TRANSFORMING ASIA

Benjamin Tze Ern Ho

China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism

International Order and Global Leadership

Amsterdam University Press

China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism

Transforming Asia

Asia is often viewed through a fog of superlatives: the most populous countries, lowest fertility rates, fastest growing economies, greatest number of billionaires, most avid consumers, and greatest threat to the world's environment. This recounting of superlatives obscures Asia's sheer diversity, uneven experience, and mixed inheritance.

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Benjamin Tze Ern Ho
Singapore, March 2021

1 The Rise of China

Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism

Abstract
This chapter introduces the concept of Chinese exceptionalism as a framework for studying China's political worldview and international relations. It argues that a discourse of Chinese exceptionalism has permeated Chinese scholarly circles as a mode of political inquiry into China's international relations and vision of global order. Consequently it argues that a framework of exceptionalism provides a more comprehensive explanation of China's international politics and foreign policy behavior. The chapter also discusses the research design of this study, which is based primarily on elite interviews and discourse analysis. It concludes with an outline of the remaining eight chapters of the book, and how they relate to the broader theme of Chinese exceptionalism.

Keywords: exceptionalism, political worldview, international relations, global order, foreign policy

The rise of China as a major player in international affairs over the past few decades has generated substantial debate among scholars and policy makers in the field of international relations. As evinced by the Covid-19 outbreak, what happens in China now has international repercussions. More than that, Beijing's economic footprint, growing military presence, and political influence have raised questions and concerns about its long term intentions, whether it will cooperate or challenge the existing global order, and consequently how countries should respond, react, and relate to the current Chinese government.

Following the November 2012 assumption of China's top office by Xi Jinping, China's international prominence has become even more conspicuous, with many suggesting that it is now moving away from the previous "strategy of lying low" (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦) to take up a more active,

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even assertive, stance in international relations.[1] Linked to this is Chinese leaders' frequent emphasis over the last decade that China's rise would be peaceful, and that it would not become a hegemonic power.[2] According to Barry Buzan, this rhetoric of a "peaceful rise" represents an "indigenous and original idea deeply embedded in China's reform and opening up, and effectively constituting the core concept for a grand strategy. While not without its ambiguities and contradictions, 'peaceful rise' represents a potentially workable program, and a distinctive way of marking China's return to great power standing in international society."[3] The key question, as Buzan puts it, is whether China "seeks a stable and harmonious regional and global environment as a desirable end in itself, or merely as an instrumental goal to underpin its own development and rise [... is] peaceful rise just a transitional strategy, to be abandoned now that China is strong, or is it a long-term strategy?"[4] Buzan suggests the likelihood that China's ascension would be better characterized as a "cold peaceful rise," which would be "high in confrontations, alienating neighbors, and reinforcing the US position in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean."[5] This means that China is likely to conduct its international relations in "raw power political terms using threat and intimidation but avoiding hot war."[6] It is also unlikely to conform to the present international system, but will instead seek to refashion that system to its own advantage while also ensuring that it does not end up embroiled in costly conflicts that would affect its internal development and slow down its economic growth.

How do these discussions about China relate to the broader conversation on international order and global politics? According to Robert Gilpin, any change in the international system would inevitably also reflect a "new distribution of power and the interests of its new dominant members."[7] While this by itself does not necessarily lead to war and hot conflict, there is still a body of evidence[8] that suggests China's rise would pose a credible

1 The term *tao guang yang hui* is sometimes also translated as "hide brightness, nourish obscurity." The scholarly literature on this is vast and will not be exhaustively enumerated here. Some selected articles I have consulted include Zheng and Gore, *China Entering the Xi Jinping Era*; Poh and Li, "A China in Transition"; Chen and Wang, "Lying Low No More".

2 Information Office of the State Council, "China's peaceful development."

3 Buzan, "The Logic and Contradictions," p. 384.

4 *Ibid*., p. 401.

5 *Ibid.,* p. 419.

6 *Ibid.,* p. 403.

7 Gilpin, *War and Change,* p. 9.

8 See Ikenberry, Wang, and Zhu, *America, China, and the Struggle for World Order;* Sutter, *China's Rise.*

challenge to the present international system, not least because of the new prominence of Chinese ideas concerning how the international order ought to be structured to benefit Chinese interests.[9]

What changes would we then expect to see in the existing international order as it adapts to account for China's interests and preference; more specifically, how would we expect China to pursue its objectives, and what are its ultimate goals? This is a topic of deeply divisive debate among international relations (IR) scholars. Realist scholars argue that, given the structure of the international system, China will not rise peacefully but will "attempt to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere."[10] Such a line of thinking assumes that the international system is universal – all countries perceive the world alike – and also that China's interests are fundamentally at odds with Western interests,[11] particularly in the Asia-Pacific region where they are being contested.[12]

Constructivist scholars who take Chinese culture and ideas (particularly Confucianism) seriously question the extent to which Chinese culture is inherently peaceful and is therefore able to constrain the Chinese government's actions. Those who are wary of Chinese intentions argue that the Confucian culture so frequently touted as antimilitary actually masks the Chinese practice of realpolitik and the government's expansive grand strategy, which is ultimately power-seeking.[13] Others perceive China's history (as shaded by Confucian culture) to have been largely peaceful before Western interference, and argue that the rise of China will herald an international order that is not Western dominated, but instead features China at the apex of the system.[14] Such an interpretation is also favorably disposed towards the tributary system, in which China "stood at the top of the hierarchy" and other neighboring countries sought to develop stable relations with it through assiduously copying "Chinese institutional and discursive practices."[15] As noted by Acharya and Buzan, Western IR scholarship was seen as arising from the European experience following the peace

9 Kupchan, "Unpacking Hegemony", pp. 19-61.

10 Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 360-413.

11 For purposes of this book, I will define the West in its broadest sense, one which places a strong commitment to liberal institutions, the rule of law, and the adherence to high standards of individual human rights. For a scholarly discussion, see Kurth, "Western Civilization, Our Tradition."

12 Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy.*

13 Wang, *Harmony and War.*

14 Kang, *East Asia Before the West.*

15 *Ibid.,* p. 2.

of Westphalia in the seventeenth century, and thus should not be applied to non-European/Western states or entities which do not share the worldviews that order the Western experience.[16]

Liberal institutionalism sees China as taking advantage of existing global institutions and argues that its rise is in part due to the present Western-led international order, one that is "open, integrated, and rule-based, with wide and deep political foundations."[17] Unlike previous hegemonic powers, the present international system has encouraged the entrance of other major powers and accommodated their presence. It is further observed that while the US "unipolar moment" would eventually end, the international order would likely continue. Such an arrangement is premised upon the role of international institutions as being able to "in various ways bind states together, constrain state actions and create complicated and demanding political processes that participating states can overcome worries about the arbitrary and untoward exercise of power."[18] Under these arrangements, China's rise would not necessarily lead to an unraveling of the international system, and there are a number of available bilateral and multilateral measures that could help ameliorate the possibility of some of the worst-case scenarios.[19]

Clearly none of the above schools of thought are able, in and of themselves, to adequately account for the complex dimensions of interactions between China and the rest of the world. While realist logic predicts with certainty that there will be conflict and war between the current hegemon and a rising power, Chinese leaders have frequently vowed to avoid that outcome and the increased frequency of Sino-American interactions over the past few years have gone some way to ameliorate its inevitability.[20] Likewise, with its emphasis on the construction of global norms that could limit China's ambitions, liberalism assumes that Chinese elites have thoroughly "bought in" to the established global order and are willing to concede that the broader "good" of international society should take precedence over what they perceive to be the national interests. Yet, domestic interests – and the paramount goal of maintaining Communist rule – mean that Chinese leaders' are sometimes required to act in an aggressive manner, particularly

16 Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory.*

17 Ikenberry, "Rise of China."

18 Ikenberry, *After Victory,* p. 35.

19 Liff and Ikenberry, "Racing toward Tragedy?"

20 The ongoing trade war between China and the United States may yet sway the pendulum back to the realist logic of the certainty of conflict. However, as of this writing the trade war has not led to actual hot conflict.

when China's international status and reputation is being challenged.[21] While constructivist arguments provide useful insights into how certain ideas and norms have contributed to Chinese thinking about international politics, their polarized predictions about China's behavior (i.e., it will be either benign or aggressive) suggest considerable ambiguity about whether ideational elements are sufficient in and of themselves to account for China's political behavior.

The Argument: The Chinese Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism

Given the limitations posed by mainstream international relations theories for explaining China's behavior, this book seeks to examine China's political worldview, its vision concerning the international order, and its preferences regarding the rules and norms that underlie international relations.[22] To do so, this book introduces the notion of "Chinese exceptionalism" as a framework or lens that can better account for China's international politics and foreign policy. I argue that the Chinese political worldview (i.e., how it sees itself and how it sees the world) is that it perceives itself as being *exceptional*, that is, it is *good* and *different*, and that such a *perception has influenced its approach to the practice of international politics*. Such an exceptionalism *mindset*, I argue, provides us with a better understanding and more comprehensive interpretation of China's international relations compared to mainstream IR theories.[23]

In studying the Chinese worldview and its claims to exceptionalism, I am not suggesting that there is only one worldview, Chinese identity, or voice. Far from it. Nevertheless, given strict state (party) controls about what the "official" narrative of China should be, it seems appropriate to examine those narratives and, more importantly, how China's top leaders and key opinion

21 Deng, *China's Struggle for Status. This is most clearly fleshed out in the "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy in the course of the coronavirus pandemic.*

22 In this book, I define the term "worldview" (or *weltanschauung*) as the fundamental cognitive orientation of an individual or society, encompassing the whole of the individual's or society's knowledge and point of view. It involves both the perception of themselves (self-identity or self-view) and also how they see the outside world.

23 To be sure, Chinese exceptionalism is not the only way China seeks to distinguish itself from other major powers. For instance, the adjective "Chinese characteristics" is often used by Chinese leaders and policy makers to differentiate the Chinese worldview from others. However, this book emphasizes the importance of Chinese exceptionalism in China's political worldview.

makers use them to tell the story of China to themselves and to the world. By taking material, ideational, and structural factors seriously, this book seeks to *locate the key driver behind China's international politics as the sense of exceptionalism within the Chinese Communist Party*. By looking at the views of its top leaders and key opinion makers as expressed in their speeches and writings, I argue that a deep sense of exceptionalism is highly pervasive within the Chinese worldview, and that these dynamics of exceptionalism have shaped how China seeks to relate with the world. To be sure, Chinese exceptionalism is not the only factor contributing to the Chinese worldview concerning the global order, nor does it provide an exhaustive explanation that accounts for China's political behavior. Indeed, other factors such as political ideology, threat perception, and historical experiences have also deeply shaded Chinese thinking on international relations. However, I argue that none of these factors have had a more profound effect on China's political worldview than Chinese exceptionalism. This is especially so in the 21st century, when China is seeking not only parity with other major powers, but also to surpass them (particularly the United States). By seeing itself as good and different, China not only seeks to emphasize its own brand of distinctive practices towards international politics, but also to differentiate its practices from and establish their superiority to those of the West. To this end, China perceives the existing international order as ripe for change and believes that it ought to play a more influential role while having others acknowledge its interests.

To clarify, I am not suggesting that I believe China is indeed exceptional in the manner of which it conducts its international relations and foreign policy. On the contrary, China has acted in a very un-exceptional way in various international political affairs. Is claiming exceptionalism then merely a strategy that Chinese leaders and policy makers utilize to promote Beijing's own interests? In my view, such an argument is also overly simplistic, for it assumes that the pursuit of national interests is devoid of any ideational basis. My view is that Chinese exceptionalism is an important element of China's worldview (although it is not the only factor, as I have highlighted earlier) that frames how Chinese leaders and opinion-makers think about the world. My objective in this book is not to build a new IR theory (exceptionalism or otherwise) that proposes to explain everything about China's international relations, but rather to use Chinese exceptionalism as a lens for comprehending China's political worldview and the extent to which this worldview is indicative of the thought-forms and ideas permeating Chinese society at large. Hence the importance of Chinese exceptionalism lies not in its ability to provide a singular explanation for Chinese political

behavior (indeed, counterfactuals and counterarguments naturally exist) but rather *as a paradigm for considering and evaluating the meaning and significance behind Chinese political narratives and international relations*. As observed by Deng Yong, China's international relations are best considered in terms of "interaction between domestic and international politics, between China and other great powers, and between China's rise and evolution of the world order at large."[24] In other words, China's views of itself and the world are closely intertwined. Instead of isolating one aspect of China's ascent as a great power (for instance its military growth or economic might) and using it to explain China's international relations, this study of the Chinese worldview hopes to incorporate a more *holistic explanation* in which Chinese interests are seen as interwoven with other political, social, and cultural factors which subsequently play out in Chinese domestic politics and international relations.

As a branch of Chinese political thought, Chinese exceptionalism (*zhongguo liwai lun*, 中国例外伦) has also been the subject of Chinese scholarly analysis.[25] According to the Chinese sociologist Kang Xiaoguang, Chinese exceptionalism is manifested in two ways: first, through China's success in large-scale institutional change and growing international status; and second, by the successful preservation of the power of the Communist Party and the increasing stability of its political situation.[26] Kang further observes that in China the government (or the Party) wields a position of absolute dominance (*juedui zhudao diwei* 绝对主导地位) over society.[27] Kang is careful to clarify that while social behavior is not insignificant, to "understand the motives and behavior of China's performance" there is a need to "understand the Chinese government's way of motivation and behavior."[28] In a study of China's foreign policy Feng Zhang noted that Chinese exceptionalism represents an "essential part of the worldview of the Chinese government and many intellectuals [and] it can become an important source for policy ideas."[29] Similarly, Chris Alden and Daniel Large espouse Chinese exceptionalism as a theoretical framework in their

24 Deng, *China's Struggle for Status,* p. 15.

25 See Cheng, "Zhongguo Qianjing"; Kang, "Zhongguo Teshulun." Kang uses the term *zhongguo teshulun* to describe Chinese exceptionalism, but using *teshu* (特殊) to mean "special" can be problematic, given its negative connotations in Chinese (i.e., "special" as "mentally challenged"), so the preferred term is *zhongguo liwai lun*.

26 Kang, "Zhongguo Teshulun."

27 *Ibid*.

28 *Ibid*.

29 Zhang, "The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism," p. 307.

discussion of China-Africa relations, terming it a "normative modality of engagement that seeks to structure relations" that is geared towards ensuring "mutual benefit" and "win-win" outcomes at continental and bilateral levels.[30] This is seen to be on fairer terms compared to Western-African relations, which are perceived to be conducted on terms more favorable to the West.

A worldview emphasizing Chinese exceptionalism has historical antecedents. One study shows that during late imperial China such an understanding was used as a "cultural strategy to confront and appropriate the hegemonic representation of modern democratic power and Occidental civilization that was articulated on the basis of Tocqueville's exceptionalist image of America and imposed by Western imperialism."[31] What is different today is that China, is far better connected to the outside world than in its imperial past, its global reach going structurally much deeper, which holds wide-ranging implications.[32] As such, Chinese exceptionalism represents not just a cultural strategy to cope with the external imposition of hegemonic foreign ideas, but also, I argue, a means for Chinese elites to actively espouse their worldviews and promote China on the international stage. Chinese exceptionalist discourse possesses both defensive and offensive elements. As a defensive strategy, it allows Chinese leaders to defend Chinese actions on their own terms, rather than being compelled to respond according to universal rules that are considered Western-centric; as an offensive strategy, it legitimizes Chinese actions by emphasizing the positive aspects of China's worldview. Such a worldview (and the use of "Sino-speak" discourse) frequently reference the past – and China's history – as a starting point in order to express how Chinese elites see China's future.[33] As observed by Callahan, "the discourse of Chinese exceptionalism is hardly unique; as articulations of American exceptionalism show, part of being a great power is celebrating the moral value of your new world order."[34] Upon what basis, then, should the moral value of China's purported world order be evaluated? To what extent does a Chinese world order offer a unique alternative – in that there is something about China, whether its history or its current position in the global order (or both), that marks the Chinese world order as utterly different from others? Or is it simply synonymous with a Sino-centric worldview, in which China's

30 Alden and Large, "China's Exceptionalism."
31 Chen, "Reflexive Exceptionalism."
32 McNally, "Sino-Capitalism;" Ajami, "China's Economic Arrival."
33 Callahan, "Sino-Speak."
34 *Ibid*., p. 50.

growing power enables it to coerce other nations to accept its view of the international system? These are the questions discussed over the course of this book.

Exceptionalism in International Relations

A discourse of Chinese exceptionalism has gradually gained traction in scholarly circles both within and outside China as a mode of political inquiry into Chinese international relations behavior. Skeptics of this approach may pose the question: Do not all countries, with few exceptions, consider themselves exceptional in some sense? If that is the case, how would the concept of a specifically *Chinese* exceptionalism offer us new insights into Chinese political behavior? To this, I argue that this is precisely why Chinese exceptionalism is important. Unless we are prepared to argue that all countries consider themselves exceptional in the same way, then the differences that constitute the reason(s) for their self-perceived exceptionalism have to be accounted for. In other words, different countries consider themselves exceptional for *different* reasons. Some appeal to history; others allude to their superior model of governance; while still others see themselves as enjoying the favor of divine providence. In this book, I look specifically at China and how its exceptionalism is considered and how these considerations in turn shape China's political worldview. To this end, I argue that a country's sense of exceptionalism is crucial as both a means of *fostering national identity* (i.e., who are we) and the *framing of its international relations* (i.e., what should we do). In other words, the idea of exceptionalism is not simply a rhetorical device used to legitimize political leadership, but is also intimately concerned with the social, cultural, and political characteristics of states and their relations with others. Given the primacy of the United States in global affairs since the Second World War, much of the *existing* scholarly literature on exceptionalism alludes to the American experience.[35] Notwithstanding the challenges to the United States in the 21st century, one might view American exceptionalism as an "interwoven bundle of ideas that together represent an American creed or ideology" that continues to wield substantial traction in both the American public and American political culture, shaping how everyday Americans

35 Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*; Tomes, "American Exceptionalism;" Brooks, *American Exceptionalism*.

think about US power and influence.[36] American exceptionalism, as one study puts it, was not caused by "wealth, military force, or the capacity to influence events far from its shores" but instead by the "features of the human condition that arose [...] that became associated with the *idea of America* [emphasis mine]."[37] What were these "features?" According to Stephanson, they were rooted in religious sources, specifically in biblical notions of what it means to be God's people in a promised land in which Providential destiny was manifesting.[38] He points out that "visions of the United States as a sacred place providentially selected for divine purposes found a counterpart in the secular idea of the new nation of liberty as a privileged 'stage' for the exhibition of a new world order, a great 'experiment' for the benefit of humankind as a whole."[39] Very early in American history, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* suggests that Christianity had exerted a deep and profound impact among Americans, particularly in how the notion of freedom was understood.[40] Of course, exceptionalism, as applied to the American experience, has also frequently been used as a point of critique; in Stephen Walt's words, "by focusing on their supposedly exceptional qualities, Americans blind themselves to the ways that they are a lot like everyone else."[41]

Be that as it may, there are important differences between political regimes, their respective systems of governance, and the outcomes (or consequences) of these systems. As Brooks puts it, "unless we are prepared to argue that all belief systems and institutional arrangements are equally likely to produce desirable outcomes in terms of affluence, population health, human dignity, and life satisfaction, then we must acknowledge that some are better than others."[42]

What, then, can be said for Chinese exceptionalism? Following from the earlier discussion of the literature, I argue that Chinese exceptionalism – in the broadest sense – is associated with the *idea of China*. Seen this way, Chinese exceptionalism *can be defined as an interwoven bundle of ideas that together represent a Chinese creed or ideology that continues to wield substantial traction among the Chinese public and within Chinese political culture, shaping how Chinese think about China's power and influence*. Such a

36 Tomes, "American Exceptionalism," p. 46.
37 Brooks, *American Exceptionalism,* p. 3.
38 Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny.*
39 *Ibid*., p. 5.
40 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 43.
41 Walt, "The Myth of American Exceptionalism."
42 Brooks, *American Exceptionalism,* p. 3.

creed or ideology conceives of China as being good and different: good in the sense that China's international politics and foreign policy are *superior – in a moral sense* – to others'; and different in that China has a distinct way of perceiving the world, one that is shaded and influenced by its cultural traditions and history. As such, Chinese exceptionalist rhetoric is frequently espoused to emphasize that China is different from others and that it is destined to be the center of the world (*zhongguo* 中国) while at the same time also celebrating the moral quality of China's international influence. For instance, the idea of *tianxia* ("all-under-heaven") promulgated by the Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang (whose thought I consider in the next chapter) features prominently in Chinese scholars' understanding of China's place in the world. Crucially, this difference is often emphasized as a *unique* Chinese contribution to global politics and is used to call into question the normative rules governing present-day international politics while presenting Chinese alternatives as morally better. According to Callahan, Zhao's attempt – as an instance – to present the Under-Heaven system as "the solution to the world's problems [entails a system] that values order over freedom, ethics over law, and elite governance over democracy and human rights."[43] Thus Zhao's desire to transcend the historical limits of Chinese tradition has the goal, as Callahan puts it, of "rethink[ing] China" to "rethink the world."[44]

This rethinking of China, I argue, takes place today through attempts to present China as an exceptional power, one which does not emulate the West but instead utilizes the cultural and ideological repository of its own traditions and history to distinguish itself from the West.[45] More importantly, Chinese exceptionalism serves to justify Communist party rule in a country that, despite its global reach and presence, remains a "partial power" in terms of influence.[46] In other words, the promotion of a Chinese world order (whether *Tianxia* or not) and the preservation of China's domestic order are intertwined vis-à-vis a single institution: the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP would be unable to articulate what an international order would be like if it could not achieve its domestic objectives; likewise, in order to achieve its domestic objectives, it has to ensure that the international order is favorably disposed towards China.

43 Callahan, *China Dreams*, p. 56.

44 *Ibid*.

45 See Callahan, "History, Tradition and the China Dream" for a critique of modern Chinese political ideology.

46 Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*.

One way to do this is for Beijing to present itself as an exceptional power that it is both different and good: different from the West (by being "inherently peaceful"), with a goodness derived from claiming moral superiority (by being the most virtuous, including first in whatever it does).[47] Given China's pursuit of national rejuvenation and international status, a moral (or ethical) basis is needed to avoid the criticism that China is pursuing growth at all costs. Chinese exceptionalism therefore provides a *conduit of discourse* for the Chinese government to achieve its objective of casting itself as a morally upright nation. This is done in two ways: first, by promoting a positive image of China which is peace-seeking, non-hegemonic, and therefore different; and second, to preserve the identity of "Chinese-ness," which is desirable or good, against what it sees as subversive values (such as the rule of law, liberal democracy, and civil society) that have the potential to undermine the Communist Party's hold on power.

The Chinese Worldview and the Global Political Order

The central question of my study is *what is the Chinese worldview concerning the global order and what are the norms and principles that China seeks to promote seeing itself as an exceptional power?* How does Chinese exceptionalism influence Chinese debates concerning China's role in the global system? To what extent can China claim to be different and good (i.e., exceptional) in international relations, and how successful has China been in utilizing such a strategy to both boost its international image and preserve Chinese identity in the 21st century?

To answer these questions, I argue the following: first, that ideas have consequences; second, that interests influence choices; and third, relations (that are not necessary defined by power) affect conduct.[48] While this viewpoint places the study in the constructivist camp in terms of taking Chinese ideas and culture seriously, I also argue that the importance of the international system in both framing and possibly limiting China's choices of actions is also an essential point of analysis. Nor does it minimize the importance of power dynamics (informed by a realist worldview) in Chinese international relations. Indeed, the importance of political power features prominently in Chinese elite politics and frequently manifests

47 Callahan, *China Dreams*, p. 156.

48 Wendt, *Social Theory,* see pp. 92-135 and 313-366.

in China's foreign policy.[49] On the other hand, it can also be argued that China's international politics entail much more than the pursuit of wealth and power; symbolic issues including Beijing's search for respect, status, and national pride also drive its foreign policy.[50]

This study's goal is therefore to locate the "recombination of processes," as Katzenstein puts it, that result from China's increased engagement with the world and the influence that these interactions subsequently have in China's international relations.[51] Chinese exceptionalism involves an interplay of forces (both ideational and material) that is aimed not just to legitimize Communist Party governance within China, but also to celebrate China (and the Party's) standing in the world – and with that the possibility of changing the global order. Further, there is a deep and ambivalent tension between the structure of the international system (which is largely Western-dominated) and Chinese thinking about what the international system ought to be like (i.e., less Western-dominated, with the introduction of more Chinese indigenous ideas). In addition, China wants to be like the West in terms of scientific knowledge and technological know-how without emulating the values of the West. Is this possible? Is it possible for China to achieve the former and not to some extent appropriate the latter? As highlighted earlier, many Chinese scholars seem to draw a distinction between China and the West in their articulation of Chinese identity, but are such differences "real" or imagined? Likewise, ideas and material structures are not inherently opposed, but instead interact with each other in a creative/dialectical manner where each influences, and in turn is influenced by, the other.

To analyzing what a Chinese worldview might mean, and whether Chinese exceptionalism has been successful in helping the Chinese government achieve its objectives, it is first necessary to examine the climate of ideas pervading Chinese society and how these ideas are incarnated in Chinese politics. Not least because of the opening up, Chinese society is far more ideologically diverse and multi-faceted than a straight-forward explanation of Confucian values or Marxist ideas might suggest. As Richard Madsen reminds us in his study of a Chinese village, the Chinese Communists' official obsession with Confucian ideas only provides "vague hints about how that official obsession might affect the beliefs of ordinary Chinese citizens."[52] Likewise, in Callahan's study of Chinese public intellectuals, it is surmised

49 Lampton, *Following the Leader;* Zhang, "Domestic Sources."
50 Deng, *China's Struggle*; Gries, *China's New Nationalism.*
51 Katzenstein, "China's Rise."
52 Madsen, *Morality and Power,* p. ix.

that China's civil society contains a "broad spectrum of activity that ranges from promoting the fundamentalism of the China model to [encouraging] more cosmopolitan views of China and the world."[53] While Chinese elites may work to project a particular Chinese worldview, how that worldview is interpreted, internalized, and acted upon, both within and outside China, remains open to debate.

Research Design

My research analyzes how popular notions of the Chinese worldview concerning the global order influence China's international relations, with a particular focus on those informed by the idea of Chinese exceptionalism. By examining the discourse of various key actors and opinion leaders in China and identifying the worldview they bring into their work (speeches, writings), this book seeks to narrate how Chinese exceptionalism is understood and fleshed out in Chinese political practices and international relations. Instead of trying to get to the bottom of what the "real China" is or debating whether China's rise will be peaceful, I ask a more basic question: "what is going on here," and what does it tell us about the Chinese worldview.

