solve the problems of adolescence through song. The outsiders (plus a few insiders) seek shelter from the problems of school and family in William McKinley High School's aptly-named 'New Directions' glee club. By working hard towards a shared goal, they overcome a host of obstacles – finally winning the sectional competition against other schools for the show's mid-season climax.

Just what does a glee club in Lima, Ohio have to do with the rise of China?

Like the teenagers in *Glee*, China is an emerging power that is experiencing a fantastic growth spurt. This rapid economic growth is changing more than its per capita GDP; it is changing the way Chinese people think about themselves, and about the world. Many are asking how Beijing can convert its new economic power into enduring political and cultural influence. Their various answers are evidence of a heady mix of excitement and uncertainty about China's future – and the world's future.

This anxiety of possibility is described as '[China's struggle for status](#)' by Chinese-American scholar Yong Deng. The PRC is experimenting with the international system, searching for China's proper role in foreign affairs. Recent diplomatic controversies testify to how Beijing is trying out international system's rules, which it had little part in making, much like a teenager would try on a dress for her junior prom. Do the norms of the international system fit? Can they satisfy Beijing's desires for greatness? Or do they need to be tailored?

This argument may seem far-fetched, but the deputy-director of Beijing's Olympic ceremonies also pointed to status, love and desire [when he explained](#) his country's goals for hosting the 2008 games: 'I really hope that the people of the world can get to know the Chinese culture through [the Opening Ceremony], to understand China, to intimately know China, to love China, and to desire China'.

China thus is eager to please international audiences. Yet Beijing's new foreign policy is still quite awkward. It mixes intemperate outbursts with clumsy explanations whenever Beijing doesn't get the foreign recognition it feels China deserves. China's policy-makers and opinion-shapers are still getting used exercising both the raw force of their new economic and military strength and the charms of their growing soft power.

While many Western commentators tell us that China has been socialized into an international society that is governed by rules and norms, many of their counterparts in the PRC describe world politics as a dog-eat-dog Darwinian survival of the fittest. International law here is not as important as the law of the jungle; international relations is guided by power politics, which is as brutally anarchic as school yard politics. Chinese commentators thus commonly understand foreign affairs in terms of bullying: as PLA General Pan Zhenqiang [explains](#), 'China once made outstanding contributions to world civilization. But, in modern times, it has been bullied by foreign powers, and is still to some degree being bullied'.

The popular slogan, 'backward countries will be beaten', doesn't question this violent international hierarchy; rather, the lesson that China takes is that it needs to be strong to fight back.

Like outsiders in high school, some in China see themselves as underdogs in the world system, and view their country as the 'Sick Man of Asia' that suffered a Century of National Humiliation (1840-1949) at the hands of European and Japanese imperialism. The current 'rejuvenation of China' (to quote Beijing's popular slogan) involves overcoming numerous obstacles that were created by people described as domestic traitors and foreign enemies. Victory (and defeat) are total in this zero-sum game: bully or be bullied, humiliate or be humiliated.

While *Glee*'s creators describe their show as an escapist fantasy that shows the optimistic yes-we-can spirit of high school students, discussions of international politics in the PRC are more pessoptimist, mixing China's national pride with its enduring sense of international humiliation. Beijing's new aggressive foreign policy certainly comes from China's dreams of global glory; but it also comes from China's nightmares of failure and revenge.

I don't want to belabor this analogy of blossoming adolescence and emerging powers. It is certainly problematic to call any country 'immature' because this assumes that the world's current great powers maturely and rationally follow the rules. As the Bush administration demonstrated, we can't take mature global leadership for granted. But *Glee* can help us here too: it also shows how adults can be manipulative and hypocritical when they try to make the system work for themselves.

Understanding China's shifting feelings is important because the PRC is no longer an underdog: This glee club has nukes.

China is one of the top players in global economics and politics. But its school yard notion of world politics that is quick to take offense means that the twenty-first century promises to be an interesting time. Things will get worse before they get better: the populist struggle over who will lead China after Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao retire in 2012 is further complicating China's uneasy relationship with the world.

In other words, as long as China continues to grow like a teenager, it is likely to act with an adolescent's supreme confidence – and deep self-doubt.

To grasp the new international dynamic presented by China's rise, it is necessary to look beyond Beijing's official statements to see how the Chinese people feel about their country and the world (a question that surely has a variety of answers). To do this we need to examine how the issues of emerging powers (in both high school and world affairs) are framed in popular culture globally and in China itself.

Glee has transcended its Midwestern small-town setting to become a global media phenomenon: it has taken Europe and Latin America by storm, and is popular in the black market DVD shops of Guangzhou and Shanghai. China's public diplomacy is likewise reaching beyond East Asia to charm audiences in Africa and Latin America.

McKinley High's glee club just won sectionals and is looking to the regionals. Can they go all the way? Will *Glee* conquer Asia? Will China mature to be the next superpower?

Stay tuned.

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