In my research, I contend that China's assertiveness about its interests is due to seeing itself as exceptional and, more importantly, as "different" and "good" compared to other major powers, particularly the United States. Given its global prominence, a certain sense of pride and "Chinese entitlement" also color how Chinese leaders comprehend Chinese interests and its political relations with other states, especially those in Asia. In relating to the world order, China – as an exceptional power – wants to challenge and modify the present Western-led international order to suit its preferences and prescriptions concerning the rules and norms of the global system.[54] This may be done through the establishment of initiatives such as the security-related Xiangshan Forum, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, but to what extent are these initiatives able to provide China with the opportunity to not just express its preferences concerning global norms, but also more crucially also to promote what it sees as the proper form of the global system and its norms. Critics of exceptionalism would argue that "exceptionalism" is mostly rhetoric, and most nation states tend to think that way about

53 Callahan, *China Dreams*, p. 39.
54 Christensen, *The China Challenge*.

themselves. The question "how exceptional is China" would be also asked, especially by realist scholars, who generally view the pursuit of power as a goal applicable to all nation-states without exception. Given this, it is necessary to empirically demonstrate that Chinese state behavior is due not only to material interests, but also to a deeper commitment to certain ideational factors that are part of the Chinese exceptionalist mindset. In other words, as the argument goes, does Chinese thinking regarding international relations and global order contain a sense of exceptionalism, and if so, to what extent do these ideas influence how China pursues its international relations?

In this study, I use in-depth interviews and discourse analysis of both primary and secondary sources to test my claims. Areas of convergence in these sources are useful for illustrating exceptionalist ideas and how they relate to Chinese actions. Using in-depth interviews is most appropriate for providing a nuanced understanding of my subjects' perspective. In-depth interviews give the following advantages: (I) they can pursue questions that are difficult to locate in documentary sources or everyday interactions, and explore such questions in intricate detail; (II) they permit an exceptional degree of flexibility, control, and detail in the pursuit of participants' understandings; (III) the act to recover and analyze the agency of individuals; and (IV) they allow the mapping of the conceptual world of participants in ways that illuminate both coherence and inconsistencies.[55] I have mostly interviewed members of the Chinese academic community for this study; as recounted to me, Chinese government officials frequently toe the official line in interviews, while the Chinese academics are more inclined to speak their mind, and hence represent a richer source of information and ideas.[56]

Discourse analysis is used to uncover themes of Chinese worldview, global order, and exceptionalism that are prevalent in Chinese sources. These sources include speeches made by the top Chinese government leaders, Chinese scholars, and citizen intellectuals whose voices collectively illuminate China's socio-political landscape. To take these comments at face-value would be naïve, but to be overly cynical and dismiss these voices as either government propaganda or the voice of a minority anti-government movement would be to jumping to an equally simplistic conclusion. As observed, discourses maintain a degree of regularity in social relations, produce both preconditions for and constraints on actions, and frame how actors think

55 Soss, "Talking Our Way," pp. 127-150.

56 Interview with Singaporean diplomat formerly based in Beijing, March 31, 2016, London.

about the world.[57] Further, as identity and policy are constituted through a process of narrative adjustment and stand in a constitutive, rather than causal, relationship, it is important to examine how individuals in China relate to their external environment, and consequently how they think and act about issues.[58] Given that Chinese society is far from monolithic, there are varying levels of beliefs (some stronger, some weaker) about Chinese views of global order and exceptionalism among my research subjects and hence, to uncover the extent to which these different levels of Chinese global order, identity and exceptionalism interrelate with each other in China's international relations. My own fluency with Chinese culture and language provides me with some measure of cultural competence to make sense of the differences of meanings and representations embedded within the Chinese worldview concerning its brand of exceptionalism.

The lack of a quantitative aspect of my methodology may raise questions concerning its replicability or, for that matter, whether claims of exceptionalism are indeed falsifiable and therefore can be considered scientifically rigorous. Recent work on the nature of the self has generally destabilized the concept of the individual as having a "fixed, immutable, identity;" instead, the individual is considered to have a "narrative identity."[59] The stories told about themself then become the basis for truth-claims by the individual and vividly shape the manner they comprehend the world. This is not to suggest that scientific precision using quantifiable indicators do not matter – where possible, I use quantitative analysis in the form of surveys – but I analyze these findings in reference to narratives, using a "person-centered strategy" to better make sense of what the findings mean to each situated individual.[60] In their study of the leadership patterns of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, He and Feng highlight the importance of leaders' belief systems for understanding the nature and policy of states in the international system. As they note, "leaders' beliefs moreover dictate the policy behaviors of states, as the different policy choices of states are the means whereby leaders achieve their strategic goals within the international system."[61] It is therefore necessary to understand the moral environment that Chinese leaders inhabit and from which they receive cues concerning how they should act. As the Cambridge philosopher Simon Blackburn puts it, "[Our

57 See Neumann, "Discourse Analysis," pp. 62-63.
58 Hansen, *Security as Practice,* pp. xvii-xx.
59 Elliott, *Using Narrative,* p. 1.
60 *Ibid.,* p. 91.
61 He and Feng, "Xi Jinping's Operational Code," p. 217.

moral environment] determines what we find acceptable or unacceptable, admirable or contemptible. It determines our conception of when things are going well and when they are going badly. It determines our conception of what is due to us, and what is due from us, as we relate to others. It shapes our emotional responses, determining what is a cause of pride or shame, or anger or gratitude, or what can be forgiven and what cannot."[62]

Seen this way, one might argue that both Chinese views of global order and Chinese exceptionalism are closely linked to the Chinese moral environment. How, then, do Chinese scholars understand their moral environment (both within and outside of China), and consequently what are the key operating ideas and belief systems that shape how Chinese scholars think about the world? How are these ideas fleshed out and translated in the field of Chinese international relations? Indeed, as discussed here (especially in Chapters 2, 3, and 4), this issue of morality is an important element in China's international relations. Both Chinese leaders and scholars seek to project China as a "good" power and whose international relations practices are justified as morally acceptable. This is contrasted with the practices of the West, which are frequently touted as morally questionable, thus allowing China to legitimately claim superiority over the West. This book therefore seeks to analyze the concept of Chinese exceptionalism with regards to a number of important themes and topics relevant to China's international relations and to see how exceptionalism is being fleshed out, and consequently to evaluate the persuasiveness and usefulness of Chinese exceptionalism discourse to China's international politics.

Book Overview

It would, of course, be impossible to exhaustively cover every aspect of China's political worldview and its relevance to Beijing's international politics and foreign policy. Instead, I will focus primarily on China's international politics and the events of the Xi Jinping administration (i.e., from 2013 onwards) and use them as a springboard to anchor my broader discussion of Chinese exceptionalism. Each chapter focuses on unpacking some of the key issues in China's political worldview and locating them in the context of the discourses and debates about conceptions of the Chinese worldview and claims to Chinese exceptionalism.

62 Blackburn, *Being Good*, p. 1.

The rest of this book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 looks at the study of the discipline of international relations in China and how Chinese international relations scholars try to explain China's political worldview in the conduct of international politics within an exceptionalist framework, or what is more commonly termed "Chinese characteristics." I examine the ideas promulgated by four Chinese scholars whose engagement in international relations through the use of so-called Chinese indigenous ideas underlies the bulk of present debates in Chinese IR theory. These ideas are underscored by a powerful conviction that existing international relations paradigms are mostly derived from Western culture and history and thus should not be applied to the analysis of Chinese international relations. Instead, there is a need to account for elements of Chinese traditional culture and historical experiences. By privileging a Sino-centric perspective towards international relations while also rejecting the tenets proffered by mainstream international relations theory (which they consider Western), these scholars demonstrate the existence of Chinese exceptionalism thinking as applied to the conceptualization of Chinese political thought and the Chinese worldview.

In Chapter 3, I explore how the Chinese worldview, particularly Chinese exceptionalism, shapes understandings of Chinese national identity. To do so, I use a sociological structure that builds on the concept of "liquid modernity" and explicate how this is played out in Chinese society. More importantly, Chapter 3 seeks to understand how the issue of Chinese national identity is intertwined with China's international relations. How is this national identity constructed to present China as a virtuous or "better" nation than the West? I also look at the relationship between the individual and the state and how the negotiation between national and individual identities plays out in practice. To what extent are these two identities co-constitutive or in conflict with each other, and how does this in turn affect the amount of "social capital" that is necessary for the proper function of Chinese society? I also probe the extent to which Chinese nationalism is able to offer the Party leadership the social capital required to create a shared sense of meaning and cohesiveness (*ningjuli* 凝聚力) within Chinese society. I question whether the Chinese government and the political system it establishes is able to contend with the forces of modernity and the dilemmas it would face in the coming years.

Chapter 4 focuses on China's view of itself (i.e., its national image) and how this view is presented to the outside world. More specifically, I relate how the projection of China's national image has the goal of telling the story of China as an exceptional power, and consequently the legitimacy of its

claim to global leadership. Through an examination of the speeches made by President Xi Jinping, I examine which political narratives and national images Chinese leaders seek to project to the outside world. I study the extent to which such images have been successful in presenting China as an exceptional power to both its domestic constituents and the wider world.

Chapter 5 looks at the high-profile Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) introduced by President Xi Jinping as an example of the Chinese worldview concerning regional/international order. In studying the discourse around the BRI, I uncover the themes that present China as an exceptional power and what these themes tell us about Beijing's political worldview vis-à-vis the West. In addition, studying the BRI will also provide us with important clues about how China – in its quest for global greatness – seeks to challenge the existing international system, and the associated set of ideas it purports to promulgate within its own theatres of influence. Given that China is frequently criticized by Western countries for being a global free-rider, these initiatives to a certain extent vindicate China's actions while simultaneously compelling China to stake a claim to regional, if not international, responsibility. If Chinese foreign policy is an extension of its domestic politics, however, such projects cannot be divorced from the internal prerogatives of the CCP. In this chapter I discuss the importance of economic statecraft in China's global diplomacy and public image, particularly the extent to which economics is understood as a form of Chinese soft power that can both procure political influence and help present China as an exceptional power. I also analyze both official and unofficial sources proffered by Chinese international relations scholars on the Belt and Road Initiative to examine how it is understood within the broader view regarding China's foreign policy and international relations.

Chapters 6 and 7 shift from focusing on the Chinese worldview itself to examining the relationship between this worldview and China's relations with its neighbors. To what extent is Beijing's international behavior accepted, or to phrase it in another way, has China's worldview been bought into by countries in Southeast Asia? How do China's neighbors interpret and understand the Chinese worldview and China's political actions? In Chapter 6, I focus on the two key countries of Vietnam and Indonesia. Given Vietnam's geographical proximity, historical ties, and ideological links with China, it is highly sensitive to Chinese actions within its periphery and thus provides highly contextualized insights into China's regional diplomacy. As one of Southeast Asia's major players, Indonesia is influential in ASEAN's decision-making process and its views of China are taken seriously, especially by Chinese leaders. Through a series of in-depth interviews with

policy-makers from these two countries, many of whom are well acquainted with political-security matters, I explain the complexities of how China is being perceived by its neighbors and the degree to which China's political worldview and ideas about the design of a proper global order are being accepted by others nations.

In Chapter 7, I focus on Singapore, a city-state with a sizeable ethnic Chinese population, and the scholarly discourse on China that emanates from its elite. If Beijing is becoming associated with a benevolent form of global leadership, then we can expect this to be reflected in Singapore's perspective towards China. Further, given Singapore's ethnic majority Chinese population, Singapore represents a good platform for testing and validating claims of Chinese exceptionalism. To what extent are Singaporean ethnic Chinese able to identify with China's political worldview and its claims of exceptionalism? In this chapter, I examine the ideas promulgated by three Singaporean public intellectuals whose reading and appraisal of China's international relations represent the existing views of Beijing in Singapore. I argue that at the crux of Singapore's perspective(s) towards China lies in the contestation of ideational, material, and structural factors that are linked to China's international relations, as well as in the extent to which China is perceived as exceptional – that is, good and different. In Chapter 8, I sum up my findings and highlight the implications of my study to understanding the future of China's international relations and its view of the global political order. I show that three key themes are highly pervasive throughout the Chinese worldview: (I) the Chinese Communist Party continues to wield significant authorship over the master narrative of China's political worldview; (II) much of China's international politics and claims to exceptionalism are defined in opposition to an imagined West (and the United States) that is seen as attempting to contain China's rise; and (III) China considers the international system and its associated rules to be outdated, and therefore wants to seek a greater voice in rewriting the rules to promote its own interests. I argue that for China's worldview to be accepted by others, it would have to demonstrate an affinity with the West and an appreciation of ideological differences in its international relations, instead of constantly presenting itself as non-Western. This would allow it to actualize the positive expression of what it stands for (rather than just highlighting what it opposes). Notwithstanding its claims to exceptionalism and being good and different from the West, I argue that the current Chinese worldview remains highly particularistic (or Sino-centric) and presents limited claims to universality, thus rendering its view of a desired political order questionable and potentially difficult to actualize in practice.

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2 Chinese Political Worldview

IR with Chinese Characteristics

Abstract
The chapter examines "Chinese ways" of thinking about international relations, including how traditional Chinese ideas are accounted for and incorporated into mainstream IR scholarship. It argues that the study of Chinese IR should be viewed within the larger framework of a Chinese self-identity that is perceived as in tension with Western conceptions of the self, society, and statehood. Specifically, I compare the ideas put forth by four Chinese scholars with a few mainstream IR theories (realism, liberalism, and constructivism) and evaluate the extent to which the theories proposed by Chinese scholars can be considered unique and/or better than existing IR theories in terms of their ability to explain certain aspects of Chinese political life.

Keywords: international relations theory, realism, constructivism, liberalism, Chinese characteristics

In Chapter 1, I highlighted the need to examine China's political worldview, including how it views its place in the existing global order, as a crucial starting point for understanding its international relations. I also proposed the notion of Chinese exceptionalism – the idea that China sees itself as being good and different – as a fundamental aspect of how China sees itself and also as a major influence on its relations with the international community. In this chapter, I examine how China's worldview and claims to exceptionalism are reflected in the study of international relations (IR) in China, and how the academic discipline of IR is understood by Chinese scholars through an exceptionalist framework. Why is this important? The study of international relations in China is not a neutral activity pursued as

Ho, Benjamin Tze Ern, *China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism: International Order and Global Leadership*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2021
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a purely academic endeavor to generate new forms of inquiry.[1] Instead, it is highly politicized and subjected to broader political objectives, particularly the preservation of Communist party rule (discussed below). As such, we might surmise that the study of IR in China reflects not only the thinking of Chinese IR scholars about international affairs, but also incorporates features of Chinese political culture and political life to some extent, insofar as these are being embedded within scholarly perceptions and the practice of international politics.

Given this context, I argue that China's prominence in international relations has emboldened Chinese IR scholars in recent years to suggest a "Chinese way" of thinking about international relations, to consider traditional Chinese ideas and incorporate them into mainstream IR scholarship, which is seen as privileging a Western-centric reading of international affairs. Indeed, as I show in this chapter, within the Chinese political worldview, there is a deep sense of superiority and difference vis-à-vis the West, and it is widely believed that the discipline of international relations ought to reflect these attributes. In a study detailing the development of Chinese IR theory, Qin Yaqing – the president of the China Foreign Affairs University – observes that efforts to develop Chinese IR theory have gained momentum since the start of the 21st century because of China's increasing economic strength and international influence.[2] While these concepts have yet to obtain universal traction and are still largely in an embryonic stage of development, the ability to theorize "is a sign of intellectual maturity,"[3] as Qin puts it, and Chinese scholars are increasingly using indigenous Chinese resources to articulate what they view as a unique Chinese contribution to the wider IR discipline.

In the following, I examine the ideas promulgated by four Chinese scholars whose engagement with international relations theory through the use of so-called Chinese indigenous ideas provide a useful comparison with existing mainstream IR theories: Yan Xuetong, Qin Yaqing, Zhao Tingyang, and Zhang Feng. Three of them, Yan, Qin, and Zhao, are well known for their theoretical work on Chinese international politics. Despite his academic background in philosophy, Zhao's ideas about *tianxia* ("all-under-heaven") have received substantial attention both within and outside China for their

1 This is also confirmed by the author's interviews with Chinese IR scholars, both inside and outside of China, many of whom highlighted the Chinese government's emphasis on domestic priorities.

2 Qin, "Development of International Relations Theory."

3 *Ibid*., p. 198.

relevance to Chinese IR thinking.[4] Zhang, who is much younger, represents a new generation of Chinese IR scholars[5] who have undergone substantial IR training in the West and are thus seen as scholarly interlocutors who are able to explain China to Western audiences using a combination of Chinese and Western forms of thought.[6] To be clear, the work of these four scholars does not exhaustively cover all the permutations of scholarly debates that characterize the study of international relations in China, an analysis of which would be far beyond the scope of this book. Instead, this chapter examines the theoretical paradigms offered by these four scholars in their study of international relations to uncover what they can tell us about the Chinese worldview and claims to exceptionalism. As I demonstrate, these four scholars are united by a strong belief that *existing IR paradigms derived from Western experiences are insufficient to account for Chinese international relations and the Chinese political worldview.* More than that, their ideas seek to challenge the universality of the insights of Western IR paradigms while at the same time also attempting to emphasize – and even universalize – the insights offered by Chinese IR thought. These scholars argue for the inclusion of traditional Chinese culture and experiences gathered from Chinese history in studies of international relations, and attempt to conceptualize China's approach to international relations in reference to other considerations, such as patterns of relationality, emotional affectivity, and moral conduct. Consequently, their arguments question the relevance of a Western thought and worldview for studies of China, and seek to relativize the conclusions that are arrived at.

This chapter proceeds as follows. I first provide a brief overview of the development of international relations theory in China, with a particular focus on scholarly discussions emerging from China in the 2000s, a period in which China's global rise become more pronounced and debate about Chinese IR insights became more prevalent. I then analyze the ideas put forth by each of the four scholars in turn, drawing out the similarities and differences between these ideas and existing IR schools of thought (realism, liberalism, and constructivism) and examining the extent to which the theories based on Chinese traditional ideas can be said to be unique or

4 Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi;* Callahan and Barabantseva, *China Orders the World.*

5 I refer only to those who were born in the PRC as "Chinese," thus excluding scholars who are ethnically Chinese but are of non PRC-descent. Whether they are based inside or outside of China is less relevant to my selection.

6 See, Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony.* The fact that Zhang also talks about Chinese exceptionalism in his writings also makes his work a natural point of reference and selection for my analysis of Chinese international relations thought.

distinct. I argue that while it is possible to incorporate Chinese traditional ideas into our understanding of the behavior of the Chinese state, China's specific political system and political culture impose limits on the degree to which these ideas can be properly termed as an IR theory, and that they also lack generalizability.

IR Theory with Chinese Characteristics

The importance of articulating a Chinese approach to international relations theory can be said to be motivated in part by the need to present Chinese national interests to the international community. In a study of the relationship between China's global ascendancy and its international relations, Hung-jen Wang identifies three main features of Chinese IR scholarship: "identity, appropriation, and adaptation."[7] In the first phase of Chinese IR scholarship in the late 1980s and early 1990s following China's re-integration into the international system, Chinese IR scholars were shaped by their experiences of China's political systems, cultural values, and history. From the late 1990s and early 2000s onwards, Chinese scholars began to appropriate Western IR theories and apply them in relationship with the Chinese principle of *ti-yong* ("substance-function") – in other words, they started combining Chinese concerns with foreign knowledge. Given the growing prominence of China in international affairs, Chinese scholars started to adapt certain concepts of Western IR scholarship (such as "balance of power" and "nation-state") to the analysis of events in China. To this end, Wang observed that "repeated cycles of learning and appropriation may ultimately relativize the universal values of those and other concepts found in Western IR theories so as to transform their original Western meanings."[8]

Similarly, Qin Yaqing has argued that the development of IR as an academic discipline in China has moved from a pre-theory to a theory-learning (or theory-deepening) stage. The "theory-innovation phase" in which "scholars will seek to explain reality and understand social phenomena from a distinctly Chinese perspective" has yet to materialize, although Chinese scholars have increasingly emphasized the need to incorporate Chinese traditional thinking into responses to global issues. One central feature of this theory-deepening stage is a fascination with constructivism (specifically

7 Wang, *The Rise of China,* p. 2.
8 *Ibid.,* p. 4.

in the footsteps of Alexander Wendt[9]) and the saliency of constructivist ideas for Chinese IR. In addition, given the debate about China's peaceful rise,[10] the issue of Chinese identity became a central concern among Chinese scholars. Constructivist ideas dovetailed well with the Chinese philosophy of *I Ching* ("Change"), which states that identity and behavior are changeable.[11] This constructivist turn in Chinese IR theory, I argue, reflects a broader debate about what it means to be Chinese in the 21st century, and the role and contribution of China in relation to the rest of the world.

Beyond scholarly enquiry, the emergence of Chinese perspectives to the study of international relations can also be said to be a reaction to the 2008-2009 US financial crisis, which had called into question the ongoing legitimacy of a Western-led international system. As such, the possibility of non-Western alternatives such as Chinese forms of thought to take root and permeate the structure of the international order became more pronounced.[12] Indeed, in the past decade China has chosen to embark on its own high-level initiatives that highlight Chinese leadership and the spread of Chinese global influence. For instance, the Xiangshan Forum, a security dialogue held every fall in Beijing since 2014 (and held once every two years from 2006-2012) is widely seen as a move to rival the annual Asia Security Forum (or Shangri-La Dialogue) held in Singapore and allow China to voice and frame discussions of global security matters. Indeed, China has downgraded its participation at the Asia Security Forum due to unhappiness about the discussion of maritime disputes in a multilateral platform (as opposed to a bilateral approach, which China prefers).[13] Economic initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – which are discussed in greater detail later in the book – have also been touted as Chinese responses to Western-led economic systems.[14]

From the above, it is evident that the study of Chinese IR should be viewed within a larger framework of perceived Chinese self-identity, and considered to be in tension, if not opposition, to Western conceptions of the

9 Wendt, *Social Theory*.

10 Mearsheimer, "Can China Rise Peacefully?"

11 Qin, "Development of International Relations Theory," p. 191.

12 This was a central point made by many of the Chinese scholars I interviewed during my fieldwork in Beijing between May 18 and June 15, 2017; see also, Zhong, *Fazhanxing Anquan;* Zheng and Lim, "Changing Geopolitical Landscape;" Sun, "Sunjianguo."

13 Tiezzi, "Why is China Downgrading Participation."

14 Zhang, "AIIB;" Huang, "Understanding China's Belt & Road Initiative;" Hu, "China's 'One Belt One Road' Strategy;" Ferdinand, "Westward Ho."

self, society, and statehood (this issue of identity will be further discussed in the next chapter). Why is this? One reason, according to Robert Cox, lies in how the past and future is understood by the Chinese, which differs from Western thinking. While Western thinkers tend to read change as "movement towards an ultimate preordained unity of thought and organized life" (i.e., the inevitable triumph of liberal democracy), in the Chinese understanding, change indicates a "movement to and fro, rise and fall, alternation in a cyclical pattern with a continuing moral injunction to achieve some degree of harmony among conflicting forces."[15] Similarly, Fei Xiaotong has explicated certain organizational patterns that are deeply entrenched in Chinese society that stand in direct contrast with those derived from the West.[16] While the merits and limitations of these arguments lie beyond the scope of this book, any analysis of Chinese IR must necessarily include some aspects of Chinese self-identity and its relevance to the study of international relations.

In the next few sections, I examine the thinking of four Chinese IR scholars and uncover aspects of Chinese self-identity that appear within their theoretical framework. I critically assess the relationship between these elements of self-identity and the three mainstream schools of IR (realism, liberalism, and constructivism), and highlight the differences and similarities between these mainstream schools and those conceptualized by Chinese IR scholars. While material factors such as power distribution, military capabilities and ideational ones such as political ideology continue to matter in our making sense of China's international politics, the topic of Chinese self-identity – I argue – remains the most complicated as it involves a self-other perception dynamic that cannot be easily measured or quantified. According to Deng Yong, China's objective during the late 1990s and early 2000s was to "join the club (of powerful nations)," but today China's intentions are to "form a club of its own" and consequently author its own terms of reference, instead of just acquiescing to the status quo.[17] To this end, the arguments described in the rest of this chapter reflect an attempt by Chinese IR scholars to distinguish Chinese ideas about international

15 Cox, "Historicity and International Relations," pp. 6-7. Interestingly, influenced by Marxist thinking under CCP rule, a new mindset has developed that adopts an almost teleological view of history as consisting of continuous progress and forward movement accompanied by "scientific development." This suggests a break from traditional Chinese thinking, as described by Cox, in the worldview of Chinese political elites. However, whether the vast majority of Chinese citizens subscribe to this new understanding of history remains to be seen.

16 Fei, *From the Soil*.

17 Personal interview, July 14, 2017, Singapore.

relations from existing paradigms, and more importantly, China's desire to interpret the story of its global rise through its own narrative frameworks instead of the West.

Yan Xuetong: A Chinese Realist Confronts Realism

Due to Yan's scholarly prominence both within and outside China, a number of critical assessments of his political ideas have been undertaken after the publication of his 2011 book, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, which provides an account of Chinese political thought and its implications for contemporary Chinese international relations.[18] Yan identifies as a realist scholar, noting that "realist logic is clear, simple, and easy to understand [... unlike the] dialectic method [...] by which any form of explanation is possible."[19] A central theme of Yan's overall analysis is the need to incorporate morality into the practice of international politics. In his 2016 book The *Transition of World Power: Political Leadership and Strategic Competition*, Yan proposes a framework of moral realism (*daoyi xianshizhuyi*, 道义现实主义) as a foundational premise for the conduct of international politics.[20] Yan prefaces his study by rejecting John Mearsheimer's claim that countries that take a moralistic approach are dangerous in international affairs. Yan argues that it is necessary to have a proper understanding of morality: states should not confuse their own moral concepts with universal moral standards. However, Yan adds that the concepts of moral realism that he puts forth are not restricted to China, but are also universally applicable. Yan also writes that the Confucian concept of "welcoming without exception, but not to teach" (*laierbuju buwangjiaozhi,* 来而不拒,不往教之) sharply contrasts with the Christian tradition of "asking others to convert" (*curen guiyi,* 促人皈依), and that China therefore adopts a non-confrontational foreign policy. This is in contrast to the US, which Yan argues has attempted to implement its own moral standards across national boundaries and has thereby caused countless conflicts.[21]

18 Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought.* For a critical appraisal of Yan's thinking, see Cunningham-Cross and Callahan, "Ancient Chinese Power."

19 For further explication of Yan's realist approach, see Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought,* pp. 240-241.

20 Yan, *Shijie Quanli de Zhuanyi.* As this chapter is not meant to be a full analysis of the book, I limit my observations to Chapter 1 (pp. 3-23), Chapter 5 (pp. 103-123), and Chapter 9 (pp. 214-238), in which Yan expounds on his study of moral realism and its relevance to the practice of international relations.

21 *Ibid.,* p. 7.

Yan also seeks to distinguish moral realism from other Chinese theories of international relations, arguing that a universal theory of international relations cannot be confined to national boundaries. Yan proposes that the goal of moral realism is to achieve a universal theory and that moral realism best explains the transition of world power from a leading power to a rising power.[22] Yan also argues that moral realism is a scientific method of inquiry and thus ought to be viewed as logical, verifiable, and having predictive properties.[23] In this respect, moral realism – as an IR theory – while developed to account for patterns of behavior in Chinese history, can also be applied to contemporary international relations since it is founded on an understanding of human nature, which is unchanging.[24] Yan further contends that, due to its emphasis on moral leadership, moral realism matches the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tenets and is thus being accepted. Yan also notes that moral realism does not mean that leading countries ought to practice "self-constraint" (*ziwo yueshu,* 自我约束) based on purely moral considerations, but should also include other factors in their decisions, such as their own "strategic interests" (*zhanlue liyi,* 战略利益).[25]

Yan concludes his analysis by proposing that China needs to establish its credentials as a "humane authority" (*wangquan,* 王权) rather than a "hegemonic power" (*baquan,* 霸权). Yan criticizes the hegemony of the present US-led international system and argues that a humane authority would be far superior to the existing arrangement.[26] The litmus test of whether China is able to fulfil its role as a humane authority is whether other countries view China as a model to emulate. Yan notes that, for example, the intensification of anti-corruption efforts by the Chinese government since 2013 can act as a positive force for attracting others to follow it.[27] In reference to the relationship between China and the US, Yan argues that the strategic competition between the two countries does not just concern their material capabilities, but also involve the values each country holds. Hence for China to achieve national rejuvenation, it not only has to provide the world with a different set of values, but these values need to be of a higher standard than those promoted by the US. To this end, Yan contends that values like "fairness" (*gongping,* 公平), "righteousness" (*zhengyi,* 正义) and "civilization" (*wenming,* 文明) are more important than "equality" (*pingdeng,*

22 *Ibid*., p. 105.
23 *Ibid*.
24 *Ibid*., p. 113.
25 *Ibid*., pp. 126-127.
26 *Ibid*., p. 216.
27 *Ibid*., p. 217

平等), "democracy" (*minzu,* 民主) and "freedom" (*ziyou,* 自由). Yan adds that it is natural for countries to emulate those who are more powerful, richer, and more prosperous, and that in the process of doing so, the country also subconsciously absorbs the values upon which these successes were built. This then results in new international norms and global orders.[28]

Given this brief summary of Yan's arguments, how should we approach the ideas of moral realism, and to what extent does Yan's exposition reflect a uniquely Chinese way of perceiving and ordering the international system. To be sure, the issue of morality is not solely found in Chinese IR thinking; Western IR thinkers – both realist scholars and others – have long debated the relationship between morality and power politics.[29] The difference between these discussions and Yan's discussion lies in how IR theory is related to practical realities. In the case of Western IR scholarship, theory is viewed as descriptive (what is), whereas Chinese IR theory purports to also be prescriptive (what ought to be).[30] While the saying that "theory is always for someone and for some purpose" can be applied equally to both Western and Chinese IR theories, Chinese IR scholars operate in a domestic environment that is far more restrictive and inhibitive of academic freedom than in the West.[31] Hence scholarly writing is not a purely academic exercise for the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, but also reflects individual and institutional positions vis-à-vis the Chinese government – and in some cases even functions as a political gamble to be "on the right side of those in power."[32] Yan makes clear that he sees his role as both a scholar and a policy advisor, and consequently that he can contribute to China's success on the global stage.[33] Because he mixes his scholarly and patriotic positions, it is difficult to take Yan's arguments on moral realism as having sufficiently universal reach. Rather, it can be said that Yan's prescriptions are largely framed with *only* China's national interests at heart, rather than taking into account the interests of other states as well, notwithstanding the rhetoric of China's inclusive diplomacy.[34]

28 *Ibid*., pp. 217-218.

29 Williams, "Why Ideas Matter;" Lebow, *The Tragic Vision.*

30 It should be said that critical IR scholarship also seeks to differentiate between what is normative from what is materialist.

31 Cox, "Social Forces, States, and World Order," p. 128. In China, academic think-tanks are usually required to provide policy positions that support political objectives, and have less autonomy to conduct purely academic research.

32 This was recounted to me by a Chinese IR scholar during a personal interview in Beijing, June 13, 2017.

33 See Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought,* pp. 229-251.

34 For a scholarly analysis of how Chinese diplomatic talk and Chinese diplomacy actions are frequently incompatible, see Lai, "Acting One Way."

Yan's moral realist position becomes more problematic in reference to Chinese exceptionalism: if Yan were to remain faithful to his version of moral realism, at some point he would have to criticize the Chinese government. However, nowhere in his writings does Yan explicitly criticize the Chinese Communist Party; it is as if the CCP faithfully and perfectly lives up to Yan's standards of morality. This is clearly not possible, for any government. By claiming a morally privileged position from which to criticize the West, Yan does not acknowledge his own starting position or political biases. This calls into question whether Yan's views can be said to be unique, or if they are simply a rehashing of realist tenets taken from existing international relations paradigms.

Finally, Yan's formulation of moral realism is also highly contentious. By conceiving of moral realism in a law-like manner, Yan does not leave any room for debate about the role of morality in international politics. Indeed, Yan writes of moral realism as if it is an established scientific law (like the law of gravity) that both states and statesmen ought to follow. In *Transition of World Power*, Yan frequently prefaces his arguments with the phrase "moral realism contends" (*daode xianshizhuyi renwei,* 道义现实主义认为), thereby essentially taking moral realism as unproblematic and as a given fact (or law). This begs the question: can one always be moral in the pursuit of one's own interests? A true realist would (in a Machiavellian manner) privilege interests over morality, the latter acting as a support only where expedient. Yan is unclear about where he stands on this matter. Does he perceive morality as necessary to the exercise of power politics and consistent with realist principles, or does he treat morality as ultimately subjected to political objectives, in which morality is seen as useful but not necessary? Indeed, the possibility that morality could be used as an instrumental veil for political goals is not factored into Yan's analysis. Given Yan's reputation as a realist scholar, the absence of a critical perspective towards the issue of morality somewhat undermines the strength of his arguments and challenges the validity of his conclusions.

Qin Yaqing and Feng Zhang: From Constructivism to Relationality

Unlike Yan, who identifies with a realist approach to international relations, Qin and Zhang refrain from identifying themselves outright as constructivist scholars, notwithstanding the emphasis on ideational elements in their lines of thought. Instead, both scholars propose that a relational paradigm is

required to understand contemporary Chinese international politics.[35] This relational paradigm is neither new nor a unique Chinese contribution, but is located within a wider epistemological and methodological debate in IR that problematizes how states ought to be understood. Instead of perceiving states as a "substance" or autonomous entity, this line of scholarship seeks to advance the position that states are best conceived as processes, and that relations between entities (such as individuals or states) therefore possess ontological significance.[36] Not surprisingly, both Qin and Zhang attempt to build upon the insights made by Western scholars such as Alexander Wendt and Jackson and Nexon in their respective analyses, privileging the importance of social identities and social relations in their analyses of state behavior.[37]

In Qin's view, the biggest weakness of mainstream Western IR theory is the focus on the systemic (state) level and failing to sufficiently account for processes of social interaction and relations. To be fair, this line of critique is not unwarranted; over the years constructivist IR scholars have attempted to articulate a variety of ways to emphasize the social aspect of human existence. According to this view, social structures are not a given, but are "constantly produced, reproduced, and altered by discursive practices of agents."[38] Where Qin attempts to distinguish his ideas from mainstream constructivist scholars are his assumptions about relationality, which – in his view – are uniquely borne out of the Chinese socio-cultural experience. His three assumptions are: (I) relationality has ontological significance; (II) relations define identity; and (III) relations generate power.[39]

Qin maintains that one of the basic features of Chinese society is its relational orientation, and that relationships are the most significant content of social life and activities. According to Qin, "the political philosophy of Confucianism starts with relations and defines social classes and political order in terms of relationships. Social and political stability first and foremost relies on the management of relations."[40] Qin also posits a sharp difference between Western and Chinese ways of thinking, in which the

35 While Qin's arguments are largely limited to the formulation of theoretical concepts, Feng's writing – which is closely based on his doctoral thesis – includes historical illustrations and empirical evidence to back his theoretical paradigm. For the purpose of this chapter I combine Qin's and Feng's insights under the broader theme of relationality scholarship.

36 Ashley, "Untying the Sovereign State"; Campbell, *Writing Security*.

37 Wendt, *Social Theory;* Jackson and Nexon, "Relations Before States."

38 See for instance Guzzini and Leander, *Constructivism and International Relations,* p.3.

39 Qin, "Relationality and Processual Construction," p. 14.

40 *Ibid*.

former is inclined to thinking in a "logic of causation" (i.e., if A>B and B>C, then A>C) while in the latter "relationality is to be found in the relational web as a whole [...] things or variables change along with the change of their relations; individuals in the web are subject to change in the relational web as a whole; and similarly the interaction among individuals can have an impact on the web."[41]

Qin also proposes "relational identity" as a way of thinking about individual human beings. He argues that social actors "exist only in social relations [r]ather than being independent and discrete natural units" and that "individuals per se have no identities."[42] Qin also postulates that within Chinese thought, one's identity can be "multifold, interactive, and changeable along with practice," and that hence "truth" and "falsehood" are not mutually exclusive categories: "there is truth in falsehood and falsehood in truth, and true can become false and vice versa." Qin goes on to suggest that relationship processes ultimately influence the behavior of individual actors and that changes to one's relational web also lead to the "identity-reshaping" and "behavior-transforming of an actor in relations."[43]

Qin's last assumption concerns the use of power, with which the study of IR is most intimately concerned. According to Qin, "relations generate power:" for power to be exercised, a relational platform is required. For instance, Qin argues that China possesses greater influential power than the United States for determining the outcome of the North Korean nuclear issue, as this influence springs from the "relational web it is in, and from the operation and coordination of the web involving all the parties involved in the crisis."[44] He also argues that relations can enlarge or constrain the exercise of power. As an illustration, Qin contends that in China's patriarchal society "a father's power over his son was absolute and supreme" by virtue of the power that this patriarchal society accorded towards father-son relations. Paralleling this, according to Qin, is China's relations with ASEAN states (where China wields considerably more power than each of the respective states). Despite this power difference, Qin argues that China has constrained its exercise of coercive powers in order to maintain existing relationships. Consequently, Qin argues that relations in and of themselves are power, and that these relational webs ought to be viewed as important power resources.[45]

41 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
42 *Ibid.*
43 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
44 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
45 *Ibid.*

Likewise, Zhang Feng proposes relationalism as a structural theory that explains the grand strategy between China and its neighbors, namely Korea, Japan, and Mongolia.[46] According to Zhang, three relational structural components can be found in the historical systems of East Asian states: the ordering principles of expressive and instrumental rationalities, the differentiation of roles in a sovereign-subordinate and father-son hierarchy, and the distribution of ties measured by the degree of centrality of an actor.[47]

Borrowing from Confucian ideas, Zhang postulates the concepts of both an "expressive principle" (*qingganxing yuanze,* 情感性原则) and an "instrumental principle" (*gongjuxing yuanze,* 工具性原则), both of which, he argues, contribute to how relational networks function. While the expressive principle embodies humanized "affection" (*renqing,* 人情) between two actors, the instrumental principle reflects a relational interaction through which resources can be obtained for the purpose of utility.[48] In Zhang's mind, the instrumental principle is a dominant paradigm that frames states' relations: their ultimate goal is to maximize utility. As such, the relationships between states becomes a means to an end – a way to attain other, utilitarian goals. As Zhang puts it, "the relationship itself is not valued. It does not involve the affection or obligation that actors may attach to each other, and it may not last beyond the moment of mutual expediency."[49] On the other hand, expressive rationality emphases the self-other relationship, in which social actions involve "commitment, empathy, affection, mutual support, and human obligation among actors and are thus more than instrumental calculation." In Zhang's view, "expressive rationality is the psychological, emotional, and ethical foundations of the Confucian paradigm of relational social life based on reciprocal respect, affection, and obligation."[50] Unlike the instrumental principle, then, the expressive principle takes the relationship itself as the end goal of social interaction, not as a means to an end.

Zhang also argues that role and status relationships factor heavily into social life, and that the role of ethics is central to Confucian thought.[51] From this principle, Zhang argues that different role relationships necessarily lead to different ethical principles of action. In China's case, the Chinese emperor was viewed as the "sovereign and father of the known world," thus implying a "distinct set of reciprocal obligations and implicit rights [...] between

46 Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony.*
47 *Ibid*., pp. 21-22.
48 For further discussion, see Hwang, "Chinese Relationalism."
49 Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony,* p. 27.
50 *Ibid*.
51 *Ibid*., p. 28.

China and other polities."[52] Zhang argues that under this arrangement, a "logic of hierarchy" and a "logic of differentiation" frames China's relations with other states, in which framing the intimate is favored. As he writes, "simultaneously integrating and differentiating, the intimacy-distance principle assigns foreign entities differential places in China's international network according to their cultural affinity."[53]

Similarly, the distribution of relational ties allows actors with greater centrality to possess greater social power, easily accessing resources and information from other actors and shaping the flow of information – including altering common understandings of relative capabilities, interests, and norms.[54] In this respect, Zhang suggests that, unlike substantialist theories of international relations, which focus on the categorical attributes of actors as variables (e.g., of their material capabilities), relationalism focuses on "relational patterns as structure, and thus sees the distribution of ties as a central structural component." Zhang distinguishes relationality from constructivism by claiming that constructivism is not fully relational. In his view, identity is composed "as a series of identifications developed and changed through relational actions" instead of as a "cohesive, prosocial self" as assumed by constructivist scholars like Alexander Wendt.[55]

Relationalism Meets Power Politics

If we take these arguments by Qin and Zhang as reflective of the thinking among Chinese IR scholars who subscribe to relationalism, what kind of behavior should we expect from China's international relations? Relational scholarship contends that other states will accept China's hierarchy over them and willingly submit themselves as vassal states to China. But would these states do so based on China's superior conduct, which is held up as a model to emulate, or because of China's coercive behavior? Zhang's contention is that China's practice of humane authority will necessarily lead other states to reciprocate: "if the Confucian role differentiation of a sovereign-subordinate and father-son hierarchy is a potent structural force, and if other actors genuinely follow Confucian expressive rationality, one may posit that they will accept their subordinate roles vis-à-vis China,

52 *Ibid.,* p. 29
53 *Ibid.,* pp. 29-30.
54 *Ibid.,* p. 30.
55 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

identify themselves as China's hierarchically differentiated outer vassals and fulfill their obligations of loyalty and integrity towards China."[56] This is evidently not the case, as China's problematic relations with its neighbors over the past decade (2008-2018) have demonstrated.[57] According to Zhang, one reason for the exacerbation of these tensions was China not sufficiently playing its role as a humane authority (as expected by Chinese relationalism), but instead acting in a realpolitik manner in its international conduct.[58]

But this line of argument poses several problems. First, it assumes that Chinese moral standards are normative and universally applicable; second, it fails to sufficiently take into account the structural constraints of the existing international system; and third, it is premised on a highly optimistic view of human nature which runs contrary to many of the core assumptions behind IR scholarship. Given that the first two points have been previously discussed at length by other scholars,[59] I focus on the third point here, which I argue is also the biggest flaw of relational scholarship.

In a classical study into the relationship between individuals and society, the American political theorist Reinhold Niebuhr posits a sharp cleavage between the ideals of the individual ("moral man") and of society ("immoral society").[60] While a number of critical responses to Niebuhr's work have been undertaken,[61] I argue that the core of Niebuhr's observations remain eminently valid in the study of relational scholarship, particularly his pessimistic assumptions about human nature and the extent to which self-interest pervades political life. For instance, Niebuhr perceives conflict, not cooperation, as the natural consequences of human egoism. As he puts it, "[T]here are definite limits in the capacity of ordinary mortals which makes it impossible for them to grant to others what they claim for themselves." Hence, politics become an arena where "conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises."[62] In addition, by attributing the root source of conflict to human nature (given his belief in the Christian doctrine of original sin), Niebuhr is highly skeptical of collective efforts to resolve these same conflicts, particularly if they are undertaken by political actors. Indeed, he expresses general wariness towards group behavior: the

56 *Ibid.,* p. 36.
57 This is further discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.
58 Email interview, February 29, 2016.
59 Wang, "Being Uniquely Universal;" Clark, "International Society and China."
60 Niebuhr, *Moral Man.*
61 Holder and Josephson, *Irony of Barack Obama.*
62 Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* p. 3, 5.

"hypocrisy of man's group behavior" expresses itself in the fact that human beings are unable "to conform its collective life to its individual ideals."[63] In Niebuhr's view, group solidarity, far from being a benign force for good, actually accentuates the egoism inherent in individuals, resulting in far more devastating and dangerous outcomes than those resulting from actions that can be taken individually.

Seen from this vantage point, one might argue that the blind spot of relational scholarship lies in its optimistic view of human nature and that it ignores the coercive character of social life as played out in international politics. For instance, a core strand of Qin's relational scholarship assumes that Chinese leaders are wont to use resources of power in a proper manner, and that abuses of power are best checked, not through an external system of checks and balance, but rather by the arrogation of power to a centralized authority (be it in the form of a strongman leader or a group of top decision-makers). For instance, the establishment of the National Security Commission of the Communist Party of China is said to be designed not only for the more effective coordination of China's security policies, but also as a means of centralizing party control and strengthening President Xi Jinping's grip on the Chinese state apparatus.[64] Relational scholarship provides a strong theoretical justification for such top-down political control. As Qin puts it, "the political philosophy of Confucianism starts with relations and defines social classes and political order in terms of relationships. Social and political stability first and foremost relies on the management of relations. Social norms are mostly the norms of relation-management and social harmony is characterized by the domination of morality and mediation of disagreements."[65] To this end, it is possible to argue that relationality scholarship is ultimately premised upon a socially conservative approach to politics in which the maintenance of relations is primary and social disruption is frowned upon, regardless of the consequences.[66] Further, one might also locate the seeds of corruption within such a system of rule: in the absence of external checks or scrutiny (which might require disrupting familial relationships), there is a marked propensity for internal decay which can result in devastating consequences if left unchecked. Indeed, a glance at China's history suggests that the insistence on social and political

63 *Ibid.*, p. 8

64 See You, "China's National Security Commission."

65 Qin, "Relationality and Processual Construction," p. 14.

66 This is most vividly illustrated by the Covid-19 outbreak, in which early whistle-blowers were harassed by the Chinese authorities for attempting to disrupt social harmony.

stability *at all costs* can result in catastrophic consequences if individuals are not given sufficient space to express their own personal misgivings. A case in point can be seen in Yang Jisheng's work *Tombstone: the great Chinese famine*, a study of the ill-fated Great Leap Forward policies enacted by Chairman Mao in 1958-1962 in which more 36 million Chinese died.[67] Notwithstanding Chairman Mao's erroneous judgments in the matter, it was evident that the Chinese political structure was equally culpable. As Yang writes:

> In the face of a rigid political system, individual power was all but nonexistent. The system was like a casting mold; no matter how hard the metal, once it was melted and poured into that mold, it came out the same shape as everything else. Regardless of what kind of person went into the totalitarian system, all came out as conjoined twins facing in opposite directions: either despot or slave, depending on their position in respect of those above or below them. Mao Zedong was a creator of this mold [...] and he himself was to some extent a creature of this same mold. Within the framework of this system, Mao's own actions were conscious but to a certain extent also beyond his control. No one had the power to resist such a system, not even Mao [...] In accordance with the logic of that time and under the prevailing framework, things that now appear patently absurd at that time seemed reasonable and a matter of course.[68]

In sum, I argue that Qin's relational scholarship remains largely limited to accounting for China's domestic situation (i.e., the maintenance of the CCP's monopoly of power and management of intra-China relations). It is also overly optimistic that the CCP will make the right decisions for China (without accounting for the fallibility of even its highest leaders) while simultaneously being largely dismissive of the ability of individuals to create meaningful change or contribute to social life.

Zhao Tingyang: *Tianxia* ("All-under-Heaven") and World Order

The notion of "All-under-Heaven" (*tianxia,* 天下) and its relevance to international politics was first voiced by Zhao Tingyang, a Chinese philosopher and researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences which he argued

67 Yang, *Tombstone.*
68 Yang, "The Fatal Politics," p. 775.

that the *Tianxia* model was the best philosophy for world governance.[69] In it, Zhao challenges the configuration of the present international order as being overly state-centered and failing to transcend the perspective of the nation-state to view issues and problems from a "world-ness" perspective. According to Zhao, Chinese political philosophy differs from Western philosophy in that the former defines a political order in which the world is primary while the latter takes the nation-state as the central unit of analysis.[70] Linked to the idea of *Tianxia* is the concept of the "Son of Heaven" (*tianzi,* 天子), whose legitimacy to rule must be confirmed by the people. However, Zhao criticizes the Western system of democratic elections, claiming that such a system is "spoilt by money, misled by media and distorted by strategic votes."[71] On the other hand, the "Chinese way," as Zhao puts it, is to choose a leader by means "of observation of social trends or preferences and especially by the obvious fact that people autonomously choose to follow and pledge their allegiance, instead of voting for one of several dubious politicians."[72] According to Zhao, "sincerity of concern for the people," not public preference, is the most important criteria for being a ruler. Furthermore, Zhao contends that "most people do not really know what is best for them," so elite rule is necessary because they are most sharply attuned to what is best for the citizens.[73]

Zhao also espouses the notion of a "family-ship" as an interpretive framework for understanding ethical and political legitimacy, as it represents "the naturally given ground and resource for love, harmony and obligations."[74] To this end, the *Tianxia* system ought to be viewed in terms of a family-ship, and the "wholeness" and "harmony" of this system ought to be preserved. This is where Chinese political theory, with its emphasis on a world-society, can be most aptly appropriated as an IR framework to achieve the vision of *Tianxia*. According to Zhao, "the world's effective political order must progress from All-under-Heaven, to state, to families, so as to ensure universal consistency and transitivity in political life, or the uniformity of society, while an ethical order progresses from families, to states, to All-under-Heaven, so as to ensure ethical consistency and transitivity."[75] More tellingly, Zhao states that Chinese philosophy does not regard an individual "to be a political

69 Zhao, "Rethinking Empire."
70 *Ibid.,* p. 31.
71 *Ibid.*
72 *Ibid.*
73 *Ibid.,* p. 32.
74 *Ibid.*
75 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

foundation or starting point;" rather, "the political makes sense only when it deals with relations rather than individuals" – thus echoing Qin's and Zhang's arguments discussed earlier.[76] Zhao also observes that in Chinese thinking, politics aims at creating a good society of peaceful order, which is a precondition for individual happiness, and thus at avoiding disorder. Here, the concept of All-under-Heaven is fused with Chinese concerns in which a dynasty is considered as legitimate (when there is prevailing order) as opposed to one which is maintained as a result of the territorial conquest or preservation. Finally, Zhao distinguishes Chinese ethics from Western systems by claiming that the West possesses a missionizing impulse as a result of the Biblical mandate to "do unto others as you would have them do to you" (*jisuoyu huyuren,* 己所欲勿于人), while Chinese principles are passively presented in that one should "never do to others what one does not want others to do unto you" (*jisuobuyu hushiyuren,* 己所不欲，勿施于人).[77]

Tianxia: A World Liberated or a World Enslaved?

In the above, I have summarized Zhao's exposition of *Tianxia* and its relevance for our understanding of global order. Notwithstanding some of its contributions to Chinese thought patterns, Zhao's ideas about All-under-Heaven remain severely limited, not least because of its abstraction from the reality of the international structure and problematic view of human agency. Much of Zhao's analysis lacks empirical evidence and cannot be verified in reference to social reality. For instance, Zhao states that the present condition of the world is as a "failed world, a disordered world of chaos [... and] a non-world."[78] What does this actually mean, and more importantly, how true is it? Despite ongoing international conflict, the present international system cannot be said to be a failure, given that many countries, including China, have benefitted from the Western-led liberal order put in place after the Second World War.[79] While Zhao is right in noting that political governance needs to be justified with reference to both domestic and international norms, it is unclear how this should be done. For instance, Zhao posits that the political goal of "All-under-Heaven" is to create a grand narrative of a "trinity of the geographical world, the psychological

76 *Ibid*.
77 *Ibid*., pp. 35-36.
78 *Ibid*., p. 39.
79 See Ikenberry, *Power, Order, and Change*.

world and the political world," yet he is silent on what steps could be taken to achieve this.[80] By claiming that "world-ness is a principle higher than internationality,"[81] Zhao also sets up a further problem for his theory: who and how should such a "world" be governed, and what kind of rules must be established for such governance to take place? All these raise the key questions of whether a *Tianxia* system could truly liberate countries to live in harmony with one another, and whether deeper, more fundamental issues concerning global governance and international politics could be resolved simply by taking recourse to an idealized *Tianxia* concept.

Further, it is evident that much of Zhao's criticism of the present arrangement of political order is trained at the West, particularly the United States, whose dominance Zhao terms as a "new imperialism, inheriting many characteristics of modern imperialism, but transforming direct control into the hidden, yet totally dominating world control by means of hegemony or the 'American leadership' as Americans prefer to call it."[82] Such an argument is increasingly common among Chinese public intellectuals, many of whom perceive liberalism, the West, and the United States as a common enemy that limits China's pursuit of being a great power.[83] Zhao takes this line of thought further: unlike other Chinese contemporaries who recognize the international structure as a given (and thus attempt to articulate China's rise from within), Zhao goes so far as to claim that the present system is an utter failure and that the *Tianxia* system is the sole means by which global problems can be solved. Indeed, Zhao cites globalization as a game changer that is breaking up the present system of the nation states, and states that it is time to revisit deeply cherished norms concerning world governance, including an entire overhaul of the state system and a return to traditional Chinese political arrangements. Of course, this is highly debatable, but Zhao is conspicuously silent about the examples that do not match his version of history. In his *Tianxia* ideal, perpetual peace is a given and conflict is largely absent (or made irrelevant). By attributing the root causes of international conflict to the state system (instead of to other factors, such as human nature, ideological differences, or material competition), Zhao sets up a *straw man* argument that his *Tianxia* system is conveniently positioned to replace.

80 To be sure, one might excuse Zhao for being silent on this matter; after all, he is a philosopher! However, this inability to spell out the specifics of action limits whether his ideas ought to be taken as being politically viable.

81 Zhao, "Rethinking Empire," p. 39

82 *Ibid*., p. 39.

83 See Callahan, "History, Tradition and the China Dream."

Finally, in Zhao's analysis, there is no mention of the internal dynamics of CCP politics or the pervasiveness of domestic agendas in the framing of China's international relations. This is by no means insignificant, given the heavy investment in Chinese domestic interests in the conduct of Chinese foreign policy. For instance, recent Chinese global initiatives such as the high-profile Belt and Road Initiative (discussed in Chapter 5) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank involve large numbers of Chinese state-owned actors, many of whom have links with the CCP and whose economic fortunes are deeply intertwined with the fate of the CCP. According to one Chinese professor I spoke to, the "monetization" (*huobihua,* 货币化) of Chinese politics means that political decisions also encapsulate the material/financial interests of those which are involved, highlighting a close conflation of political and business interests in the overall CCP decision-making process.[84] Further, self-interest remains a constant pursuit among Chinese leaders, which sharply contrasts with the picture of a benevolent leader envisaged by Zhao.[85] Indeed, the biggest problem with Zhao's *Tianxia* system lies in its conceptualization of *Tianxia* in an idealized vacuum with scant regard to other causes of conflict, such as human nature, the domestic makeup of states, and the anarchic structure of the international system.[86] From the standpoint of an analysis of Chinese exceptionalism, it seems that the more Zhao claims that his *Tianxia* system is exceptional (i.e., that it is different and better than other ways of conceptualizing the world), the less its explanatory power becomes. Further, as Zhao does not offer any practical solutions to these problems except for the abolishment of the state system in favor of a supranational authority, it raises the concern about whether such a system would end up not liberating, but rather enslaving, the countries that subscribe to such a political proposition. Indeed, what kind of authority would that supranational organization be, and what kind of political arrangements would have to be put in place to ensure the consent of those it governed? Unfortunately, Zhao's Tianxia arguments remain silent on these salient points.

84 Interview with Chinese professor, Beijing, China, June 12, 2017. For further studies of the relationship between Chinese businesses and politics, see Brødsgaard, "Politics and Business Group Formation."

85 Kerry Brown's in-depth study of the eighteenth Politburo Standing Committee starkly fleshes this out. See Brown, *The New Emperors.* For a deeper analysis of the psychological factors at work in Chinese politics, see Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre.*

86 See Waltz, *Man, the State and War.*

Chinese IR Theory and the Contestation of Chinese Identity

As the above discussion of the ideas promulgated by these four Chinese IR scholars has shown, Chinese IR theories possess little universal traction and are mostly used to lend legitimacy to Chinese political actions, both internally and externally. To this end, these theories reflect a common theme salient to China's political worldview, that is, *the importance of identity in China's international politics*. It is evident in the case of Yan Xuetong's moral realism that he believes what ought to set China apart from the West is its need to demonstrate moral leadership and virtue in its international relations. This emphasis on morality dovetails with the broader question about Chinese identity and culture: what aspects of "being Chinese" can be said to be superior or better than Western culture? I argue that what is at stake here is not simply a contestation over ideas in the sphere of international relations, but also a competition over influence. Who has more worldwide influence, China or the West? This contested influence is not simply a matter of "getting others to follow," however: it is also about the right to set normative standards so that those who do not follow (or who disagree) will be considered in the wrong. To this end, Chinese identity and its political worldview is seen as exemplifying (or at least accentuating) "all that is good" in humanity, as opposed to Western values and thinking which are said to be "bad" or to be "subverting that which is good." However, such an approach begs an even more fundamental question: who decides what is good or bad? Yan's a priori idealized view of the CCP as a political institution which remains untainted and unpolluted by the messiness of political practices, and thus is in a privileged position to adjudicate between what is right and wrong, is highly problematic. Indeed, I argue that the biggest flaw of moral realism is that morality itself is politicized in the Chinese system to achieve political goals. Yan's moral realist proposal therefore does not square with the political reality of what is happening in China, rendering his conclusions tenuous and insufficiently convincing.

Qin and Zhang's emphasis on relationality represents not so much an attempt at moralization (as in Yan's writing), but rather an effort to emphasize the importance of relations in influencing state relations. While this approach challenges the tenets of structural realism and emphatically rejects structurally deterministic outcomes of political relations, problems arise in their suggestions that political relations can be exhaustively accounted for in relational terms. Indeed, it is one thing to say that international politics ought to be understood in relational terms, and it is quite another to say that its significance is only explicable by or ought to be solely reduced to

such terms. By positing a relational framework, Qin and Zhang seem to suggest that personal identity, that which is relationally situated, is first and foremost. While this may hold true at an individual level, extrapolating this to the level of the nation-state is problematic due to its assumptions that states and statesmen approach international politics with no prior idea of their national interests, and that these interests can be infinitely modified (depending on the relational situation).

Relational scholarship is also premised on a hierarchical view of international relations in which China is central, and the Chinese emperor (or other leader)'s authority is not in question. However, this legitimacy of rule only holds as long as the leader maintains order within the borders of the Chinese nation (or empire). In other words, to rule is to ensure that China is stable. In the event that China becomes unstable, the legitimacy of the ruler would be undercut, signaling the need for either the elimination of the unstable elements or the removal of the ruler entirely. Seen this way, the self-identity of the Chinese leader is of crucial importance, as it is tied intrinsically to the nation's identity. Indeed, as Lucian Pye puts it in his depiction of Deng Xiaoping, "Deng's quiet approach to leadership conformed to important norms in traditional Chinese political culture, a political culture that was shaped by the role model of mandarin-bureaucrats and semi-divine, superman emperors, leaders who operate out of sight, secretly, behind the scenes."[87] In this interpretation the Chinese leader is also seen as a model for universal virtue and is perceived as untainted by the corrupting influences of the society-at-large.[88]

Finally, in the *Tianxia* system, Chinese self-identity is presented as the central issue – that is, the extent to which it possesses universal properties and thereby draws those who are "outside China" into its orbit. According to one study by Jing and Wang, Chinese political researchers generally do not accept the "value-free" claim of Western IR theorists, instead asserting that political values and hegemonic intentions are always embedded in IR theory and individuals bringing to bear their subjective interventions in (or interpretations of) the knowledge-making process.[89] The *Tianxia* system represents an attempt to turn the tables on the Western liberal system, which is perceived as incomplete and insufficiently inclusive since

87 Pye, "The Leader in the Shadows," p. 247.

88 This is why Chinese authorities frequently thwart attempts by Western media to conduct investigations into the private lives of its leaders. Even the official verdict on Mao Zedong, whose failed economic policies led to devastating consequences for the Chinese nation, was that Mao was 70 percent correct and 30 percent wrong.

89 Jing and Wang, "Western Political Research."

it excludes the voices and views of the developing world. For instance, in a forum with several high-ranking Chinese academics in Singapore, the delegation's leader was critical of the present configuration of international power, claiming that the rules and norms that are in place were created to protect Western interests and did not include the majority of the developing world. The leader insisted that there was a need to "adjust with the times" and make changes to the international system that would better reflect the interests of other countries. At the same time, however, the delegation was also quick to highlight the rise of China and its growing national interests and hence the need to preserve and protect these interests where they are seen as challenged.[90] Such an approach, I argue, is an example of the pervasiveness of *Tianxia* thinking in China's foreign policy, in which Chinese leaders attempt to project China's worldview as widely as possible. By aligning China with the developing world, it allows Beijing to muster support for its policy preferences; at the same time, by claiming major power status, Chinese leaders expect that China's wishes will be respected by other major powers. In short, by claiming both developing and developed nation status, China seeks to deepen its influence within the international system. More crucially, this approach seeks to present China as superior to other nations and, as pointed out by Singapore's former top diplomat, ultimately to the general "acknowledgement and acceptance of [China's] superiority as a norm."[91] To this end, the *Tianxia* system proffers a theoretical framework whereby Chinese particularism and claims to exceptionalism can be universalized in a globalized world. By claiming the *Tianxia* system as an idealized outcome (however unattainable), the objective is not to provide solutions to the problems of global governance, but rather a means of de-legitimizing the Western-led international system and articulating its claim to ideological superiority by scapegoating the United States as the source of all global problems (this will be further discussed in Chapter 3).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed recent developments in Chinese international relations thinking and how they provide us with important clues to the Chinese worldview and claims to exceptionalism. What is strikingly common about the ideas of all three schools is that they seek to present

90 Personal meeting with Chinese researchers, Singapore, August 22,2017.

91 Interview with Bilahari Kausikan, Singapore, August 7, 2017.

China's approach to international politics as both unique and superior to Western thinking. Indeed, their proponents seek to differentiate these ideas from existing scholarship and, more importantly, to infuse them with concepts and motifs taken from Chinese traditional culture. Part of the reason for doing so, apart from a dissatisfaction with existing IR scholarship's attempts to account for Chinese political behavior, is the deeply seated belief that China's international relations must be interpreted on Chinese terms which include taking its culture and history seriously.[92] Chinese IR thinking also harbors a deep mistrust of the existing IR theoretical frameworks, which are believed to be serving the vested interests of the United States and the West. As such, Chinese IR scholarship attempts to include the elements of morality, relationality, and the pursuit of global-ness, believing that these added aspects are necessary to remedy Western-centric IR theory and thereby allow a more equitable distribution of international voices to global issues.

That said, Chinese IR scholarship, presents problems of its own: first, it remains largely Sino-centric in nature; second, it is mostly anti-Western and anti-American; third, it assumes the benevolence of Chinese leaders; and last, it is premised on an essentialized view of the East and West. Taken together, these four problems provide the basis for Chinese exceptionalism and represent the main themes in discussions of China's international relations, as the subsequent chapters demonstrate. I argue that in attempting to distinguish itself from the West, Chinese international relations theories seek to justify their relevancy in reference to so-called Chinese conditions (or Chinese characteristics) without critically examining whether these conditions are indeed unique. To this end, the question "when is a Chinese condition a Chinese condition" needs to be posed. I am of course sympathetic to the view of these scholars that knowledge of Chinese history and cultural traditions is essential for understanding the Chinese worldview. At the same time, however, speaking of Chinese culture and history as something given and unproblematic also means ignoring the highly politicized nature of Chinese social life and taking for granted the legitimacy of these narratives as part of the Chinese worldview. These theories also assume a priori the legitimacy and uncontested character of Communist party rule and ultimately can be said to be preserving the status quo of Chinese domestic governance. Further, the issue of power – as a central part of politics – is largely understated in Chinese IR thinking, unlike in discussions of Chinese

92 This was one of the key take away points from my visiting stint at the China Foreign Affairs University, Beijing in the summer of 2017.

domestic politics where power remains primary. All of these concerns increase the need for skepticism about the ultimate objective(s) of Chinese IR thinking. In my view, Chinese IR thinking lends itself mostly to supporting the policy decisions and political objectives of the Chinese state and thus presents – at its core – a highly Sino-centric perspective of the world. Issues of academic freedom in China further problematize the work of Chinese IR scholarship. Indeed, the body of ideas of high-profile Chinese scholars like Yan Xuetong and Qin Yaqing cannot be divorced from their affiliations with the Chinese government, and hence can be said to be broadly sympathetic of the positions and political goals of the CCP, rather than written for the sole purposes of academic inquiry.

Finally, the issue of identity remains China's most vexing problem, and one which will continue to limit the credibility of its ideas. As discussed in the next chapter on Chinese self-identity and its encounter with modernity, contradictions between personal and political aspirations continue and could profoundly affect the social landscape in China, for better or worse.

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3 Who is China?

A Remaking of National Identity

Abstract
This chapter examines Chinese national identity as a core element of China's political worldview and claims to exceptionalism. Using a sociological structure of liquid modernity, the chapter analyzes how Chinese national identity is being considered and constructed within domestic conditions and the extent to which it affects social capital and the cohesiveness of Chinese social life. I argue that liquid modernity has resulted in greater fragmentation between Chinese private and public life as well as complicating efforts to construct a unified sense of collective national identity (Chinese-ness). To remedy these challenges, the Chinese government utilizes nationalism to cultivate domestic support by projecting itself as good vis-à-vis the West, which is scapegoated as evil and the root cause of all Chinese ills.

Keywords: identity, liquid modernity, nationalism, social capital, scapegoating

Sociological and anthropological studies of China in the late twentieth and early 21st centuries have highlighted a trend in Chinese social life : in a time of unprecedented social change, increasing numbers of Chinese citizens are asking the question, "Who am I?"[1] According to Kleinman and others, the structural changes in Chinese society resulting from the political turmoil of the twentieth century have led to a substantial severing of ties between the individual and the family, as well as between the individual and broader society..[2] Among Chinese citizens there is a "curious mix of positive and negative feelings" intertwined in their understanding of Chinese

1 Kleinman et al., *Deep China;* Link, Madsen, and Pickowicz, *Restless China*.
2 Kleinman et al., *Deep China,* p. 3.

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politics – a "pessoptimist structure of feeling," as Callahan puts it.[3] What can we say about Chinese national identity and how this internal conflict is playing out in China's interactions with the wider world, particularly in the realm of geopolitics?[4] More importantly, how is China's political worldview influenced and shaped by its national identity, and how is Chinese exceptionalism used to construct an understanding of China as "good" and "different" from the West?

As discussed in Chapter 2, Chinese international relations theories frequently allude to the need to differentiate China from the West. This is premised on the assumption that China and its citizens tend to imagine themselves in ways that are distinct from others from elsewhere in the world, thus rendering a need for scholarly insights that are peculiar to the Chinese lived experience. But how unique is the political worldview of 21st century China, and to what extent can we speak of a monolithic Chinese identity, given the rapid changes occurring within modern Chinese society? Qin Yaqing – whose ideas on relationality are discussed in Chapter 2 – has suggested that the main question surrounding China's engagement with the world does not concern institutional politics (i.e., how China will fit into international organizations), but rather identity politics (trying to answer the question "Who is China?"). The heart of Chinese foreign policy is thus not a security dilemma, but rather an "identity dilemma:" Who is China, and how does it fit into this world?[5]

In this chapter, I argue that the issue of identity is a foundational starting point for understanding the Chinese worldview. I therefore frame my analysis of the Chinese worldview, including its claims to exceptionalism, within this identity framework and analyze how these questions of identity affect China's international relations. This is not to suggest that other issues such as factional politics and economic development do not matter, but rather that insofar as these issues are currently being debated, they are generally understood within a framework of identity politics, which seeks to prescribe how Chinese citizens should relate with the state. As such, the need to preserve a "unity of identity" is paramount for the legitimization of the Chinese government's authority. In this analysis, I use a sociological structure that builds upon the notion of "liquid modernity" (or "liquid times") proposed by Zygmunt Bauman, in which the forces of globalized capitalism have dissolved social and communal bonds that traditional societies are

3 Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, p. 9, 12.
4 For a recent study, see Hoo, *China's Global Identity*.
5 Qin, "Guoji Guanxi Lilun," p. 13.

bounded by.[6] A key theme of my study is the relationship between the individual and the state and how the negotiation of national and individual identities works in practice. To what extent are the two forms of identity co-constitutive or in conflict with each other, and how does their relationship in turn affect the amount of "social capital" that is necessary for the proper functioning of Chinese society? I argue that while there is now considerably more freedom for individuals in their private pursuits when compared to the early years of China's opening up, public institutions remain highly politicized and are required to conform to the agendas of the Communist Party. I also probe the extent to which Chinese nationalism is able to offer the required social capital to the Party leadership, so that they can then create a shared sense of meaning and cohesiveness (ningjuli, 凝聚力) within Chinese society. I conclude this chapter with a discussion about how this relates to the Chinese worldview and Chinese exceptionalism, highlighting several problematic issues that remain salient to the Chinese political system and the limits they impose on the building of Chinese social capital.

Liquid Modernity and Chinese National Identity

In describing modernity as "liquid," Bauman writes of a "changing relationship between space and time" in which social patterns are no longer given or self-evident, but instead are "clashing with one another and contradicting one another's commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers."[7] Under such conditions, "social forms" (i.e., political institutions), which tend to limit individual choices, are not expected to "keep their shape" for long. Given the "local" character of politics, the modern state is unable to operate effectively at the "planetary" level of governance, thus ceding the sphere to "global space," which is extraterritorial and thus politically uncontrollable from the vantage point of any particular state. Social solidarity within the borders of the nation-state thus becomes increasingly stressed, and community bonds become frail and temporary. In such a milieu, individuals' interests are best preserved not by conforming to authoritatively issued rules, but instead by being flexible: one needs "a readiness to change tactics and style at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret – and

6 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*; Bauman, *Liquid Times*.

7 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, pp. 7-8.

to pursue opportunities according to their current availability, rather than following one's own established preference."[8]

While various scholars have debated the extent to which Bauman's observations are a true reflection of contemporary times,[9] I argue that Bauman's explication of liquid modernity remains highly relevant for our understanding of the changing relationship between state and society, between those who govern and those who are governed. First, Bauman is not alone in highlighting the changing nature of global society and its effects on individual identity and social life. For instance, Manuel Castells writes of the rise of the "network society," in which social structures are "made up of networks powered by micro-electronics-based information and communications technologies."[10] Likewise, Alastair Macintyre has observed that there is currently a crisis in moral discourse (or the "language of morality"), in which "the appearances of morality persist even though the integral substance of morality has to a large degree been fragmented and then in part destroyed."[11] Consequently, it can be surmised that a high degree of uncertainty pervades contemporary global society and modern life, further problematizing issues of national identity (*are* there any shared values?) and what it means to be a good citizen (given the changing moral discourse).

Second, given the scholarly challenge to the state-centered understanding of international politics,[12] it behooves us to look deeper at how national identity is understood socially, and how this in turn influences and affects state actions. If one views the state as a "social actor," then much of the state's actions (i.e., foreign policy) is "guided and constrained by domestic expectations that are considered legitimate and by social conventions which both define and delimit these broader social purposes."[13] The issue of identity is therefore of crucial importance, particularly as these identities "emerge from their interactions with different social environments, both domestic and international."[14] This is where Bauman's scholarly analysis of the interplay between global forces and individual appropriation of these ideas comes in. Given the "intrinsic volatility and unfixity of all or most identities," as Bauman puts it, what can be said of individual identities, or even state

8 Bauman, *Liquid Times*, pp. 1-4.
9 Davis, *Freedom and Consumerism;* Atkinson, "Not All That Was Solid has Melted Into Air."
10 Castells, *The Network Society,* p. 3.
11 MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* pp. 1-5.
12 Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security.*
13 Andrews, "Social Rules," p. 523.
14 Katzenstein, *Culture of National Security,* p. 11.

identities?[15] What are the challenges and consequences for governance if notions of citizenship and nationhood are rendered problematic and called to question? If statehood is linked to territorial boundaries and the ability to govern and maintain territory, then how does governance take place in a world where human beings and information interact across huge geographical areas and in which the idea of place (as circumscribed by territorial space) is now dominated by what has been termed the "space of flows."[16] While this does not necessarily mean a "flattening" of all global differences, as popular accounts of globalization put it,[17] it does suggest that substantial changes in global society are taking place – changes that could possibly accentuate internal fissures and fractures within and across specific societies.[18]

Third, the issue of power needs to be reconsidered in the context of the changing dynamics between the state and its citizens. If one defines state power in terms of the national interest, then it is necessary to probe how the national interest is now being framed and articulated. In considering the national interest of states, how much weight should we give to material interests compared to non-material ones? Given an increase in the attention given to "soft power" in global politics,[19] what can we say about the nature of power in liquid times? To what extent does the state and its institutional representatives continue to wield influence over the citizens, and what are the consequences to social life under such modified conditions? Contrasting solid and liquid modernity, Bauman observes, "if the flipside of the 'solid-modern' domination-through-order-building was the totalitarian tendency, the flipside of the 'liquid-modern' domination-through-uncertainty is the state of ambient insecurity, anxiety and fear."[20]

How then, does liquid modernity feature in Chinese society and national identity, and more importantly in the context of this book, how does it affect China's international relations? One study contends that under the stresses of liquid modernity China faces the dual pressures of external globalization and internal social transformation.[21] Seen this way, I argue there

15 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 83.

16 The idea of a "space of flows" is conceptualized by Manuel Castells. It is defined as "means that the material arrangements allow for simultaneity of social practices without territorial contiguity." See Castells, "Grassrooting the Space of Flows."

17 Friedman, *World Is Flat.*

18 For instance, Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations;* Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld*.

19 Nye, *Soft Power.*

20 Bauman and Haugaard, "Liquid Modernity and Power."

21 Jin and Hu, "National Identity."

exists substantial ambiguity about what the relationship between Chinese individuals and the Chinese state should be. In his study of the incipient changes within Chinese society, Arthur Kleinman notes that an intensified "sense of division in the self and society [...] is evidence of a deepening and complexifying of the interiority of the person. Subjectivity in today's China is expanding. The space of the self is being more richly furnished in emotion, memory and sensibility [...] At the core of this transmutation is a divided self (or even multiple self) that increasingly can multitask, feel comfortable with contradiction and imagine a new and different China."[22] This raises an important question about how Chinese national identity should be understood, and how this conversation plays out in China's international relations.

Community and Its Discontents

According to Bauman, the issue of community looms large at present: individuals are exhorted to be part of a community to remedy the anxiety caused by the uncertainty of modern society and procure a sense of security amidst the "accelerating liquefaction of modern life."[23] One way this is done is through the promotion of an "ethnic community," in which ethnicity is used as a means of "naturalizing history, of presenting the cultural as 'a fact of nature,' [and] freedom as 'understood (and accepted) necessity.'"[24] Furthermore, ethnic unity is frequently promoted as a success story of the nation-state, in which "ethnicity (and ethnic homogeneity) [becomes] the basis of unity and self-assertion," resulting in the production of a "natural community."[25] This results in a patriotic/nationalist narrative in which differences between "people like us" and "people who are different from us" are accentuated without admitting the equal possibility that "people may belong together while staying attached to their differences."[26] Individual interests, where they differ, are relegated to the private sphere (or privatized) and thus are rendered "fragile, temporary [... thereby signaling] the end of definition of the human being as a social being" and making "uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety" abound in daily life.[27]

22 Kleinman et al., *Deep China,* p. 288.
23 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity,* p. 170.
24 *Ibid*., pp. 172-173.
25 *Ibid*.
26 *Ibid.,* pp. 176-177.
27 *Ibid*., p. 178, 181.

According to the Chinese economist Mao Yushi, almost 48 percent more people reported greater levels of anxiety in China in 2013 compared to 2008. In his analysis, Mao attributes this discontent to vast power inequalities (between the Chinese authorities and citizens) and the related lack of social justice and opportunities to seek redress. Economic improvement alone, he argues, would be insufficient to remedy the problems of anxiety facing the Chinese people.[28] Similarly, in his analysis of Chinese citizen intellectuals Callahan noted the presence of both "grand aspirations and deep anxieties" and that China's rise presents the Chinese people with "a challenge of ideas and norms, in the drive to build a new world order."[29] Likewise, in a study of China's cultural politics Christopher Hughes highlights the tension between what is termed as the "Great Tradition, which takes the form of some kind of Communism or 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' as the official orthodoxy has it and all these other cultural phenomenon that bubble away at the grass-roots level."[30] Given the rising alienation and growing social unrest, President Hu Jintao pushed for a revival of Chinese tradition during his time in office, and advocated for a "Harmonious Society."[31] This "enigmatic relationship between modernity, tradition and nationalism," as Hughes puts it, was most visible through the use of digital technology during the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.[32]

From the above, I argue that it is this sense of incongruence between the hyper-modern and tradition, the official and unofficial,the capitalist and communist ideology that lies at the heart of the social contradictions permeating Chinese society today. In a 2014 Pew Research Survey, it was shown that while the Chinese government is officially communist, the majority of Chinese citizens embrace capitalistic ideas and only pay lipservice to the tenets of Communism.[33] More recently, A former CCP party school professor Cai Xia, in a scathing criticism of the party argued that few members of the party were actually interested in examining the implications of communist Marxist-Leninist thinking, but were only concerned about making the CCP look good and flatter their superiors.[34] This deep cleavage between what is officially demanded and what is practiced in everyday life means that people do not readily identify with Chinese political ideology.

28 Mao, *Zhongguoren de Jiaolu.*
29 Callahan, *China Dreams,* pp. 5-6.
30 Hughes, "Current Cultural Politics."
31 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
32 *Ibid.*, p. 74.
33 Simmons, "China's government."
34 Cai, "The Party that Failed."

China's national identity is in flux, and that under the conditions of liquid modernity it is now vulnerable to further stress, as highlighted by the multiple contradictions that individuals experience in the course of living in the modern Chinese society.[35] As argued, the moral context of Chinese society "is divided against the moral person" and that "the state that has been so successful at creating prosperity (albeit with worsening social inequality) is also repressive and can be dangerously so. The moral context created by the part-state is as much a place of collusion and collaboration with ruthlessly pragmatic power as it is a place of aspiration for an achievement of a better life for many of it[s] citizens."[36] In other words, state-society relations in China – as a result of its political system – is inherently weighed towards the preservation of the state apparatus; ordinary citizens can pursue their aspirations only within the permitted parameters of the state, or risk being persecuted by the state. To be certain, state-society relations are highly complicated and fraught with multiple points of tension and ambivalence and individual aspirations are not always easily reconciled with the interests of the state. Certainly such incongruities take place in many advanced capitalist countries and are not confined to the Chinese experience.[37] Yet, as a result of the Chinese's state preoccupation with and emphasis on stability and order within its borders, citizens have considerably less agency to make meaningful decisions particularly on those that speak to ultimate values (such as faith, or what a "good life" entails) and face greater restrictions to their own pursuits as compared to citizens living in Western societies.

Given these conditions, the imperative to inject a "narrative of unity" is paramount to the survival of the Chinese nation-state, particularly when the leaders are concerned about staying in power. In the following discussion, I argue that the Chinese government has used three methods to forge a social contract between the party and the citizens. First, it has promoted a unified sense of Chinese national identity (or "Chinese-ness"). Second, it has used nationalism to foster a cohesiveness among Chinese citizens. And third, it has projected the idea of the "goodness" of the Chinese state vis-à-vis the wider world – which comprises foreign forces that are deemed to be "evil" or at least substantially subversive) – to create a sense of mistrust and suspicion of foreign powers amongst the Chinese people. Taken together, these three tactics offer the Chinese state a way to portray its governance of China as

35 See Hansen and Svarverud, *IChina;* Link, Madsen, and Pickowicz, *Restless China*.

36 Kleinman et al., *Deep China,* pp. 287-288.

37 See for instance Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*.

exceptional, and consequently to generate support for its international relations and legitimize its political rule.

Chinese-ness and Chinese National Identity

The idea of "what it means to be Chinese in the 21st century" has been the subject of much scholarly debate.[38] This is particularly so given that Chinese national identity and Chinese political worldview are intrinsically linked: how Chinese leaders think about China and its place in the world will consequently influence the actions that are being taken, both in China's internal and external affairs. While my study emphatically rejects the idea of a "Chinese essence" or singular, defining aspect of "Chinese-ness," it does nonetheless recognize the existence of certain peculiarities that, for better or worse, continue to dominate how China's national identity is conceived.

I argue that an emphasis on "Chineseness" is used by the Chinese state to build a "collective identity" among Chinese citizens – a type of "social capital" that seeks to bind and connect disparate communities of Chinese citizens into a collective unit. In a way, this parallels the social capital discussed in American intellectual circles, which according to Robert Putnam refers to "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them."[39] Distinguishing between the bridging (or inclusive) and bonding (exclusive) natures of social capital, Putnam explains that bridging social capital is able to "generate broader identities and reciprocity whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrow selves."[40] The existence of such social capital imbues civic engagement with a certain moral character that is highly consequential to political life. As Putnam explains, "social capital affects not only what goes into politics, but also what comes out of it [...] our collective interest requires actions that violate our immediate self-interest and [assumes] that our neighbors will act collectively, too [...] Social capital, the evidence increasingly suggest, strengthens our better, more expansive selves. The performance of our democratic institutions depends in measurable ways upon social capital."[41]

38 Callahan, *The Pessoptimist Nation*, pp. 191-219; Brown, *Struggling Giant;* Wang, *Joining the Modern World*; Louie, *Chineseness Across Borders.*

39 Putnam, *Bowling Alone,* p. 19.

40 *Ibid*., p. 23. Narrow selves can be defined as the self which considers purely one's own well-being instead of the well-being of others.

41 *Ibid*., pp. 344-349. Interpreting Putnam, an "expansive self" considers others and their interests instead of just being solely focused on oneself.

Seen in this way, Chineseness presents an opportunity for the Chinese government to procure social capital that ultimately lends weight to the CCP's political credentials for continuing to govern China. In one sense this is not unlike the utilization of social capital in countries with democratic institutions, where private voluntary groups contribute to larger public life by functioning as "intermediary associations" through which individuals are able to express their interests and demands to the government, protect themselves from abuses of power by political leaders, instill habits of cooperation and public-spiritedness, and learn the practical skills necessary to partake in public life.[42] However, one key difference lies in the relationship between political and civic life. Unlike democratic systems where there is a fairly clear demarcation and separation of power between what is political and what is not (hence the existence of civil society, which bridges these gaps), it has been argued that Chinese social life is far more organizationally fluid and politically bounded, which is to say that political prerogatives supersede that of organizational imperatives when it comes to the final decision-making.[43] This political character of Chinese society can be problematic in practice, especially should Chinese political leaders bring up their political motivations in the course of discharging their duties. As such, there is a need to legitimize their actions by referencing motivations other than political ones. Due to its highly dynamic (and diffusive) nature, evoking "Chineseness" is an ideal option for this. According to Wang Gungwu, Chineseness is above all expressed in its political utility and dynamic nature: "It is living and changeable; it is also a product of a shared historical experience whose record has continually affected its growth; it has become an increasingly a self-conscious matter for China; and it should be related to what appears to be, or to have been, Chinese in the eyes of non-Chinese."[44]

This need to show the meaning of "being Chinese" can be most vividly seen in the 2008 Olympic Games, which offered Chinese leaders the opportunity to showcase the story of China's global success. Writing on the event, Victor Cha notes that "sport is an unmistakable prism through which nation-states project their image to the world and to their own people [...] in some instances, sport is critical to the process of independence and nation-building [...] poor performance in sport can render negative images of national identity and self-worth beyond anything imagined in politics."[45] Beyond providing an

42 *Ibid*., p. 338.

43 See Pye, *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, pp. 16-28; Fei, *From the Soil,* pp. 19-24.

44 Wang, *The Chineseness of China,* p.2.

45 Cha, *Beyond the Final Score,* p. 2.

opportunity for nation-building and image promotion, the Olympics also allowed Chinese leaders to narrate a political vision of China's future vis-à-vis the outside world. As an illustration, I examine the song "Beijing Welcomes You" (*Beijing Huanyingni,* 北京欢迎你),[46] a theme song during the 100-day countdown to the Games, which features 100 celebrities from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, and South Korea. Notwithstanding the bright visuals and upbeat melody, the song conveys a number of themes that reflect both certain aspects of Chinese self-identity and the political narratives that its leaders are attempting to convey to the world.

I China Welcomes the World, but on Its Terms

At first glance, the song lyrics seem to suggest that China is prepared to go all-out to welcome its international guests ("Beijing Welcomes You/we've split the heaven and earth for you [...] The vastness as big as heaven and earth/ we are all friends/there is no need to stand on ceremony"), but the reality of the Olympics suggests that this hospitality is qualified: only countries who are willing to accept China's international actions are accorded the right to be welcome. For example, critics of China's human rights' records were reportedly detained by the Chinese authorities before the Olympics and, in a veiled challenge to Western democratic norms, the United States was criticized for not ensuring its citizens "abide by the law in foreign countries".[47] Such harsh treatment was not directed only at outsiders, however: millions of ordinary Chinese citizens also had their lives turned upside-down as a result of the Chinese government's policies to "clean up" the capital for the games.[48] These examples highlight the difficulties Chinese leaders faced when trying to convince a global audience of their magnanimity, which was conditional upon countries willing to acquiesce to Chinese terms. While the song seems to exhort the world to "be at home" in Beijing, the irony is that Chinese leaders themselves were far less comfortable "at home in Beijing" when outsiders were present than in their absence.

II To Be Chinese Is to Be Supportive of the PRC

While the 100 celebrities in the video are all of East Asian descent, countries like Singapore, Japan, and South Korea are distinct nation-states

46 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYqHmN2Jdzc (retrieved July 12, 2016).

47 Spencer, "Beijing Olympics;" *ChinaDaily,* "China expresses dissatisfaction."

48 *National Post*, "Beijing Planning to Evict 1.5 Million."

with political constitutions far removed from that of China and the relationship of Taiwan and Hong Kong with Beijing remains highly problematic. The video, however, conveys the impression that these differences do not matter – or at least, ought not to matter in the larger scheme of things, which is the achievement of China's Olympic objectives, which are the successful hosting of the games, and topping the medal table. For instance, Chinese-American singer Wang Lee Hom (who is of Taiwanese origin) sings the words "we promised to get together here, we welcome you;" likewise, Singapore-born singer JJ Lin sings "Beijing welcomes you, people who have dreams all are extraordinary." Setting commercial reasons aside, I argue that the inclusion of these ethnic Chinese citizens of other countries reflects a broader political-cultural mindset at work here: *China's cultural hegemony means that there is no difference between mainland Chinese citizens and foreign-born Chinese*. To be ethnic Chinese, it is frequently assumed, is to support China. Indeed, China's nationality law operates on the "right of blood" (*jus sanguinis*), whereby Chinese nationality can be obtained when at least one parent is a Chinese national by birth or naturalization. In practice, this approach is highly problematic given that only Chinese with a *hukou* are considered legitimate citizens and that citizens of Hong Kong and Macau face different arrangements despite the PRC's claim to territorial sovereignty over them. This is corroborated by the author's conversations with several senior Singaporean diplomats who are ethnically Chinese, who pointed out they are frequently chastised by Chinese officials for not "defending China's interests" in their diplomatic work with Western countries. Moreover, Chinese policymakers draw little distinction between military/economic and cultural affairs: both are used to promote China as the number one country on the world stage. As observed in one study of Chinese internal publications, Chinese elites involved in policymaking are widely convinced that China is locked in a realist competition with the United States and the broader West, "not only in military and economic affairs but also for the power to shape the construction of Chinese culture and the mentalities of people in China and other societies."[49] Under the conditions of this competition, ethnic Chinese are seen as supporters of the Chinese state (or at least, they ought to be); other national loyalties are permissible only so long as they do not run against the grain of what the Chinese government wants.

49 Lynch, *China's Future,* p. 203.

III One Must First Embrace China to Love (and Discover) China

More problematic is the need for outsiders or guests to first embrace China to truly "love" and discover China. As the Chinese singer Na Ying and Singaporean singer Stephanie Sun put it, "I (China) always open the doors of my home and my arms to embrace you (the guest or outsider), once embraced there will be a rapport and you (the outsider) will love this place (China)." In other words, the outsider is exhorted to make an a priori commitment to China before they are allowed to examine the country and its people. To be fair, some kind of "faith commitment" or risk is necessary in every social endeavor, but it seems that this song is asking the observer to "suspend judgment" about China. This is combined with the added certainty that the listener would ultimately come to love China and to have their dreams fulfilled there ("Beijing welcomes you, people who have dreams are all extraordinary, keep your courage then you will have miracles"). This does not seem possible: after all, there are only so many world records that can be broken, and most athletes actually end up with their dreams dashed! Indeed, if we examine the lyrics not so much for their cognitive content (what they mean logically) but rather for their affective content (i.e., the kind of emotions they are supposed to invoke in the viewer or listener), then it becomes evident that these words are composed with the purpose of persuading outsiders that "China is the future"[50] and that the Games represent the precursor to the ushering in of that future.

Implicit in the discourse surrounding the 2008 Olympics and this theme song is the desire to portray China as exceptional – that is, good and different. While it is often necessary for countries that host large-scale events like the Olympics to invoke elements of theater and make-believe in their marketing campaigns, in the case of China these campaigns are not just about the promotion of events for commercial reasons, but also China's projection of a certain image of itself to the wider world. In other words, the Beijing Olympics is not about showcasing sporting excellence per se, but instead about highlighting China's story: the sporting events matter to the extent that they allow China to showcase and narrate its story of rise and success to the outside world.

One might also argue that the Olympics themselves are also a reflection of geopolitical competition, as seen in the rivalry between China and the United States. Prior to the 2008 Olympics the United States had been the top sporting nation since the collapse of the Soviet Union, topping the Olympic

50 Callahan, *China Dreams,* pp. 7-16.

medal table in the three previous competitions (1996, 2000, and 2004). In 2008, however, China came first with 12 more gold medals than the United States. Other events in the same year including the start of the US financial crisis with the Lehman Brothers collapse, Beijing's subsequent release of a 4 trillion yuan global stimulus, and the first Chinese astronaut sent into space on a Chinese vessel also prompted Chinese leaders to view China's role in the world from a position of strength. Reflecting on these events, China's former ambassador to Japan Chen Jian stated that "the US is beginning to degenerate [while] China will become the world's next superpower, and such recognition has been floating, fermenting and spreading around the world."[51] The events surrounding the Beijing Olympics provided the Chinese government with an opportunity to highlight its credentials as an exceptional power, thereby also perform its role as the custodian of Chinese identity. By suggesting that China is both good and different, Chinese exceptionalism seeks to coopt others into the worldview preferred by the Chinese state, or what we might term a "CCP-centric" view of seeing the world. As Rey Chow points out, "the collective habit of supplementing every major world trend with the notion of 'Chinese' is the result of an overdetermined series of historical factors, the most crucial of which is the lingering, pervasive hegemony of Western culture."[52] By the constant referencing of China's actions at the global theatre, Chinese leaders seek to distinguish what China does from the others (especially the West) and consequently also present what Chinese does as good (since it does not seek to enforce Chinese culture on others).

Fostering Cohesiveness Via Chinese Nationalism

National cohesion is regularly referenced in official CCP statements, indicating that Chinese leaders are increasingly concerned about it.[53] As Minxin Pei argues, this is a result of the considerable decline in the importance of Communist ideology, which was formerly used as an ideological tool for buttressing support of the government.[54] To address the issue of a trust deficit of the citizens towards the Chinese government and promote social cohesion within broader Chinese society, a specific idea of Chinese culture

51 Cited in Peh, *When The Party Ends,* p. 25.
52 Chow, "Introduction: On Chineseness," p. 3.
53 See, "Zhonggong Zhongyang."
54 Pei, "China's Precarious Balance."

is used to "unite the people" (*ningju renxin,* 凝聚人心), as described by the propaganda chief Liu Yunshan.[55]

Much of this is related to the issue of *trust*. In a study of the relationship between self-identity and modernity, Anthony Giddens argues that a central feature of late modernity is the "separation of time from space." Unlike pre-modern cultures and ways of life, "modern social organizations presume the precise coordination of the actions of many human beings physically absent from one another."[56] The uncertainty arising from the separation of time and space means that trust is vital to the effective ordering of social and political life. As Giddens puts it, "we have no need to trust someone who is constantly in view and whose activities can be directly monitored."[57] In reference to China, a central question is how much trust is there between the government and its citizens? Can the central government trust the citizens to do the right thing in the absence of supervisory mechanisms (given the inherent impossibility of controlling *all* aspects of social life); and conversely, to what extent do Chinese citizens trust the central government to act in the right way, given the lack of accountability mechanisms (such as elections) that could be utilized to register their feelings towards the authorities?

Various studies of Chinese cities have highlighted the issue of trust as a growing problem in Chinese megacities.[58] Chinese writers have also lamented the lack of trust within Chinese society. For instance, the Chinese sociologist Li Yinhe laments a "crisis of social trust" (*shehui xinren weiji,* 社会信任危机) that permeates Chinese society as a result of four problems: ideology, legal mechanisms, social customs, and religion.[59] Zheng Yongnian likewise locates the problem of trust in the fields of politics, economics, and society-at-large. He points out the problem of "irrational investments"[60] (*feilixing touzi,* 非理性投资) among local authorities which cause harm to the "social contract" (*shehui qiyue,* 社会契约) between the central government and the citizens. In addition, "black box operations" (*anxiang caozuo,* 暗箱操作) or illegal activities have also damaged the reputation of public officials in the eyes of ordinary citizens, particularly in times of crisis.[61] As the initial stages of the Covid-19 outbreak have shown, trust between

55 *Xinhua,* "Liu Yunshan Qiangdiao."

56 Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity,* pp. 16-17.

57 *Ibid*, p.19.

58 Hazelzet and Wissink, "Neighborhoods, Social Networks, and Trust."

59 *Fenghuang guoji zhiku*, "Li, Yinhe."

60 This likely refers to local authorities making risky financial transactions (often involving a lot of money) with due oversight and supervision.

61 "Zheng, Yongnian: Zhongguo Shehui."

Chinese leaders and citizens remains highly precarious; the government's response is to provide a constant injection of CCP propaganda to maintain domestic stability. For example, a high-level visit to Wuhan by Chinese vice-premier Sun Chunlan in March 2020 was roundly criticized by many locals for being exaggeratedly staged, with some even saying the event was "fake."[62] This suggests that many Chinese citizens do not sufficiently trust the government to tell them the truth; instead what is being communicated is meant for political consumption and to present the CCP in a positive light.

In his study of Chinese propaganda, Kingsley Edney argues that if the CCP wants to enhance China's standing in the world then it must first foster domestic cohesion at home. By doing so, the CCP would also increase China's soft power and address the negative external perceptions of China.[63] The difficulty lies in the lack of separation between government, state, and society in China; as such, "the Party and state are intertwined in a way that makes it difficult for observers to distinguish persistent political values from fluctuations in CCP policy."[64] For instance, it remains to be seen whether Xi Jinping's concept of the Chinese dream (which I further touch upon in Chapter 4) is truly representative of a genuine collective national sentiment or whether it is instead an ideological concept designed to unify the CCP with the Chinese people. As Edney observes, "the process of introducing and defining the Chinese dream is top down, rather than bottom up, and is driven by the CCP rather than the public."[65] In other words, it is unclear whether the promulgation of certain political values in China is congruent with broader societal aspirations (thus leading to greater national cohesion) or are purely for the advancement of political (party) goals and do not actually address the issue of cohesion.

One way the CCP has attempted to foster a stronger sense of national cohesion is through referencing nationalism. According to Bauman's description of nationalism, it is the "[proclamation of] the nation itself, the living legacy of long and tortuous history, to be a good in its own right – and not just one good among many others, but the supreme good, one that dwarfs and subordinates all other goods."[66] Instead of the search for a "common good" in which would-be citizens engage by "looking at themselves and calling themselves into question," nationalism offers the solution of "my

62 Mai, "It's All Fake!"
63 Edney, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda,* pp. 101-121.
64 *Ibid*., p. 118.
65 *Ibid*., p. 119.
66 Bauman, *In Search of Politics,* p. 165.

country, right or wrong" to the problem of communal security.[67] In other words, instead of examining critically the social and political ideas which frame a nation and its citizens understanding of themselves and their place in the world, nationalism provides states and statesmen a convenient solution with which to reference their political decisions by. Seeing the nation-state as the ultimate good, actions taken on behalf of the nation must also be equally good (or virtuous). By focusing on nationalism, the CCP seeks to de-problematize the contested concept of the Chinese nation and consequently legitimize its rule.[68] But more than just increasing regime stability, Chinese nationalism has the added effect of creating a moral basis by which one's loyalty to the Chinese nation can be judged.

To be sure, there are many varieties of nationalism, and a number of scholars have even raised questions about the validity of the entire concept of nationalism, particularly since most events of significance today are not longer confined to national boundaries, but have international relevance.[69] Still, given the ability of the Chinese government to suppress alternative prescriptions for China's nation-building efforts, Bauman's observations continue to be valid, in my view. Indeed, Christopher Hughes argues that the CCP has become adept in using nationalist ideology to maintain its stranglehold on power while at the same time ensuring that its version of nationalism is compatible with the requirements for attracting foreign investment to sustain economic development.[70] Nevertheless, the conditions of liquid modernity mean that drawing a distinction between what is "Chinese/non-Chinese," or "local/foreign" is difficult, if even possible, given the highly fluid borders of global flows of ideas, knowledge, and expertise, or as Bauman puts it, "the political economy of uncertainty."[71] If one sees Chinese nationalism as a call to patriotism (i.e., *aiguo zhuyi,* 爱国主义), upon what basis is one asked to do so, and to what extent does love for one's country depend upon unqualified support for the ruling Communist party and the decisions it makes regarding foreign relations? All of this suggests that the promotion or development of Chinese nationalism is not a one-sided exercise. As Callahan observes, the Chinese people are also "consuming

67 *Ibid*., p. 166, 168.

68 For studies into Chinese nationalism, see: Unger and Barmé, *Chinese Nationalism*; Hughes, "Reclassifying Chinese Nationalism;" Callahan, "National Insecurities;" Wang, "Chinese Discourse;" Gries, *China's New Nationalism.*

69 Breen and O'Neill, *After the Nation?* Buttle, "Critical Nationalism;" Özkırımlı, *Theories of Nationalism.*

70 Hughes, *Chinese Nationalism.*

71 Bauman, *In Search of Politics,* p. 173.

nationalism as part of a symbolic economy that generates identity;" in this respect, it can be argued that nationalism is not "imposed by elites so much as it resonates with people's feelings as it is circulated in the market."[72] The ways that Chinese citizens appropriate (or consume) nationalism may therefore be quite different from those prescribed by the state. This means that Chinese nationalism may be far more dynamic and diffusive than is generally assumed, and that attempts by the state to clearly demarcate the parameters of nationalist ideas may be less successful than expected.

Projecting the Idea of China's Goodness vs. the Evil Outside World

The emphasis on Chinese identity also represents a particularly potent weapon for the promotion of "nation-building" amidst the social flux currently pervading Chinese society. This is often seen in the promulgation of the Chinese state as inherently "good" and the assertion that Chinese civilization is magnanimous and embracing of outsiders.[73] As Callahan notes, "Beijing's idealized view of imperial China is constantly repeated as a way of explaining how China's peaceful rise is not a threat, but an opportunity for all to prosper in a harmonious world."[74] By positing a priori that Chinese ideals are representative and reflective of the desires and values of all (or at least, a majority of) countries in the world, Chinese leaders are able to justify their policy actions through asserting a superior morality, while simultaneously characterizing those who oppose those actions as lacking in morality (or even as evil).

One way this has been done is via the "scapegoating" of the West, upon which all of China's ills and problems are often blamed. In a series of studies on the role of violence in the sustainability of a society, Rene Girard suggests that beneath the calm surface of peaceful and friendly cooperation of communal life lies the seeds of violent urges. Given the propensity of modern society to eschew violence within their own communities, this violent disposition must be channeled beyond the borders of the community onto an external group (or scapegoat), who is sacrificed to restore a sense of communal unity. According to Girard,

> the victim is not a substitute for some particularly engendered individual, nor is it offered up to some individual of particularly bloodthirsty

72 Callahan, "History, Identity, and Security," see p. 179 and 202.
73 Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, pp. 1-31.
74 *Ibid*., p. 21.

> temperament. Rather, it is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from its own violence. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice.[75]

The selection of the victim is crucial; to be suitable for sacrifice, the potential object "must bear a sharp resemblance to the human categories excluded from the ranks of the 'sacrificeable' while still maintaining a degree of difference that forbids all possible confusion."[76] In other words, the candidates must be outside the group, but not too far; similar to "us rightful community members" but also unmistakably different. The purpose of this sacrifice is to draw tight, unsurpassable boundaries between the "inside" and "outside" of the community. Interestingly, Girard observed that there are mentions of such sacrificial rites in ancient Chinese literature, and that they possessed a propitiatory function: they "pacify the country and make the people settled [...] It is through the sacrifices that the unity of the people is strengthened [...] sacrificial ceremonies, music, punishments, and laws have one and the same end: to unite society and establish order."[77] Through this we see that the idea of scapegoating is not absent in Chinese thinking and that these scapegoating rites are conducted primarily as a form of nation-building and to preserve the existing political order. Bauman's discussion of scapegoating within the context of liquid modernity argues that the sacrifice of such "surrogate victims" calls up the "remembrance of an historical or mythical 'event of creation,' of the original compact on the battlefield soaked with enemy blood. If there was no such event, it needs to be retrospectively construed by the assiduous repetitiveness of the sacrifice rite."[78] Relating to liquid modernity and the Chinese experience, I argue that Chinese leaders have thus used the West (specifically the United States) as a convenient scapegoat so as to remind its citizens memory the historical grievances it has towards the West such as the Century of National Humiliation and to also cast the West as a scapegoat for the ills and problems plaguing Chinese society.

To understand how this scapegoating mechanism works in Chinese politics, we must examine how the CCP has refashioned itself over time to ensure that it retains a monopoly over the right to rule China. In his study of state building

75 Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 8.
76 *Ibid*., p. 12
77 *Ibid*., p. 9.
78 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 195.

and the training of the elite in modern China, Frank Pieke observes that the CCP's greatest strength lies in its "organizational (rather than ideological) credibility" to play the leading role in society. "As the undisputed ruling party, the CCP continues to draw on the charismatic impersonality of Leninist party organizations. As the infallible source of absolute truth, the party has an unchallengeable and almost mystical mandate to resolve contradictory trends and objectives by relating them to an unquestioned final and overriding mission and desire, no matter how vaguely defined."[79] This claim to infallible truth means that Chinese leaders tend to transfer blame onto others rather than admit that the Party could possibly make a mistake. While party members are individually open to prosecution for personal mistakes, as a collective whole the Party is absolved from blame. As Pieke puts it, "at the root of [the CCP's] survival as a Leninist organization lies the party's almost uncanny ability time and again to learn from its mistakes and act upon itself and its ideology. Approaching revolution and later rule as a learning process has given the party a virtually unique capacity for renewal, change and reinvention."[80] It is by scapegoating the West that Chinese leaders can avoid the burden of blame and "buy time" to respond to internal criticism and ultimately preserve their moral standing among their domestic constituents.

Besides just ensuring the continuation of party rule, there is also a need to present the party as a positive attractive force: in other words, to create a narrative that Chinese citizens will only be able to actualize their aspirations if the Party remains in power. This is where Chinese soft power and the practice of scapegoating come together: a "positive Chinese self" is built "through the negative exclusion of Otherness."[81] Chinese domestic politics and foreign relations are also intimately intertwined through the drawing of a civilized/barbarian distinction: "a positive, civilized inside takes shape only when it is distinguished from a negative barbaric outside [...] to understand the soft power of China's dreams, [one] needs to understand the negative soft power of its nightmares."[82] Hence the West becomes the source of China's nightmares, its actions and policies towards China representative of a larger effort to contain China's rise and preserve Western global primacy and leadership. To persuade the Chinese citizens of the correctness of this perspective, it is necessary to incarnate the West in real, tangible terms that citizens can relate to in their everyday life. Seen this way, issues such as

79 Pieke, *The Good Communist,* p. 191.

80 *Ibid.*

81 Callahan, "Identity and Security in China," p. 217.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 218.

the Dalai Lama, cross-straits relations, Hong Kong independence, and the South China Sea disputes become surrogates for the West, in which Chinese leaders claim to hold the moral high ground and are consequently perceived as infallible. According to Rey Chow, what is frequently encountered in modern-day China is a type of cultural essentialism or Sinocentric world-view, which draws an imaginary boundary between China and the world: "everything Chinese, it follows, is fantasized as somehow better – longer in existence, more intelligent, more scientific, more valuable, and ultimately beyond comparison."[83]

Indeed, the West has been the subject of repeated criticisms by Chinese leaders regarding what they perceive to be historical injustices towards China. As pointed out by a number of scholars, mentions of the "century of national humiliation" in the 19th century formed a common refrain among Chinese leaders to frame how modern China relates with the West.[84] This is most clearly seen in China's relations with Japan, which are tinted with a pervasive and vivid sense of victimhood on the part of the Chinese.[85] This deep suspicion towards the West and its allies is also seen in the attempts by Chinese leaders, possibly President Xi Jinping himself, to clamp down on Chinese teachers in recent years for spreading "subversive values," a term synonymous with "Western capitalist values."[86]

To be sure, scapegoating the West is not a novel practice, particularly in geopolitics where Western foreign policies are frequently blamed for the problems of countries whose political regimes are antagonistic towards the West. What makes China stand out is that unlike some of the other countries, for instance those that have been the target of the United States war against terror campaign, it can be argued that China has benefitted the most from the rules-based Western-led international order and thus has little incentive to want to modify that order.[87] It seems that Chinese leaders criticize the West because of a deep-seated suspicion that the West is attempting to challenge its domestic political system and erode the power of the CCP. Scapegoating the West offers Chinese leaders a ready-made panacea that can deflect attention from its own domestic limitations and maintain the aura of "sacredness" that the CCP wants to evoke.[88]

83 Chow, "Introduction: On Chineseness," p. 10.

84 See Gries, *China's New Nationalism;* Callahan, "History, Identity, and Security;" Chong, "Popular Narratives;" Wang, "National Humiliation."

85 Suzuki, "The Importance of 'Othering,'" p. 25.

86 Gan, "China's President Xi Jinping."

87 Ikenberry, "The Rise of China."

88 See Pieke, *Knowing China,* pp. 21-27.

Conclusion

The issue of identity remains a central problem in modern China's engagement with the wider world. This is because identity is an integral aspect of the Chinese political worldview and deeply influences how Chinese leaders perceive China's relations with the rest of the world. Given the present conditions of liquid modernity, questions about whether the party-centered worldview of Chinese leaders is sufficient for responding to myriad and complex social challenges pervades Chinese society. While scholars like Pieke have pointed out the durability and strength of party leaders to evolve and reinvent themselves, others have noted increasing challenges of governance in China, not least because of a lack of coherence in its foreign policy and domestic governance[89] or as Jonathan Fenby describes it, "a series of different agendas pursued at different times in different ways by different actors."[90] If we maintain that a country's political order is dependent upon its social order and the extent to which its citizens are able to freely participate in social life, then the Chinese government's growing assertion of control over matters of culture and society in recent years is problematic, particularly in the context of flexible economic and social relations that characterizes liquid modernity. This would have consequences in terms of how it relates with its citizens as well as the outside world. By insisting on a narrow vision of what a permitted (or correct) worldview ought to be (which needs to be in line with the CCP preferences), it limits the amount of social capital that can be harnessed in support of its objectives. Recent attempts by the CCP to utilize ethnic affiliation in support of its political goals have generated concerns worldwide, not least among countries with significant ethnic Chinese populations.[91] In my view, the international system configured around nation-states is unlikely to acquiesce to a Pax-Sinica arrangement; indeed, efforts by the Chinese government to expand its circle of influence beyond Chinese shores encountered difficulties, even in Chinese ethnic majority city-states such as Hong Kong and Singapore. To a large extent, the refusal to play by international norms blunts claims by Chinese leaders that China's rise would be non-hegemonic and peaceful, that China is unlike other great powers, and that its actions are unlike those of other great powers (including the United States which it frequently criticizes).[92]

89 Two of the more recent works that deal with these issues are Shambaugh, *China Goes Global* and Lampton, *Following the Leader*.

90 Fenby, "China's Geoeconomic Strategy."

91 See To, *Qiaowu*.

92 See Allison, "Of Course China."

It seems that China finds itself in a double bind: it wants to be exceptional (good and different from the West) in its international politics, while simultaneously needing to contend with domestic problems such as social mistrust and growing unrest that are not unlike those faced in other societies. As an authoritarian government, I argue that it is difficult – if not impossible – for China to de-emphasize the need for domestic stability and monopolistic claim to truth and to suffer damage to themselves and the party for the greater good of its citizens especially if that ends up undercutting the sacralized image it seeks to put forth of itself. While a full assessment of China's domestic condition is beyond the scope of this book, I argue that a central point of contestation lies in the extent to which the CCP's worldview is accepted by ordinary Chinese citizens. Given the unattractiveness of a Marxist-Leninist political philosophy as an ideological framework to the ordering of social life, it remains to be seen whether the Chinese government's brand of governance will find wider resonance among the public.

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4 Chinese National Image and Global Leadership

Abstract
This chapter looks at the national image that President Xi Jinping is attempting to project on the world stage vis-à-vis China's global interactions. By studying Xi's speeches, this chapter identifies the ways China tries to distinguish itself from the West in the space of domestic governance and the extent to which these ideas reflect the Chinese political worldview and belief in Chinese exceptionalism. Three main themes form the key narratives of both the promoted national image of China and Chinese exceptionalism, namely: (I) the "Chinese dream" and image of China as a flourishing civilization; (II) a progressive and peaceful China; and (III) China as a moral example which should be internationally emulated.

Keywords: national image, domestic governance, Chinese dream, peaceful rise, morality

In the preceding chapters, I have examined how China's political worldview is reflected in both the study of China's international relations thinking and discussions about its national identity. As I have noted, embedded in the Chinese worldview is a deep sense of exceptionalism: China claims that it is good and different from the West. Building on this, Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the construction of China's national image and how this image is used in China's international relations. In this chapter, I examine the national image(s) that Chinese leaders are attempting to project on the world stage vis-à-vis Beijing's global interactions. In Chapter 5, I examine the discourse surrounding the high-profile Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) rolled out in 2013 by President Xi Jinping to see how the BRI is understood by Chinese thinkers and what this tells us about China's view of the current global order.

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Here in Chapter 4, I argue that creating a positive national image is essential if a country wants its political worldview to be accepted by others, and also strengthens a country's claim to be an exceptional power. A positive national image also provides diplomatic goodwill in international relations and affects the way political relations are structured. States that are perceived negatively on the international stage face greater diplomatic challenges, not least in the issue of trust, which is considered the backbone of any societal or political arrangement.[1] Similarly, the apprehension of threat is also closely related to the *perception* of its potential source. According to Stein, "perception is the process of apprehending by means of the senses and recognizing and interpreting what is processed [...] the basis for understanding, learning, and knowing and the motivation for action."[2] While it can be argued that states' perceptions of each other are not the only important variables for decision making, Jervis points out that "the roots of many important [international] disputes about policies lie in different perceptions. And in the frequent cases when the actors do not realize this, they will misunderstand their disagreement and engage in a debate that is unenlightening."[3]

From this analytical perspective, many countries, particularly those in East Asia, regard the rise of China with some unease, and tend to perceive Chinese activities within their own territorial jurisdiction with some measure of suspicion.[4] It has been argued that China has been unable to shed its image of an "international propagandist [that has been] inherited from the years past" even though it has attempted – through means of "public diplomacy" (*gonggong waijiao,* 公共外交) – to boost the legitimacy of the CCP's rule and lure foreign investment to China while making China "palatable to the region and the world at large."[5] Indeed, as a sovereign nation-state with global ambitions, the careful management of China's national image is crucial to shaping how it is perceived by the rest of the world. According to a 2019 Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Survey, opinions of China across most of Western Europe were negative overall while countries in the Middle East, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa expressed favorable views.[6] This sharp division suggest that China's image as

1 For further discussion of the importance of trust in international relations, see Seligman, *Problem of Trust*; O'Neill, *A Question of Trust*.

2 Stein, "Threat Perception," p. 365.

3 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception,* p. 31.

4 Linley, Reilly, and Goldsmith, "Who's Afraid of the Dragon?"

5 D'Hooghe, "Into High Gear," p. 43; Chang and Lin, "From Propaganda to Public Diplomacy."

6 Silver, Devlin, and Huang, "People Around the Globe."

a global great power remains largely contested – thus calling into question its claim to be a moral example and force for international good. As one study of China's public diplomacy puts it, "China has not yet been successful in projecting the image of a responsible great power."[7] In this context, what steps are Chinese leaders taking to remedy this problematic image, and to what extent have they been successful in doing so?

In the following discussion, I first demonstrate the relationship between China's political worldview, particularly its claims of exceptionalism, and its national image. I then analyze some speeches of President Xi taken from the two-volume published work *The Governance of China.* In these speeches, I uncover some key images and ideas about China that the government is attempting to propagate on the world stage. Finally, I examine the extent to which these images have been successful in promoting China's desired national image to the outside world, and what these national images tell us about its political worldview.

The Importance of National Image

What then constitutes a "national image," and more importantly, how does a state obtain a "favorable" national image? Kenneth Boulding defines perceived images as the "total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure of the behavior unit or its internal view of itself and the universe."[8] Given that decision-makers do not make decisions in a social vacuum, but in the context of their perceived "image" of the social situation, Boulding argues that "it is what we think the world is like, not what it is really like, that determines our behavior."[9] The desire to maintain "cognitive consistency" therefore compels decision-makers to attribute "favorable characteristics [...] to liked nations, and unfavorable characteristics to disliked nations."[10] Seen this way, whether a country is "liked" or "disliked" is based on whether it is able to project a "favorable" national image – one that is sufficiently "attractive" to be considered worthy of emulation. A well-constructed national image also serves the dual function of shoring up domestic support while simultaneously expanding a country's global and regional influence.[11]

7 D'Hooghe, "Into High Gear," p. 57.
8 Boulding, *The Image,* pp. 121-122.
9 Boulding, "National Images," p. 120.
10 Scott, "Psychological and Social Correlates," p.100.
11 Li and Chitty, "Reframing National Image."

Relating this to the study of China's political worldview and its claims of exceptionalism, I argue that any country *that seeks to have its worldview accepted must first be able to project a positive national image of itself.* In his study of public opinion, media theorist Walter Lippmann argues that the external environment is so complex that humans must reduce it to a simpler model if they are to comprehend it and take decisive action.[12] Scholars of international relations have also utilized image theory to discuss how state-to-state relationships are conceived as either a threat or opportunity represented by the other actor.[13] This national image is closely related to what a country *does*, both domestically and internationally. In this respect, a national image is not self-evident, and a state's actions are always interpreted within a mental framework that involves prior assumptions, preconceptions, and value judgments about their intentions and interests. At the same time, these images and actions are not entirely relative: there are certain characteristics of state behavior, or "baseline social processes," that are held up as normative standards for international emulation.[14] To the degree countries exhibit these traits, they are likely to be favorably perceived and vice versa. In other words, a national image is produced not simply by words, but also through the actions of the state.

In this chapter, I examine how Chinese elites perceive China as "different" from the West within the space of domestic governance and how these governance priorities reflect the idea of Chinese exceptionalism in practice. To do so, I analyze the speeches made by President Xi Jinping that are complied in *The Governance of China* (*Xi Jinping Tan Zhiguo Lizheng,* 习近平谈治国理政).[15] Through a close study of this work, I uncover several key themes that reflect how China is presented as "different" to the outside world and how this relates to the processes of domestic governance. I also examine how China's national image is portrayed in these instances, and the extent to which such activities help or hinder attempts to generate a favorable national image.

12 Lippmann, *Public Opinion.*

13 Herrmann, Voss, Schooler, and Ciarrochi, "Images in International Relations."

14 For a more detailed explanation, see Copeland, "Constructivist Challenge."

15 In late 2017, a second volume of *The Governance of China* was published which covered major speeches made by Xi between August 2014 and September 2017. Notwithstanding some new themes, such as the idea of a Community of Shared Future and the Belt and Road Initiative, the speeches generally revolved around similar narratives at those in the first volume, which my subsequent analysis will be taken from. As this chapter is not meant to be an exhaustive review of Xi's writings, I train my focus on topics that, in my view, matter most to China's national image-promotion objectives.

Xi Jinping: The Governance of China

I use *The Governance of China* as a springboard for my analysis of China's national image for the following reasons. First, it comprises 80 speeches made by President Xi Jinping in the first 18 months after he became China's leader, and thus represents an important attempt to narrate what China's future might be like. Given Xi's thorough consolidation of power within the party, the book can also be viewed as a blueprint of Xi's vision of China under his rule.[16] Second, given that the book was translated into English in 2014 by the Foreign Languages Press of Beijing which comes under the control of the CCP, the book was likely translated and compiled with an external audience in mind. A careful study of this book thus allows us to glean further information about the national image that Xi and senior party leaders want to project to the outside world. Third, despite being almost 500 pages long, this book contains few references to the United States and the Western world, instead articulating Chinese perspectives regarding various aspects of global governance, particularly China's relations with other countries in Asia.[17] This suggests a desire of Chinese leaders to differentiate China from the West on the basis of self-perceived cultural and political superiority. Taken together, the book provides important clues about how Chinese leaders think China's international relations should be structured and the priorities that Chinese leaders tend to emphasize in domestic, regional, and international affairs. As observed by Callahan, the book is helpful because it "gathers together otherwise scattered speeches and comments to show Xi's hopes, dreams, goals, and plans for China and the world."[18] Indeed, the publisher notes that the book was written "to respond to rising international interest and to enhance the rest of the world's understanding of the Chinese government's philosophy and its domestic and foreign policies."[19]

In this analysis, I focus on three themes that constitute key narratives of China's image promotion. They are: (I) the "Chinese Dream" and the image of China as a flourishing civilization; (II) the image of a progressive and peaceful China; and (III) China as a moral example for the international community to emulate. Besides analyzing Xi's speeches related to the above themes, I also look at the writings and ideas of Chinese scholars touching on

16 Yang, "Why Read Xi Jinping's book?"
17 Ahmad-Noor, "How China Sees Itself."
18 Callahan, "Impact of Xi Jinping's Governance."
19 Xi, *Governance of China*, Publisher's note.

them. By linking this analysis to my broader study of Chinese exceptionalism, I argue that China's national image represents a crucial aspect of its ability to influence and lead the world. A negative image would sorely dent Chinese ambitions to lead and to have others follow. In this context, the ideas articulated by Xi in *The Governance of China* attempt to remedy the national image of the PRC, as exemplified in the area of governance, and establish that Xi's vision of governance is perceived as "different" from the West.

I The Chinese Dream: The Image of China as a Flourishing Civilization

On November 29, 2012, shortly after the unveiling of China's fifth generation of leaders at the 18th National Congress, President Xi gave a speech titled "Achieving Rejuvenation is the Dream of the Chinese People" while visiting the National Museum of China in Beijing. In this speech, Xi exhorted Chinese citizens to pursue the "Chinese Dream" (*Zhongguo meng,* 中国梦):

> In my opinion, achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times. This dream embodies the long-cherished hope of several generations of the Chinese people, gives expression to the overall interests of the Chinese nation and Chinese people, and represents the shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation.[20]

Given the setting in which the speech was made, this can be interpreted as Xi attempting to invoke a strong sense of historical pride among the Chinese citizenry to unite them under the umbrella of a shared common destiny, and to seize the opportunity as a result of the problems in the West following the financial crisis. As noted by Callahan, "expectations are high in China for Xi to act quickly on a range of issues; there is a sense of urgency in Beijing because people feel that China's 'window of opportunity' for global greatness is closing."[21]

This appeal to the Chinese Dream was again made in Xi's first official address to the Party as president, after the official handover of power during the 12th National People's Congress on March 17, 2013.[22] Unlike his earlier speech, in which the Chinese Dream was vaguely defined as national

20 *Ibid.,* p. 38.
21 Callahan, *China Dreams,* p. 22.
22 Xi, *Governance of China,* pp. 41-43.

rejuvenation, this speech is a clarion call to action, with the parameters of the Dream more clearly defined:

> To realize the Chinese Dream, we must take our own path, which is the path of building socialism with Chinese characteristics [...]
> To realize the Chinese Dream, we must foster the Chinese spirit [...]
> To realize the Chinese Dream, we must pool China's strength, that is, the strength of great unity among the people of "all ethnic Chinese" (*zhonghua minzu,* 中华民族).[23]

The Chinese Dream theme was repeated in five other speeches made over the next fourteen months (April 2013-June 2014) that are compiled in the book.[24] As I have suggested in previous chapters, these reiterations of the Chinese Dream should not be construed or dismissed simply as propaganda or as facts that can be proven or disproven. Instead, the Chinese Dream represents a "moral drama that expresses a community's aspirations and fears."[25] I argue that efforts to forge a Chinese national identity is closely intertwined with how Chinese leaders endeavor to generate social cohesiveness within Chinese society (as discussed in Chapter 3). More than just social cohesion, however, the Chinese Dream also symbolizes an effort to showcase and highlight China's credentials to the outside world and enhance its national image, particularly if its citizens are able to identify with a sense of shared destiny regarding China's future. To this end, the Chinese Dream can be considered a way of engaging the emotions of the Chinese people, thus generating a greater affinity between Chinese political leaders and citizens.

As such, the Chinese Dream can be understood as the proclamation of a Chinese political "gospel," whereby China seeks to "confer blessings" on both its own citizens and the international community. As one Chinese scholar writes, "the core message of the Chinese Dream is that China's rise is not a zero-sum game, but a mutual win-win situation for the rest of the world."[26] The image that this seeks to portray is of China as a flourishing civilization whose values and way of life are attractive to both insiders and outsiders, thus rendering cooperation inevitable and conflict obsolete. Such an outcome is not a certainty, however, but is contingent on the preservation

23 Another plausible translation is "Chinese of all ethnicities." As discussed in Chapter 3, this emphasis on ethnic Chinese people and their close connection with the Chinese nation is a common refrain. I revisit this theme in Chapter 6.

24 *Ibid*., pp. 47-69,

25 Callahan, *China Dreams,* p. 145.

26 Li, "Interpreting and Understanding 'The Chinese Dream,'" p. 517.

of two things: socialism (with Chinese characteristics) and the centrality of the Communist Party of China.

Given that socialist ideology and the CCP are closely intertwined, it is not surprising to see how they contribute to Xi's vision of the Chinese Dream. Socialism represents the ideological core of the CCP's institution while the CCP presents itself as a custodian of the doctrines of socialism. Indeed, socialism with Chinese characteristics, according to Xi, remains an indispensable "doctrine" which "can save China [… and] bring development to China."[27] Xi refers to China's history to buttress his point, noting that the socialist system was a result of the Party's "painstaking efforts" over years.[28] In other words, Xi allies himself with Chinese history – as interpreted from the Party's vantage point – and concludes that Chinese socialism remains the "only way to achieve China's socialist modernization and create a better life."[29] Xi also maintains that Chinese socialism, however imperfect at present, remains "unique and effective" and that party members should guard against "erroneous views aimed at abandoning socialism."[30]

Similarly, in reference to the CCP's leadership, Xi emphasizes the importance of party members for "accomplish[ing] concrete deeds that can stand the test of practice, survive the scrutiny of the people and history."[31] Quoting the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Zi, Xi states that "governing a big country [like China] is as delicate as frying a small fish" (*zhidaguo ru pengxiaoxian,* 治大国如烹小鲜): party members therefore should not be negligent, even in the smallest of matters, and need to devote themselves to their work and the public interest.[32] Interestingly, the above quote was also used by former US president Ronald Reagan in his 1988 State of the Union speech, with the added words "do not overdo it." While Reagan's emphasis was on a government-light approach to domestic governance, Xi's approach requires the continuation of considerable Party oversight over matters of governance and policy affairs. This is because under the single-party system the fortunes of the Communist Party are coterminous with the fortunes of China.

Why should we care about the Chinese Dream, Chinese socialism, and the Chinese leadership? Xi's words are not entirely unexpected, and his proclamations are not exactly unique, but at the same time the "China Dream" discourse is not simply empty talk, but broadly reflects how Chinese leaders

27 Xi, *Governance of China,* p. 24.
28 *Ibid*., p. 7.
29 *Ibid*., p. 9.
30 *Ibid*., p. 11.
31 *Ibid*., p. 445.
32 *Ibid*., p. 458.

perceive China's economic development and its place in the world. In the words of Zhou Tianyong, the vice director of Research at the Party School of the Communist Party of China's Central Committee, the Chinese dream "is rooted in [the Chinese] people's obligations, trust, hopes and dreams for themselves, families, society and country in the future, and the pursuit for the vision and ideal of China."[33] However, it also raises the larger question of whether the Chinese dream is able to incorporate and account for the interests of other countries, and whether Chinese leaders are not merely acting on the behalf of only China's own national interests. In a discussion of "the China model," which was widely promulgated by Chinese policy-makers in the late 2000s, Suisheng Zhao observes that despite its "non-ideological, pragmatic and experimental approach" this model has several flaws: first, it lacks moral appeal; second, it has not been effective in dealing with important dimensions of human development either at home or abroad; and, third, the success of the model is based on short-term results and its durability is questionable.[34] Taking the "China model" as a precursor to the Chinese Dream, it is therefore important to ask whether either of these models possesses universal appeal and is sufficiently attractive to persuade other states to follow China's lead – and thereby constitutes an improvement of China's national image? In other words, how much traction does Chinese exceptionalist thinking have in the context of the states that the PRC purports to influence? In a study on China's relationships with various African nations, Alden and Large observed that the Chinese government has been challenged by the need to reconcile aspirational ideals with policy prescriptions (and the messy reality on the ground), in addition to the difficulty of ensuring that Chinese official rhetoric can be conclusively demonstrated in the substance of day-to-day interactions with African counterparts.[35] Likewise a 2020 Pew Research Centre survey has also shown that views of China have grown more negatively across many advanced countries in recent years, with criticism over China's poor handling of the Covid-19 outbreak at the start of the pandemic.[36]

This brings us back to the crucial question surrounding the Chinese Dream: can it be actualized in the day-to-day work of governance, or is it simply an exercise in idealized reality? Callahan observes that the Chinese dream reflects a wider debate within Chinese society about values, even

33 Zhou, *Zhongguomeng yu Zhongguo Daolu*. The above citation is taken from the English translation published by World Scientific in 2014, p. 7.

34 Zhao, "China Model." For a succinct outline of the China Model, see Pan, "Chinese Model of Development."

35 Alden and Large, "China's Exceptionalism."

36 Silver, Devlin and Huang, "People Around The globe."

though the objective of the dream is national rejuvenation through state power.[37] Seen this way, I argue that the Chinese dream is not without deeper political overtones: to achieve the Chinese dream, the party-state needs to be in charge, and cannot tolerate any challenge to its monopoly of power. To be sure, the desire to preserve political power is not unique to China, and Beijing's political system should not be simply labeled as a dictatorship (and thus condemned) rather than a democratic system (which is to be praised) – as many Westerners would see it. As Pieke puts it, "democracy and dictatorship are not [...] antagonistic political systems. Democratic enclaves can exist within authoritarian regimes just as authoritarian enclaves can exist within democratic political systems [... China] is a bit of both and at the same time also something altogether new."[38] Still, the need to preserve party centrality and control at all costs presents sharp difficulties for Chinese leaders, not least because of the rapidly changing character of Chinese society, in which the CCP is unable to control every aspect of social life particularly the private lives and beliefs of individual citizens. As discussed in Chapter 3, the conditions of liquid modernity are currently complicating the CCP's efforts to enforce a single unifying narrative of what Chinese national identity ought to encompass. Hence, I argue that the Chinese dream and the attempt to conjure an image of China as a flourishing civilization is being diluted by the current flux in Chinese social life, which reveals the CCP's limitations in terms of responding, let alone providing a solution, to the deeper moral and existential tensions within Chinese society. The highly diffusive nature of the Chinese dream means that it can be taken to mean anything and everything, ultimately rendering the concept itself vacuous and empty of meaning. Indeed, some Chinese scholars have also questioned the concept of the Chinese dream and the extent to which the concept can be used to generate feelings of patriotism and national identity among Chinese citizens.[39]

II Reform and Restraint Strategy: The Image of China as "Progressive And Peaceful"

IIa The Language of Reform: China Is Progressing

One of Xi's frequent refrains is the need for "all round and deeper-level reforms," which are described as "ongoing tasks [that] will never end."[40]

37 Callahan, *China Dreams*, pp. 144-162.
38 Pieke, *Knowing China,* pp. 117-118.
39 See Callahan, "China Dreams: The Debate."
40 Xi, *Governance of China,* p. 75, 77.

Indeed, the Communist Party considered the topic of reforms so crucial to China's future that it was made the central topic for discussion during the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CCP Central Committee meeting. According to Xi, reforms had to be comprehensive (covering everything from the economy to the ecology), but more importantly they had to be "connected to and integrated in the reform of *Party* building."[41] I argue that whether specific reforms can be actualized is not the point here; rather, it is the emphasis on reforms that suggests that they are of paramount importance. But is this emphasis purely used as a rhetorical device to bolster the Communist Party's legitimacy, or is there more to what reforms entail and how they are perceived?

The concept of "reform" (*gaige,* 改革) is not unique to Xi's administration; it has been frequently echoed by Chinese leaders since Deng Xiaoping, who have all recognized the necessity of reform for governing China successfully. As David Lampton points out, reforms confer legitimacy on Chinese leaders, and are premised on "bringing China's social, economic, and governing systems into greater harmony with one another in the very different PRC that has evolved since mid-1977."[42] More importantly, it is believed that the Communist Party would emerge stronger from reforms and be better prepared to meet the needs of the country.[43] Xi's recent recentralization of political power suggests that reforms in China under his leadership are not without an additional political purpose: to strengthen Xi's authority and solidify his control of the party.

For example, Xi espouses the "Rule of Law" as a "fundamental principle by which the Party leads the people in running the country [so as] to ensure that the people lead a happy life."[44] In a speech commemorating the 30th anniversary of the PRC's post-Cultural Revolution constitution, Xi spent a considerable amount of time explicating the need to "comprehensively implement" the constitution.[45] However, six months later in the summer of 2013, Chinese leaders started to clamp down on the academic and popular discourse that had flourished following Xi's speech. Since then, a number of human rights lawyers have been arrested or detained for participating in "subversive activities."[46] Scholars argue that adherence to the rule of law is problematic in China, where checks and balances have traditionally

41 *Ibid.,* p. 99.
42 Lampton, *Following the Leader,* p. 222.
43 Deng, *On Reforms,* pp. 191-215.
44 Xi, *Governance of China,* p. 152, 165.
45 *Ibid.*, p. 153.
46 Buckley, "Charges Against Chinese Rights Lawyers."

played a smaller role in limiting the leaders or empowering the ordinary citizen compared to the West.[47] As Xi puts it, "our judicial, procuratorial and public security officers are good. They are loyal to the Party, serve our people, are able to take on tough challenges, and brave death."[48] This statement suggests that the law – and those who practice it – is ultimately subservient to the broader prerogatives to the party. To the degree that members of the judiciary and those who are tasked with enforcing the law are expected to abide by Party guidelines and serve the interests of the Party, reforms remain limited in scope and contingent upon the decisions of China's top political leaders.

Seen against this backdrop, I argue that China's reforms are conceptualized to further strengthen institutional power and project the image of Chinese leaders as capable and coherent in their governance, ultimately lending legitimacy to their power. Given that the Chinese government is frequently criticized by the West for human rights' violations, "reforms" provide Chinese leaders with the necessary credentials to convince both Chinese citizens and the outside world that its political processes are in tandem with the domestic needs of its polity, thereby accentuating the competency of its leaders. The language of reform also lends weight to the generation of a "progressive mindset" among Chinese leaders, in that these changes are necessary for China to obtain the skill sets required to ensure its ongoing development.

In a discussion of how images permeate the political process, Kenneth Boulding observes that the difference between democratic and authoritarian political systems lies in the nature of the feedback from lower to higher roles in the decision-making process. Whereas in democratic models this feedback is more direct, resulting in a more powerful influence over or modification of decisions, feedback in authoritarian structures tend to be inadequate, as the "tyrant controls his sources of information [thus ensuring] these sources become increasingly unreliable." In addition, the leader also tends to surround him- or herself with likeminded people (i.e., "yes men") so "his image of the world becomes increasingly divorced from the image of the lower roles."[49] How does this apply to China, and is President Xi's increasingly centralized approach to governing symptomatic of a bigger problem?

The decision of the Communist party's Central Committee to bestow the title of "the core" (*hexin,* 核心) on President Xi in October 2016 – thus

47 Zhao, *Debating Political Reform.*
48 Xi, *Governance of China*, p. 166.
49 Boulding, *The Image,* p. 100.

arrogating maximum political power to Xi in a manner similar to that enjoyed by Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping – was justified by the need to push forward the "fundamental needs of the Party and the nation" and achieve national rejuvenation.[50] As a number of scholars have noted, however, it is unclear whether Xi's attempt to exert such widespread control is at all feasible, let alone effective for managing the needs of the country.[51] This is particularly demonstrated by the initial outbreak of the Covid-19 virus, when the reluctance of local officials in Wuhan to convey bad news upwards to the central government resulted in delay and inaction. As one Singaporean observer of Chinese politics puts it, "China is a Leninist state led by a vanguard party that insists on absolute control. Control is the primary value to which all other considerations are subordinate. If exceptions are made, they are tactical and temporary. Control gives a Leninist state the capability to take fundamental decisions and pursue them over the long term, with minimal discussion except within the top echelon of the party."[52] This insistence on political control *at all costs* collides with the political effectiveness of governing China, particularly in times of crisis.[53]

IIb The Logic of Restraint: China Is "Peaceful"

Russia, the United States, and the European Union loom large in Beijing's imagination. Xi's speeches in Moscow, Sunnylands (California), and Bruges all attempt to find common ground between Chinese civilization and his respective hosts.[54] In these speeches there was virtually no mention or acknowledgment of any bilateral problems; he mostly touched on positive developments, including the role played by China in helping these nations flourish. Part of the reason for this is China's acute sensitivity towards relations with other major powers and foreign policy tradition of "realist thinking, situational ethics, and a deeply embedded sensitivity to being bullied."[55] In addition, Chinese leaders since Deng Xiaoping have tended to describe Chinese foreign policy as fundamentally peaceful, and insist that

50 Song, "Xi as Core."

51 Lampton, "Xi Jinping and the National Security Commission."

52 Kausikan, "The Coronavirus was Unexpected."

53 To be sure, the CCP's ability to mobilize huge resources and effectively close down cities in mainland China is unprecedented in global politics. In early March, the CCP celebrated its so-called success in overcoming the Covid-19 virus, insisting that its political system allowed it to move with great speed and effectiveness. But, as Kausikan pointedly reminds us, "Why were such drastic measures and Herculean efforts necessary in the first place?"

54 Xi, *Governance of China*, pp. 297-315.

55 Lampton, *Following the Leader,* p. 136.

China does not harbor hegemonic designs or seek global expansion.[56] By choosing to affirm areas of common interest with the other major powers, Xi is pursuing two objectives – one for a domestic audience, and the other for a foreign one. For a Chinese domestic audience, Xi is attempting to narrate, and consequently instill, a sense of pride about China's global achievements and international parity with the major powers. More crucially, these platforms also offered Xi the opportunity to portray China as not seeking international dominance, but instead intending to usher in a "new model of major country relationship" (*xinxingdaguoguanxi,* 新型大国关系) – a foreign policy slogan that would be repeated many times by Chinese scholars and diplomats over the following two years.[57]

A central theme underlining this policy was providing a basis for solving bilateral issues between China and the United States from a "more symmetrical position than before," that China has a special role and duty as a major power to work with the United States and other major powers to solve global problems.[58] As one Chinese scholar puts it, Xi's diplomatic strategy is to lead through major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.[59] Beyond their symbolic value, such expressions are intended to shore up China's national image by insisting that Beijing would eschew Cold War-style confrontational politics and instead exercise restraint and responsibility in its external relations. While both the US and China remain deeply suspicious of each other (notwithstanding their leaders' high-profile meetings), it can be argued that Chinese leaders and scholars frequently go to great lengths to characterize Chinese foreign policy as inherently peaceful – more than their Western counterparts do.[60] This fits into the "peaceful development" narrative first promoted by President Hu Jintao during the 2000s, which cast China as a model benevolent power in pursuit of peaceful development.[61]

To see how the notion of peaceful development is understood in China, let us examine the "Asian security concept" mooted by Xi in a 2014 speech at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia.[62] While much of this speech covers predictable terrain, Xi notably spoke of the need for the "people of Asia [to] run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of

56 *Xinhua,* "China Will Never Seek Hegemony."
57 Cui, "Tuidonggoujian Zhongmei," pp. 58-60; Jia, *Xinxing Daguo Guanxi;* Wang, *Daguoguanxi*.
58 Zeng and Breslin. "China's New Type of Great Power Relations," see p. 774.
59 Su, "Xi Jinping's Strategic Thought."
60 Zheng, *China's Peaceful Rise;* Guo, *China's "Peaceful Rise;"* Qin, "International Society."
61 *China Daily*, "Hu Jintao."
62 Xi, *Governance of China*, pp. 389-396.

Asia and uphold the security of Asia."[63] Unsurprisingly, this notion of "Asia for Asians" met with substantial debate among both Chinese and Western scholars.[64] Was China attempting to coerce Asian countries to stand with China to challenge American primacy in Asia? Or was China attempting to create a Pan-Asia community of nations where China would be at the apex, in a return to a modern tributary system? According to Jakobson, Xi's speech reflects his aspiration of creating a new Asian security framework, although the details of such a security framework remain vague.[65]

In my view, this emphasis on Asia tells us two things about China's present and future priorities: first, China sees Asia as a key region in its global quest for greatness; and second, China is attempting to reduce American influence in Asia, particularly in terms of security relations. The Asia for Asians framework demonstrates Chinese contestation of the US-led regional alliance, which it dismisses as a Cold War relic that is irrelevant to China's "exclusivist vision of Asian regionalism and institutionalism."[66] To do this, China needs to differentiate itself from the United States and promote a regional – even international – order that is *distinctively* different from the US-led system. For this reason, Chinese leaders repeatedly emphasize the peaceful nature of Chinese international relations and contrast them with the United States' hegemonic power. This sense of competition is especially evident in China's interactions with its Asian neighbors, specifically with countries within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Furthermore, as observed by Callahan, debates about how China can fit into the world system as a "responsible great power" have also emerged among liberal Chinese IR scholars in recent years. "China is trying to prove to the world (especially the West) that it is no longer a revolutionary state that challenges international order, but is a responsible member of international society."[67] Another view proposed by Deborah Larson is that China wants to restore its previous status as a great power while at the same time preserving its culture and norms without assimilating Western liberal values, which are seen as problematic.[68] Despite the best efforts of Chinese diplomats and scholars to promote a peace-loving image of Beijing, however, China's closest neighbors continue to eye its actions with suspicion. This reinforces the idea that states' actions, not words, influence how its national image

63 *Ibid*., p. 392.
64 Jakobson, "Reflections from China."
65 *Ibid*.
66 Tow and Limaye, "What's China Got to Do with It?" p. 23.
67 Callahan, "Chinese Visions," p. 757.
68 Larson, "Will China be a New Type of Great Power?"

is perceived. Seen in this way, merely proclaiming China's peaceful rise is insufficient to produce a favorable national image if not backed up by concrete action.

III China as a Moral Example in International Politics

Discussions of morality feature heavily in Chinese international relations scholarship, especially in recent attempts to distinguish China's practice of international politics from those of the West (as discussed in Chapter 2). Yan Xuetong, who leads the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University, has been highly vocal in formulating a normative model of Chinese international relations.[69] Two of his recent works, as discussed in Chapter 2, deal with the theme of China's moral standing in international politics, which in Yan's mind is indispensable for a country's ability to lead.[70] Yan distinguishes hegemonic from humane authority and argues that the latter – while more difficult to achieve – provides a better basis for international leadership. Importantly, Yan regards the United States as a hegemonic power and argues that China should strive to obtain a higher international moral standing: "If China wants to become a state of humane authority, this would be different from the contemporary United States. The goal of our strategy must be not only to reduce the power gap with the United States but also to provide a better model for society than that given by the United States."[71]

I argue that Chinese leaders perceive and attempt to project China's moral quality partly through "symbolic (or performative) acts" whereby the social reality of China is being constructed. As observed, states are not passive objects of socialization but rather active agents who continuously attempt to shape the international discourse about themselves. For this reason, much of everyday political interaction can be construed as a performative act, whereby states attempt to communicate – through policies enacted and articulated – how they *should* be seen and treated.[72] Indeed, Erving Goffman's seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* highlights the importance of the co-constitution of social relations. "When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them."[73] Symbolic actions

69 Paltiel, "Constructing Global Order."
70 Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought;* Yan, *Shijie Quanli de Zhuanyi.*
71 Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought,* pp. 15-16.
72 Adler-Nissen, "Stigma Management."
73 Goffman, *Presentation of Self,* p. 10.

take on crucial importance, determining both the impression that a state conveys to the outside world as well as how a state understands itself to be.

On this theoretical basis, I argue that the Chinese state performs many actions that are highly symbolic in nature. Given that Chinese society is largely given to "ritualistic" action, the act of governance is not only a social contract between the government and the people, but also carries certain obligations that are morally defined.[74] Fei Xiaotong defines "ritual" (*li,* 礼) as "an act performed in accordance with ceremonial forms" and states that "rituals work through the feeling of respect and of obedience that people themselves have cultivated. People conform to rituals on their own initiative."[75] Thus those who govern must "perform" as expected if they are to be viewed as legitimate by the people. Given the challenges of domestic governance in China, there is a particular need for symbolic action – what Lucian Pye terms "theatrical gesture" – through which great importance can be placed on the "manner and the form of actions and not just to look for substance."[76] Whether such acts are merely performative in nature or whether they are in and of themselves "good" and beneficial to the people is not as important as how the actions themselves are constructed and perceived.[77] In other words, we could say that China's national image is contingent on the extent to which its leaders are able to convince the citizens that they are discharging their responsibilities with recourse to moral considerations, or put more simply, how they are presented as being morally good. As pointed out by Richard Madsen in his classic study of the interpersonal dynamics within a Chinese village, an emphasis on the importance of good "human feeling" in political conduct reflects the broader commitment to a Confucian paradigm that governs individual thinking – either consciously or otherwise – in which man is not by nature selfish.[78] From this I argue that ritualistic acts – at their core – are meant to confer moral rectitude (even if only symbolically) to political actors and consequently to offer political legitimacy especially in closed political systems whereby ordinary citizens are unable express their opinions through elections.

This framework provides a better understanding of some of Xi's social undertakings, especially those with utopian objectives or goals that seem overly idealistic. As Sujian Guo observes, although the post-Mao era has

74 See Fei, *From the Soil,* pp. 94-101; Pye, *International Relations,* p. 5.

75 Fei, *From the Soil,* pp. 98-99.

76 Pye, *Spirit of Chinese Politics,* p. 168.

77 In my view, reality probably constitutes both "performative" and productive elements.

78 Madsen, *Morality and Power,* pp. 12-13.

become far less attentive to utopian visions of an ideal future compared to during Mao's time, "CCP ideology still officially retains many utopian elements as stipulated in the CCP constitution and reflected in the leaders' speeches."[79] In this case, I interpret these utopian elements as statements or actions that express symbolic intent, not necessarily as realistic initiatives that are meant to be achieved. For instance, at a 2013 Politburo study session, Xi spoke on the need to "usher in a new era of ecological progress," but the speech provided no details as to how this might happen except highlighting the importance of implementing the "guiding principles of the Party's 18th National Congress," such as the "Deng Xiaoping Theory," "the Three Represents," and a "Scientific Outlook on Development."[80] Similarly, during a 2012 visit to Hebei province, Xi spoke about the need to "eliminate poverty and accelerate development in impoverished areas" but did not specify how that could be done – except to note the importance of Party committees for achieving this goal.[81]

Of course, statesmen are not always expected to be intimately involved in day-to-day policymaking, which is usually done by lower officials. In the case of China, however, this is complicated by the fact that "Chinese national politics revolves around the personages of leaders [...] the mystique of the leader as the great man, the savior of the nation, the one whose will and wishes become the collective obligations of the country."[82] This can particularly be seen in the case of President Xi, who wields far more personal power than his predecessors; there is an expectation that his words carry substantial weight, even though those who subsequently interpret and translate those words into actual policies may face a very different set of situational constraints. According to Lucian Pye, when faced with the constraints of reality, symbolism (as expressed in performative actions) produces the "peculiar Chinese combination of wishful thinking and cold practicality."[83] Expressed this way, these forces have the potential to deepen the fissures between the party leadership and ordinary citizens particularly if *institutions are unable to cope with what is politically demanded*.

What symbolic action can achieve, however, is the imbuing of political action with a certain moral quality which lends legitimacy to Chinese leaders. This fixation with morality is most vividly seen in Xi's high-profile anti-corruption campaign. In a January 2013 speech, Xi touched on the

79 Guo, *Chinese Politics and Government,* p. 119.
80 Xi, *Governance of China*, pp. 230-232.
81 *Ibid.,* pp. 209-210.
82 Pye, *Mandarin and the Cadre,* p. 135.
83 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

need to catch "tigers" and "flies" (referring to powerful leaders and lowly bureaucrats, respectively) and stated that party members should not "seek any personal gain or privilege" over and above what they are entitled to by the nature of their jobs.[84] It is unclear whether this campaign is truly aimed at eradicating corruption, or instead is meant to purge Xi's political opponents. As such, anticorruption campaigns can be said to have a dual purpose: they can act as instruments of personal power (for political purges), as well as a demonstration of good governance whereby the party is able to – or at least can be seen to – claim a moral high ground.[85]

The fact that Chinese society is particularly sensitive to issues of "saving face"[86] means that social policies are often couched in moral language: they not only are expected to benefit the people in a real way, but also to portray the Party in a favorable light (i.e., the Party is "good"). This perception is ultimately linked to China's success or failure in the world. As Pye has observed, "[the] powerful and essentially mystical belief that moral uprightness and ethical correctness on the part of rulers is enough to determine the fate of empires."[87] What is different, I argue, is the *basis* upon which this moral code is built upon. Unlike Western ethical systems whose values are (however imperfectly) based on Christian teachings, Chinese society lacks a transcendental reference point with which to establish a set of guiding – or binding – moral code. In this place the Communist Party is enthroned (or made sacred) by its leaders, thus becoming the ultimate reference point to which Chinese citizens (including party officials) are required to pledge their allegiance. As Pye notes, "the absence of an unchallengeable code of ethics or a widely-held belief in otherworldly retribution sets the stage for a purely opportunistic calculus of behavior. The problem has been intensified with the decline in ideological faith in Communism and the consequent weakening of the concept of socialist morality."[88]

In sum, the value of morality lies in its symbolic power for the Party, which uses it to claim credit for its success in ruling China. Given the one-party system of the Chinese state and the absence of popular elections, in addition to whether they bring economic prosperity Chinese leaders are judged in reference to their "moral standing" among the people. The Chinese saying, "if the leader is not upright, the subordinates will also be crooked"

84 Xi, *Governance of China*, pp. 425-431.
85 Broadhurst and Wang, "After the Bo Xilai Trial."
86 Ho, "About Face."
87 Pye, *Spirit of Chinese Politics*, p. 128.
88 Pye, *Mandarin and the Cadre*, p. 52.

(*shangliangbuzheng xialiangwai,* 上梁不正下梁歪) thus dovetails with how Chinese politics function: to legitimize their governance, Chinese leaders must be perceived as "morally good" insofar as they represent the public face of the CCP and reflect the extent to which the Party and nation are favorably viewed by the outside world. The image of the party projected by the CCP is one of a party that is untainted by the immoral vagaries and vicissitudes of everyday politics. As Pieke observes, the party is kept pure through a process of self-criticism and self-reflection, without "expos[ing] the inner core of CCP politics to the gaze of ordinary people [thus] stripping the Party of the mystery and sacredness that have rendered its rule unquestionable and untouchable for so long."[89]

Conclusion: Whither China's National Image

Despite the efforts of Chinese leaders, China's national image remains largely controversial. Consequently, China's political worldview remains unattractive to the outside world and is unlikely to be accepted by other countries as it is subjected to a greater degree of domestic politicization compared to those and is mostly considered with the preservation of the CCP in mind. On the domestic front, it is unclear whether Chinese citizens themselves identify with the Chinese Dream. As Callahan observes, the "optimism of the China dream relies on the pessimism of the national humiliation nightmare [...] rather than being attractive and embracing difference, the China dream is part of a broad practice whereby identity is constituted by excluding difference."[90] In other words, such a dream perceives the outside world as a dangerous place, delegitimizes the West and considers only the aspects which are mandated by the Chinese state as being acceptable. The Sino-centricity of the China Dream also raises questions about whether nations that do not subscribe to the Chinese worldview are excluded or even assumed to be hostile to China. Similarly, the leitmotifs of reforms and restraint constantly reiterated by Chinese leaders are not entirely convincing. The reluctance of the Party to cede power severely limits whether domestic reforms can be made; as Francis Fukuyama warns, "the very stability of institutions is also the very source of political decay [... as these] institutions fail to adapt to changing circumstances."[91]

89 Pieke, *Knowing China*, p. 27.
90 Callahan, "Identity and Security," see p. 223, 225.
91 Fukuyama, *Political Order,* p. 463.

The ritualistic character of Chinese society may afford Xi's administration some leeway if (when) reality falls below expectations (provided the necessary rituals are kept up). But given the increasing diversity and "restlessness" of China,[92] it is unclear how much social transformation can happen without political reforms, maybe even involving the weakening of party power. I argue that if China is to improve its international image, it needs to provide more than just political rhetoric and slogans: China will be evaluated not by what it says, but by what it does, both domestically and internationally. In my view, the biggest obstacle to this lies in the highly particularized character of the image of China that is being constructed. If Chinese leaders and scholars represent the Chinese worldview as being *utterly distinct* from the West, how can this worldview be considered a valid model for other nations to follow, let alone something that could achieve global appeal (i.e., becoming what all countries want). As the American political scientist David Shambaugh notes, China needs to go beyond making claims about its own *uniqueness* to appeal to more universal standards.[93] If China wants to be seen as more than just "looking out for itself," it must demonstrate that its approach to global governance displays broader standards that are internationally valid. In other words, for China's image promotion to work, a less Sino-centric way of seeing and relating to the world is needed, particularly in its diplomatic relations with its closest neighbors. This may, however, compromise the CCP's attempt to portray itself as the vanguard of Chinese rejuvenation efforts – particularly if a "desacralized" image of the party prevails.

Thus, if Chinese leaders want to project an image of China as exceptional – i.e., different and good – they would have to – paradoxically – divest the party of certain powers, particularly those that inhibit the operation of basic human rights including the freedom of worship and the ability to express one's views regarding sensitive issues without fear of political persecution or being purged from the party. Instead, China should harness the energies and dynamism of a diverse and politically heterogeneous population of people, both at home and outside China, beyond party prescriptions. This identity dilemma (as discussed in Chapter 3) is something Chinese leaders must wrestle with if China's global influence is to become sufficiently attractive for international emulation.

92 See, Link, Madsen, and Pickowicz, *Restless China*.

93 *Personal interview*, Singapore, April 10, 2017.

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5 The Belt and Road and the Path to Chinese Greatness

Abstract
This chapter looks at the Belt and Road Initiative as a case study of China's claim to exceptionalism in global affairs. I argue that, as a form of economic statecraft, the BRI is conceived with the primary goal of generating Chinese political influence abroad. Through a study of the existing scholarship, I argue that three key themes frame Chinese IR scholars' discussion of the BRI: (I) the rules of the international system; (II) the competition for regional influence; and (III) China's own domestic affairs and responsibility to its own people. Taken together, these themes provide important clues about how the BRI is conceptualized to promote a sense of Chinese exceptionalism.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, economic statecraft, international system, Chinese domestic politics

In 2013, China proposed the establishment of a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The Silk Road Economic Belt was focused on promoting the development of China's Western territories and would span a region from Central Asia to Europe, while the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road would promote economic cooperation would promote economic cooperation through Southeast Asia, South Asia to Europe, including fostering links between the coastal regions. Originally termed One Belt One Road (OBOR), it was renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2016.[1] The proposal was framed as an initiative by which China could strengthen

1 It is still called the "One Belt One Road" (yidaiyilu,一带一路) in Chinese. For the purposes of this chapter, I use the term "Belt and Road Initiative" unless quoting Chinese primary sources that use the term One Belt One Road.

Ho, Benjamin Tze Ern, *China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism: International Order and Global Leadership*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2021
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its relations with countries around the world while also shouldering greater responsibilities and obligations on the international stage.[2]

As noted in Chapter 4, China wants to promote a favorable national image of itself to the outside world, which would help encourage others to accept its political worldview. The Belt and Road Initiative represents a key centerpiece of China's international outreach strategy, especially the articulation of its desired global order. This is vividly demonstrated by the speeches made by Chinese leaders – led by President Xi Jinping – touting the benefits and opportunities that the Belt and Road Initiative would bring to not just China, but also the countries throughout the world that are economically connected to China.[3] Scores of Chinese scholars and commentators have also attempted to articulate the initiative's finer aspects. For example, a simple search on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database – currently the largest and most comprehensive database hosting Chinese journals and periodicals – of liberal arts/history/philosophy, politics/military affairs/law, and education/comprehensive social sciences publications from January 1 to December 31, 2014 returned 984 papers featuring the phrase *yidaiyilu* ("one belt one road") in their title. The same search for subsequent years (i.e., 2015-2019 saw a tremendous increase in discussion of the Belt and Road Initiative (see Table 5.1).[4]

While not all these papers or newspaper articles are directly relevant to China's international politics or had to do with its foreign relations, the frequent mention of the Belt and Road Initiative within Chinese intellectual circles suggests the extent of interest amongst Chinese observers and scholarly interlocutors. Another indication of the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative in Chinese political circles is the Belt Road Forum held in Beijing in May 2017, which saw 28 other heads of state and representatives from more than 130 countries and 70 international organizations meet with the stated purpose of building "a more open and efficient international cooperation platform, a closer, stronger partnership network, and to push for a more just, reasonable and balanced international governance system."[5]What do all these developments mean, and how should we understand the Belt and Road Initiative from an international relations perspective? How does the Belt and Road Initiative reflect China's vision concerning international order

2 State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Full text: Action plan." See also, National Development and Reform Commission, "Vision and Actions."

3 Xi, "President Xi's Speech."

4 Online search conducted on March 12, 2020.

5 *China Daily,* "Belt and Road Forum Agenda Set."

Table 5.1 Search on the term "One Belt One Road"

Year	Number of articles with the phrase "yidaiyilu" (一带一路)
2014	984
2015	12,326
2016	12,970
2017	22,037
2018	20,477
2019	15,169

and Chinese preferences on the rules and norms underlining international relations? In the following discussion, I will use the BRI as a springboard to discuss China's political worldview and the manner in which China perceives the BRI as being exceptional, that is, good and different from existing initiatives and institutions, particularly those which are Western-led.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. First, I discuss the importance of economic statecraft for China's global diplomacy and public image, particularly the extent to which economics is understood as a form of Chinese soft power and a means of procuring international political influence. Next, I analyze both official and unofficial sources on the Belt and Road Initiative written by Chinese international relations scholars to examine how it is understood within the broader worldview of China's foreign policy and international relations. To this end, I argue that the Belt and Road Initiative represents an ambitious attempt at economic statecraft with the objective of entrenching and promoting China's geopolitical influence abroad, as well as preserving the domestic legitimacy of Communist Party rule. Finally, I relate these ideas to the study of Chinese exceptionalism and examine how the discussion and implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative attempts to portray China as a good and different power compared to the West. Through studying the discourse about the Belt and Road Initiative in Chinese scholarly circles, this chapter hopes to uncover important clues about how China – in its quest for global greatness – seeks to challenge the existing international system and what ideas China wants to promulgate within its own theatres of influence.

Economic Statecraft and Chinese Political Influence

According to existing studies of Chinese economic statecraft, Chinese leaders have been highly adept in perusing economic tools for the promotion

of their own national objectives, particularly those they consider core national interests.[6] This is certainly not unique to China; countries all over the world have utilized economic statecraft to pursue their political objectives to varying degrees. According to Baldwin, economic measures are particularly useful for helping states gain political influence, for they are "likely to exert more pressure than either diplomacy or propaganda, and are less likely to evoke a violent response than military instruments."[7] Similarly, Huntington has posited "that economic activity is probably the most important source of power [...] in a world in which military conflict between major states is unlikely [so] economic power will be increasingly important in determining the primacy or subordination of states."[8] Put simply, economic relations between states ought to be viewed as a derivative of existing geopolitical interests and calculations; to understand the reasons behind economic decisions, we need to look at the political factors at work.

I therefore argue that China's Belt and Road Initiative represents a grand strategy through economic means:[9] economic power is seen as way to generate greater political influence in the countries Beijing wants to win over into its camp. Economic initiatives like the BRI are linked to how Chinese leaders seek to present and project Beijing's worldview to others, and ultimately to how they wish to achieve China's foreign policy and domestic goals. This "selling" of Beijing's worldview is closely linked to the conceptualization and operation of Chinese soft power. While Western discussions of soft power tend to emphasize non-coercive aspects, and thus stress the importance of culture and values as instruments of soft power,[10] whether economics should be seen as "hard" or "soft power" is less clear cut in China. According to one study, in Chinese discourse soft power is frequently applied in its own domestic context and towards domestic objectives, and also involves touting the economic success of China's development model on the global stage.[11] This suggests that, in the Chinese mind, economic resources can be used as a source of soft power because they allow China to demonstrate its political model and worldview to the outside world, thereby

6 See for instance Norris, *Chinese Economic Statecraft;* Zhang, *Chinese Economic Diplomacy;* Li, *China's Economic Statecraft.*

7 Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft*, p. 110.

8 Huntington, "Why International Primacy Matters," p. 72.

9 For existing discussions of Chinese grand strategy, see Friedberg, "Globalisation and Chinese Grand Strategy;" Ma, "Thinking of China's Grand Strategy."

10 This line of thought is most popularly captured in Joseph Nye's discussion of soft power. See Nye, *Soft Power.*

11 Li, "China Debates Soft Power."

rendering Beijing a model for others to emulate. For instance, it is observed that the "success story of China's own economy make[s] China['s] cultural merits self-evident [... and] a prime opportunity to expand its cultural influence."[12] The highly fluid nature of soft power and its relevance to the economic sphere in China was also a common point made by Chinese scholars during my interviews.[13]

Studies in Chinese business fields have also noted the pervasive influence of politics in the economic sphere,[14] while the practice of Chinese politics, as one Chinese scholar recounted, is also very much linked with economic interests.[15] According to one study, the biggest Chinese enterprises – which account for most of the Chinese companies on the Fortune Global 500 list of the world's largest companies – also dominate the strategic sectors such as aerospace, telecommunications, power generation – of the Chinese economy. The leaders of the 53 largest companies, "national champions" as they are called, are not appointed by the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), but instead by the Party's own Organization Department. "They are part of the Party's nomenklatura system and are cadres ranked at vice ministerial level. This means many business executives are subject to cadre rotation and are moved to take up government or Party positions [...] The renewed emphasis on cross appointment and on the role of Party organizations in SOEs (state-owned enterprises) indicates that the CCP's current policy is to strengthen rather than weaken its control over SOEs."[16] In other words, as far as the major strategic decisions of these SOEs are concerned, these are subjected to the CCP's political prerogatives, and are made with the goal of amplifying the party's power.

From these examples, it is possible to surmise the following: Chinese economic power and its geopolitical objectives go hand-in-hand with the former providing a means to achieve the objectives of the latter, such as political influence and expanding its power globally, be it soft or hard power. In other words, China perceives economic statecraft as a legitimate means for substantiating its claims to exceptionalism, and its economic influence allows Beijing to claim that its approach to global economic governance is good and different compared to Western economic practices

12 *Ibid*., p. 292.

13 Interviews conducted in Beijing in 2017 and in Guangzhou in 2018.

14 Wank, *Commodifying Communism;* Brødsgaard, "Politics and Business Group Formation."

15 Interview with Chinese professor, June 13, 2017, Beijing, China.

16 Brodsgaard, "Can China Keep Controlling its SOEs?"

and norms. In the next section, I analyze how this sense of exceptionalism and its broader political worldview is reflected in the Chinese scholarly discourse surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative and the international order that is envisaged in reference to China's growing global influence. Notwithstanding the variety of topics permeating discussions of the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese international relations scholars tend to focus on three areas: (I) the rules of the international system; (II) the competition for regional influence; and (III) China's own domestic affairs and responsibility towards its own people. Taken together, these three themes indicate how Chinese thinkers conceptualize the Belt and Road Initiative as a platform for China to highlight its sense of exceptionalism.

Chinese Discourse of the Belt and Road Initiative

I Challenging the Rules of the International System

The need to question the existing rules of the international system represents a key starting point for Chinese thinkers' conceptualization of the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang (whose thoughts on international relations are discussed in Chapter 2) has explained his current understanding of the rules of the existing international system. In an article entitled "New Game Expects New System" (*xinyouxi xuyao xintixi,*新游戏需要新体系) Zhao states that globalization has ushered in new political conditions and political that require states to fundamentally alter how they approach the practice of international relations.[17] In Zhao's mind, the pursuit of national interests and modern political thinking according to the Western paradigm is a zero-sum game in which countries struggle to establish their domination and hegemony, in turn resulting in "suspicious and irrational plans, which are, ironically, based upon the modern rational analysis."[18] Instead, he writes, the countries of the world should forge closer "reciprocal interrelations" with one another, creating, as his all-under-heaven (*Tianxia*) system is described, "an all-inclusive and all-compatible system for the world."[19] In Zhao's thinking, the rules of the existing international system do not match the changed reality of the world (brought about by globalization) and thus a new system of political arrangements is needed. While Zhao's worldview is highly problematic (as

17 Zhao, "Xinyouxi Xuyao Xintixi."
18 *Ibid*., p. 6.
19 *Ibid*., p. 13.

discussed in Chapter 2), his writings reflect a common ideological thread that permeates the thinking of Chinese IR scholars: the perception that the norms and governing principles of the post-World War 2 international system are deeply flawed, and thus in need of a change.

To this end, other Chinese scholars have also proposed the need for deepened interaction between China and the world, and perceive the Belt and Road Initiative as a means to achieve that end. For instance, Xing argues that the Silk Road was traditionally an icon of Chinese history and culture, and thus possesses much significance and value. Given economic globalization, it is said that "China will reshape cultural and economic exchange in a civilized, modern, and convenient manner to create a friendly atmosphere in Eurasia as a whole."[20] The Belt and Road Initiative is also perceived as allowing China to actively shape its external environment and further integrate itself with the wider world through deepened cooperation with other countries. Other scholars also speak of the Belt and Road Initiative as an initiative that "will create a new situation, an all-around opening up, that will further the global interaction and exchange of China and the entire Asia-Europe-Africa region."[21] Zheng Yongnian has written that the Belt and Road Initiative was primarily designed to allow China to play a leading role in international development and to promote a global economy with the participation of other countries. Hence, both China and international society are seen to be in need of deeper globalization, so the objectives pursued by China and the wider world are seen as synonymous with one another.[22] Zhao Kejin, the deputy director of Tsinghua University's Center for US-China relations has observed that the Belt and Road Initiative is China's response to "international anarchy" (*guoji wuzhengfu zhuangtai,* 国际无政府状态) that at its core seeks to transcend "the international system and international order" and forge a more just and equitable world order.[23] Similarly, another Beijing-based scholar Zhong Feiteng has argued that the Belt and Road Initiative will allow China to "transcend Western centralism" (*chaoyue xifang zhongxin zhuyi,* 超越西方中心主义) and thus provide a novel model of development that is not dependent on a "limited Western posture of fixed thinking" (*bushou xifang guhua siwei yueshu de zitai,* 不受西方固化思维约束的姿态).[24]

20 Xing, "Lijie Zhongguo," pp. 6-7.
21 Hu, Ma, and Yan, "Sidiao Zhilu Jingjidai."
22 Zheng, "Yidaiyilu."
23 Zhao, *Daguo Fanglue,* p. 6.
24 Zhong, "Chaoyue Xifang."

Thus it seems that in the eyes of Chinese political scientists the Belt and Road Initiative is not simply an economic endeavor, but more importantly presents a form of grand strategy through which the Chinese state can achieve its strategic interests. According to one study of Chinese economic statecraft, economic tools of national power present a particularly attractive lever for China's pursuit of its foreign policy strategic objectives for several reasons: first, the use of economic initiatives need not be as obvious, threatening, or dislocating as military or diplomatic power tends to be; second, relying on economic power limits influence of military-related political interests in the domestic bureaucracy; third, it offers the possibility of attracting partners with a win-win mentality, thus assuaging regional concerns over a growing China; and last, to the extent that the two are complementary, China can realize its economic growth objectives while also pursuing its foreign policy goals.[25] Beyond achieving strategic objectives, I argue that the Belt and Road Initiative also represents a challenge to the rules and norms of the international system that are usually associated with the Western liberal order.[26] In the eyes of Chinese scholars, then, political and economic order are interrelated: the success of the latter legitimizes (to some extent) the practice of the former. Seen this way, the Belt and Road Initiative is an opportunity to showcase Beijing's vision of global governance and to put forth suggestions about what this new political order should entail.

In the opinion of Chinese scholars, the domestic problems faced by the United States over the past decade present the ideal opportunity for China to stake a claim to global leadership and promote its worldview and its claims to exceptionalism. As a result of its global war on terror and the 2008 economic crisis, the American international image is considered to have taken a battering, thereby presenting China with favorable circumstances in which to portray its leadership as good and different. As Zheng Yongnian writes, "the United States is currently undergoing a period of adjustment; once it readjusts, it will come out (*zai chufa,* 再出发). From this vantage point, to the Chinese, this undoubtedly is an opportunity. However, it should be emphasized that this is not a simple case of American decline and thus an opportunity to write the rules, but rather a process to explore what a different set of rules might entail."[27] In my view, this articulation of the Chinese *difference* is crucial in the Belt and Road Initiative's positioning *as*

25 Norris, *Chinese Economic Statecraft,* pp. 62-63.

26 For a discussion of China's challenge to the rules-based international order, see Ikenberry, "Rise of China."

27 Zheng, "Yidaiyilu."

an opportunity to offer the world an alternative source of global governance to which other nations can subscribe.[28]

II Competition for Regional Influence

As discussed in Chapter 6, the Sino-America competition to establish influence over other countries can be most pervasively felt within the Southeast Asia region, where both countries have significant economic and military investments. While security issues continue to frame and dominate the discourse surrounding the Sino-American relationship, economic issues have recently taken center stage, for example in the trade war between the two countries that was ongoing at the time of writing. In this context, the Belt and Road Initiative represents not only a challenge to the rules of the international system as a whole, but also a form of competition for regional influence – that is, the struggle to establish which country is perceived to be *better* in delivering differences (measured in economic growth) to other countries in the region.

As such, the Belt and Road Initiative has offered China with several advantages in cultivating positive influence among the countries touched by the Belt and Road Initiative. According to a comparative study of Chinese and American economic relations in the Asia-Pacific and Eurasia, the US strategy primarily focuses on regional security while China's focuses on regional economics. As the authors of that study put it, "the economic relationship between China and countries along the belt is like one of fish and water, whereas the relationship between the United States and these countries is more like one of oil and water."[29] What this means is that China was perceived to be a more natural partner, including its interests being more aligned with those countries it was working with compared to the United States. Indeed, the presence of the United States is considered the main reason for the impeding of China's global influence. As one Chinese scholar bluntly writes, "if the United States did not exist on the planet, the rise of China basically would have been realized. In large part, the United States intends its strategy of rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific region to counter the rise of China. In turn, the Chinese government introduced the One-Belt-One-Road Initiative, in part, to offset the unfavorable impact that the US rebalancing strategy may impose on China."[30] At the same time,

28 See also Zhou and Esteban, "Beyond Balancing."

29 Lu et al., "Why China?" p. 192.

30 Xue, "Zhongguo Yidaiyilu," p. 70.

Chinese scholars recognize that many of China's neighboring countries continue to distrust it for various reasons, and have adopted a strategy of depending on Beijing for their economic needs while looking to the US for security.[31]

According to Shi Yinhong, Chinese leaders' use of hard military power since the 18th National Congress in 2012 has eroded its previous foundation of soft power, resulting in the danger of "strategic overreach" (*zhanlue touzhi,* 战略透支) and becoming overstretched in both political commitments and material resources.[32] To avoid such pitfalls, Shi suggests that Chinese leaders should emphasize that the security, prosperity, and development of its neighbors are synonymous with China's own, and to also win trust among the governments and people of those countries. Shi adds,

> Chinese leaders must be careful not [to] give the impression that they consider their help to other countries as charity. China must neither play the role of big brother to other countries nor rush to scramble for benefits at the sacrifice of justice [...] The One-Belt-One-Road Initiative should be understood as an undertaking of both China and the international community. Instead of just trying to predict what countries along the One-Belt-One-Road Initiative route need, China should make direct enquiries [...] By assuming that other countries along the One-Belt-One-Road Initiative route accept all facets of its initiatives, China could ignore the complex and unique conditions of other countries or fail to see conflicts in policy and strategy. If it does not take all of these issues into considerations, China risks repeating universalistic Western practices that it has repeatedly criticize.[33]

From the above, Shi cautions China against taking an overly instrumental approach to the BRI, including the need for policy-makers to be cognizant of the internal realities of the BRI-recipient countries, as these could pose problems for China's BRI projects. But more importantly, Shi perceives the need for China – through the BRI – to distinguish itself from the West and to avoid the mistakes made by the latter. There is also a competition for regional influence in Central Asia, this time involving not only the United States but also Russia. In Central Asia, the Belt and

31 This point was made by many Chinese scholars I spoke to in the course of my fieldwork, indicating a strategy of hedging.

32 Shi, "Yidaiyilu."

33 *Ibid*., pp. 151-152.

Road Initiative provides China with the opportunity to distinguish itself from the two other superpowers and, more importantly, demonstrate that its conceptualization of geopolitical matters is better than that of the others. For instance, it was suggested by one Chinese scholar that the United States largely views Central Asia as "full of danger" (*weixian zhongzhong zhidi,* 危险重重之地) and "difficult to tame" (*nanyi xunfu,* 难以驯服) while Russia perceives it as its "soft underbelly" (*ruan fubu,* 软腹部) that is under its "sphere of influence" (*shili fanwei,* 势力范围). In contrast, China is said to view Central Asia as "among the sources of human civilization" (*renlei wenming de fayuan zhidi,* 人类文明的发源地之一) and the "center of the world whose potential has yet to be realized" (*qianli shangwei dedao chongfen wajue de shijie zhongxin,* 潜力尚未得到充分挖掘的世界中心).[34] In other words, while US policies aim to convince countries in Central Asia to adopt the Western model of development and Russia is pushing for policies that would integrate these countries within its own geopolitical orbit, the Chinese approach is to respect the countries' national sovereignty and promote mutual "beneficial cooperation" (*huli hezuo,* 互利合作).[35] In this characterization, Chinese influence is portrayed as benign and sharply contrasted with the influence of the other major powers. I argue that, in the minds of these Chinese thinkers, bringing economic development to an area is sufficient for legitimizing Chinese initiatives as good and better than their Western alternatives. This argument assumes that countries in the region ultimately desire economic prosperity and that China is well-placed to meet those needs through the Belt and Road Initiative.

According to Zhang Yunling, who heads the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Belt and Road Initiative represents a certain "spirit" (*jingshen,* 精神) through which China could peacefully engage with the outside world and achieve win-win outcomes. He further notes that China's rapid economic development has made it the main market for neighboring countries, and that this expansion of economic development is the "highest common factor" (*zuida gongyueshu,* 最大公约数) for deepening relations between China and its neighbors.[36] Another commissioned study also highlights the Belt and Road Initiative as a form of "public diplomacy" (*gonggong waijiao,* 公共外交), that is referring to government attempts to communicate with foreign publics, in order to generate political goodwill through economic

34 Zeng, "Yidaiyilu de Diyuan Zhengzhi."
35 *Ibid*.
36 Zhang, "Foreword."

and financial means.[37] Seen this way, the Belt and Road Initiative can be said to allow China to showcase its superiority compared to the West and in so doing, attempt to shift regional influence by convincing countries that are traditionally supportive of Western objectives that their national interests are more in tune with those of Beijing. This sense of eschatological inevitability and Chinese exceptionalism – that a Chinese-led future is both certain and better than the present context – pervades the message painting the Belt and Road Initiative as China's grand contribution to the world.

III China's Domestic Environment and Responsibility to Its People

While the previous points reflect a posture of Chinese confidence, Chinese leaders and scholars still frequently lament the domestic problems that China continues to face due to its size and population.[38] According to Fu Ying, who chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress, China's size belies its actual strength, as it is still learning how to become a global player: "On numerous occasions, Americans and Europeans have asked China to play a leading role with regard to international affairs. A leading role, to the ears of the Chinese, is an almost alien phrase. It will take time for us to master the steps necessary to waltz gracefully across the global stage. Domestically, we have our own issues and challenges to resolve, which demand our focused attention."[39]

This reference to domestic conditions inhibiting China's ability and willingness to play a more active role in international politics may at first glance seem to contradict the earlier discussion of China's intention to challenge the rules of the international system and compete with the United States for regional, if not global, influence. I argue the Belt and Road Initiative represents an important conduit for China's legitimation of its overseas forays as a response to domestic demands. According to the prominent Chinese economist Justin Lin, the Belt and Road Initiative showcases China's new opening-up strategy in response to changed domestic and international circumstances. As such, it is meant to provide China with a sounder market economic system, furthering its development into a high income country, as well as facilitating the industrialization and modernization of other

37 Custer et al., *Ties that Bind*.

38 This was a point made by many Chinese scholars I spoke to during fieldwork. While they share the vision of an influential and powerful China coming into its own in global politics, they were also quick to remind me that "China has many internal problems" and thus has no intention to lead the world.

39 Fu, "Fu Ying: Tansuo Zhongmei."

developing countries.[40] Renmin University professor Wang Yiwei also proposed the "Sinicization of globalization" (*zhongguohua de quanqiuhua,* 中国化的全球化), and stated that the Belt and Road Initiative was not just about encouraging Chinese companies to head outside, but rather to allow "China itself to head out" (*rang zhongguo de difang zouchuqu,* 让中国的地方走出去) to build and deepen its relations with the world.[41] Wang's contention is that the Belt and Road Initiative represents an effort to marry the "sinicization of globalization" (*zhongguohua de quanqiuhua,* 中国化的全球化) with "China's own globalization" (*zhongguo de quanqiuhua,* 中国的全球化),[42] resulting in a formulation that is not unlike Zhao Tingyang's all-under-heaven system. Similarly, Zhao Kejin has also explained that the success of the Belt and Road Initiative would not be dependent on the responses of the countries along the belt and road, but rather on an assessment of the sustainability of the funding contributed by Chinese stakeholders. Zhao observed that it was unlikely that the Belt and Road Initiative would bear much fruit in the short run, given the volatility and uncertainty of the domestic conditions in the recipient countries. Nevertheless, it he argued that once the basic infrastructure was set up, the Belt and Road Initiative would provide many "spillover effects" (*yichu xiaoying,* 溢出效应) to China in the medium to long term. Chinese companies should therefore continue "loss-making" transactions (*peiqian maimai,* 赔钱买卖), as the other "derived benefits" (*yansheng shouyi,* 衍生受益) would be money well spent.[43]

Based on these narratives, I argue that the Belt and Road Initiative was conceptualized with an acute awareness of China's own domestic conditions, and consequently reflects China's own domestic priorities and concerns. To speak of China going out (*zouchuqu,* 走出去), it is important to consider the Chinese actors at work and the domestic interests that these actors represent. According to Norris, China currently defines its strategic security interests in terms of maintaining the Communist Party's power. To do so, however, requires continuous economic growth, which in turn requires raw inputs, especially of energy.[44] For instance, a study of the "going out" activities of the China National Petroleum Corporation observes that the original impetus to go abroad was primarily driven by commercial factors, and was done without prior government approval. Given the difficulty of working

40 Lin, "One Belt and One Road."
41 Wang, *Shijieshitongde*, p.28.
42 *Ibid.*
43 Zhao, *Daguo Fanglue,* pp. 26-28.
44 Norris, *Chinese Economic Statecraft,* p. 70.

with certain unsavory regimes where oil reserves are still available, the Chinese authorities sought to re-establish control over these activities by its commercial actors, which it only succeeded in doing after much struggle.[45]

To what extent, then, is the Belt and Road Initiative an instrument of state control, and what benefits does it provide to ordinary Chinese citizens? According to one Chinese scholar, six domestic relationships would determine the success or failure of the Belt and Road Initiative. These are: the relationship between the Chinese government and business enterprises; the relationship between the central government and provincial governments; the relationship between historical and contemporary conceptions of the Silk Road Belt; the relationship between financial and other institutions; the relationship between using existing comparative advantage and the development of new comparative advantages; and the relationship between institutional cooperation and non-institutional cooperation.[46] The degree to which the Chinese state is able to exercise control over commercial and economic activity while maintaining the profitability and dynamism of these enterprises is a subject of considerable debate which falls beyond the scope of this chapter. Be that as it may, it is also unclear whether the Belt and Road Initiative would actually bring about the economic prosperity that is promoted by Chinese leaders or would instead exacerbate existing economic inequalities within Chinese society.

In my interviews, Chinese IR scholars were relatively more guarded in their assessment of the Belt and Road Initiative's ability to improve domestic conditions. The common refrain among Chinese scholars is that China has enough problems of her own and thus possesses little appetite for shouldering the problems of the wider world: China is content to be "number 2 in the world and to let the United States bear the load of providing public goods to the rest of the world."[47] Such thinking mitigates how much positive influence the Belt and Road Initiative can generate amongst China's neighbors, particularly if a slowing Chinese economy imposes limitations on Beijing's economic statecraft. Indeed, if "China's ambition is not to surpass the United States but to look after its own people"[48] – as former Singapore foreign minister George Yeo puts it – then it makes sense to be cautious and not overstate the degree to which the Belt and Road

45 *Ibid*., pp. 84-89.

46 Li, *Yidaiyilu*.

47 Speech made at the RSIS-CSIS conference on China's public diplomacy, June 27, 2018, Singapore.

48 Email interview, June 10, 2015.

Initiative can truly represent a unique Chinese economic proposal for the wider world. I argue that in the long run domestic conditions are likely to dampen the over-exuberant claims about China's economic leadership and global influence. This is further discussed in my final chapter, which covers the post-Covid-19 Chinese socio-political landscape.

The Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese Exceptionalism

In the previous section I have provided a non-exhaustive excursion into the Chinese discourse over the Belt and Road Initiative, insofar as it is discussed by Chinese IR scholars. While Chinese scholars generally eschew using the term "exceptionalism" (*liwailun* or *teshulun,* 例外论 /特殊论) in academic discourse, many of them nevertheless insist on the existence of "Chinese characteristics" (*zhongguotese,* 中国特色) in their exegeses of China's international politics, believing that these characteristics present a unique Chinese model and contribution that is substantially distinct from Western political configurations.[49] Chinese characteristics are seen to be unique, and hence exceptional, to the degree that they provide the Chinese state with a way to justify Chinese initiatives as "non-Western" and therefore necessarily better than those with Western origins. This is where the Belt and Road Initiative comes in. While Chinese scholars generally do not go so far as to claim that the Belt and Road Initiative is only of Chinese-origin, many of them do insist that the Belt and Road Initiative would create more equitable outcomes for China and the other countries than is seen in Western initiatives. As noted above, the use of economic initiatives to generate influence and validate China's global prominence is central to understanding the strategic considerations behind the Belt and Road Initiative. To this end, the Belt and Road Initiative can be said to confer China with the opportunity to present itself as a non-hegemonic power and demonstrate that it harbors no ill-will or intention to interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries. This is reflected in Chinese scholars' frequent emphasis of the need for mutual respect and trust in the conduct of the Belt and Road Initiative. As Chinese economist Li Yining observed, "China wants to cooperate better with countries along the Belt, and to understand them, this is very important, all countries have to offer mutual trust and sincerity, and the One-Belt-One-Road would certainly succeed."[50]

49 Interviews with Chinese scholars in 2017 and 2018.

50 Li, "Yidaiyilu wei Zhongguo Jingji."

In my view, this argument is born from the belief that Western economic initiatives are fundamentally hegemonic and inherently bad in character because they seek to entrench Western strategic interests. In contrast, Chinese economic initiatives are frequently touted as non-hegemonic because they allow countries to preserve their domestic political autonomy and are thus said to be inherently good.

But how true is this in practice, and do examples of Chinese economic initiatives provide on-ground evidence of this non-interference principle in China's foreign policy? Current debates about Chinese economic investments in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, to speak of just two examples, suggest that the Chinese state is considerably active, if not coercive, in employing economic initiatives to achieve its geopolitical goals – even if doing so acts against the political autonomy of the concerned states.[51] Indeed, there are concerns that countries who are overly economically dependent on China run the risk of being caught in a "debtbook diplomacy" in which China extends loans to developing countries that are unable to repay the loans and therefore must give up strategic assets to Beijing in exchange.[52] However, I argue that a bigger issue is the question of whether through the Belt and Road Initiative China is able to articulate a new set of rules to support its claim of being better than the West. Chinese scholars' treatment of globalization as being a new global reality in which China – through its Belt and Road Initiative – is well-placed to respond to globalizing forces compared to the Western liberal system which was seen as being inadequate to meet the challenges of globalization.[53]

The competition for regional influence is most vividly seen in China's depiction of its relations with its neighbors – particularly smaller countries in Southeast Asia – as "a partnership of good neighborliness and mutual trust" (*mulinhuxin de huoban guanxi,* 睦邻互信的伙伴关系).[54] This was premised on two assumptions: first, that China's economic power provides Beijing with political influence over its neighbors; and

51 See for instance, Lim and Mukherjee, "Does Debt Pay?" Lim, "China's Investments in Malaysia."

52 Parker and Chefitz, *Debtbook Diplomacy.*

53 See for instance, Yan, "Yan Xuetong: Xifang Gainian." That said, in my interviews, some Chinese scholars expressed discomfort with the idea that China would play a leading role in a new international system, even though the majority critiqued the existing international system as problematic and in need of reform. At the same time, there was also a tacit acknowledgment that China was an influential player and that its preferences and interests needed to be reflected, or at the very least acknowledged, in international affairs.

54 Liu, *Yidaiyilu de Lilun,* p. 129.

second, that its neighbors have little choice but to align themselves with Beijing if they want to prosper economically. Both of these assumptions are problematic. While China's economy might help it advance its strategic objectives to some extent, China's actual political influence among foreign elites continues to be limited. I argue that Chinese conceptions of soft power as exercised through economic initiatives are highly problematic because economic influence *alone* is unable to generate the sustainable effect resulting in political goodwill and an attraction to the Chinese worldview. For instance, Chinese efforts to use financial diplomacy in its relations with Malaysia have provoked criticism that the projects increased Malaysia's indebtedness while advancing China's strategic interests. A lack of sensitivity to Malaysia's domestic context on the part of Chinese companies and the Chinese embassy also undercut the efficacy of Beijing's public diplomacy overtures. Further, while Beijing possessed outsized influence in the process of setting terms for economic deals, it was uncertain what real concessions it won from Malaysian leaders.[55] This suggests that economic power alone is insufficient to persuade countries of the truthfulness of China's claim to having benign intentions.

In the same way, China's neighbors are not without choices or options for who they can engage with to obtain their geostrategic objectives. This is particularly important for our understanding of how Chinese exceptionalism is framed in Beijing's geopolitical strategy. The idea that China is good and different and that countries in the region should therefore align their choices and preferences with Beijing if they want to prosper is a frequent refrain in China's diplomatic overtures. According to former Singaporean top diplomat Bilahari Kausikan, in its public diplomacy the Chinese state often makes use of coercive techniques to "create a psychological environment which poses false choices for other countries [...] This technique of forcing false choices on you and making you choose between false choices is deployed within a framework of either overarching narratives or specific narratives [...] The purpose is to narrow the scope of choices and they are usually presented in binary terms."[56] In this context, to what extent are countries in Southeast Asia reliant on China for the achievement of their own domestic objectives? According to Evelyn Goh, Southeast Asian countries possessed considerable ability to negotiate with Beijing. She notes that "China's record of influence is mixed, and often unsuccessful, in persuading, inducing or

55 See Custer et al., *Ties that Bind,* p. 23.

56 Wai, "S'pore Should Guard."

coercing developing Asian states to do what they do not want to do."[57] Chinese influence is not a one-way street: other countries seek to maximize their gains from working with China while simultaneously ensuring they do not compromise on more fundamental national interests such as territory or political autonomy.

In addition, the ability of China's economy to generate a sustained economic presence should not be taken for granted. This will be particularly likely if the Chinese economy faces structural limitations to its growth and starts to slow down in the coming years, thereby impacting the extent of China's overseas forays. The domestic conditions of recipient countries can also pose a challenge to Chinese economic statecraft. The Chinese scholars I spoke with expressed caution against risk-taking behavior in Chinese economic endeavors, particularly in countries where insufficient attention has been paid to matters of domestic governance, as this was considered to pose long-term challenges and threats to China's presence on the ground.[58] Chinese foreign aid frequently involves charging much higher market rates and not providing grants to countries with whom it seeks to cultivate relations. This is unlike Western countries, including Japan, which provide grants and low-interest loans to developing countries. This may backfire on China, especially if the countries perceive their national interests to be compromised from acquiescing to Chinese terms. For instance, following the election of the opposition Pakatan Harapan coalition in Malaysia in May 2018, the East Coast Railway Link and two gas pipeline projects worth billions of dollars that had been inked under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative by the Chinese government and the previous Malaysian administration were canceled due to concerns that the terms of the projects excessively benefitted Beijing while being unfavorable to Kuala Lumpur.[59] These kinds of pushbacks based on the mustering of sufficient political will suggest that China's economic might not always result in determinative outcomes. In Sri Lanka, the Hambantota port that was given to China as a result of the country being unable to repay its debt continues to be highly unattractive to cargo ships – raising concerns about the long-term economic viability of the port project.[60] This suggests that notwithstanding certain geopolitical benefits that Beijing might stand to gain from possession of the port, the possibility that such assets will become an economic burden on China cannot be ruled out.

57 Goh, "Modes of China's Influence," p. 848.

58 Interviews in Beijing and Guangzhou, 2017 and 2018.

59 *Straits Times,* "East Coast Rail Link."

60 *Straits Times,* "Inside China's US$1 Billion Port."

China's own domestic environment also represents a significant challenge to the Chinese state's ability to project its influence abroad. According to Norris, for economies to be used as an active instrument of statecraft the nation must be able to control or direct the behavior of the economic actors that carry out the international economic activity. Given the pervasiveness of factional politics in China, CCP control over Chinese economic institutions cannot always be taken for granted.[61] Hence it would be incorrect to assume that top Chinese leaders have a monopoly over the knowledge and wisdom needed to make decisions aligning with China's best interests. Indeed, given the growing complexity of decision-making processes and the increasing pantheon of political and commercial actors involved in economic enterprises, top CCP leaders may find themselves hard-pressed to provide appropriate responses to challenges of domestic governance, let alone those of the Belt and Road Initiative, which involve political relations with other countries. If the Belt and Road Initiative is seen as a primarily domestic issue meant to deal with the problems of overcapacity and overproduction within China, then this raises the bigger question about how prepared China is for taking on challenges of the global economy, which require the Chinese government to look beyond domestic priorities in its policy making. This brings us back to the question of "how unique is the Chinese model of domestic governance" and to what extent can the principles of governance used in that model be universalized and thus applied to other countries which do not share China's political values. I argue that while China frequently criticizes the West for being hegemonic and Western political models are considered incompatible with Chinese preferences, the exact nature of the Chinese alternatives to Western models remain vague. While many Chinese scholars have articulated the problems they perceive in the Western-led international order (as discussed in Chapter 2), descriptions of the kind of global order that China is truly in favor of remain vague, except for the fact that its interests ought to be taken into account or at the very least acknowledged.

Finally, I argue that the lack of clearly spelt out objectives for the Belt and Road Initiative suggests considerable ambiguity and a lack of consensus among Chinese scholars and policy makers about the actual outcomes that the Belt and Road Initiative is designed to achieve. If it is meant to entrench China's position and influence in the world, the growing suspicion of Beijing's economic statecraft (vis-à-vis the Belt and Road Initiative) in many countries inherently limits China's ability to cultivate political goodwill and positive

61 Li, "End of the CCP's Resilient Authoritarianism?" Ho, "Rise of the Bureaucratic Bourgeoisie."

diplomatic relations. The increasing chorus of domestic opposition – notwithstanding Chinese state attempts to muzzle these voices – to China's outward economic forays, which are considered ill-advised and highly risky, are also generating internal social turbulence that may inadvertently affect the CCP's mandate to govern.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the importance of economic statecraft in China's quest to be perceived as a global great power with an enhanced national image in the wider world. As I alluded to in Chapter 4, China's national image is crucial to Beijing's aspirations to be seen as good and different from the West, and consequently for its political worldview being accepted by others. Economic power remains a central instrument used by the Chinese government to wield international influence, because it is considered less direct than other methods and therefore allows Beijing to subvert official diplomatic channels while simultaneously applying political pressure to pursue of its national interests. China also considers the use of economic statecraft to be a legitimate means of wielding soft power. This is unlike the Western understanding of soft power, which tends to focus on aspects such as culture and values.[62] Because of these conceptions by the Chinese state, the Belt and Road Initiative must be understood beyond mere economics: it is a state-backed attempt to generate political influence amongst the countries that fall upon the belt and road.

I argue the Belt and Road Initiative can be interpreted as a geostrategic instrument for China to challenge the rules of the international system and shape it to better reflect its national interests and global objectives. This is supplemented by criticism of Western economic initiatives like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which are said to be further entrenching Western interests while presenting developing countries – which Beijing claims to represent – with unfavorable terms. At a regional level, China uses the Belt and Road Initiative to cultivate influence. Poorer countries like Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar in the Southeast Asia region are highly susceptible to Chinese economic inducements, as demonstrated by examples from recent years.[63] Given the existing territorial

62 See Zheng and Zhang, "Guoji Zhengzhi."

63 For a discussion of how China exercises economic influence in Southeast Asia, see Nyíri and Tan, *Chinese Encounters*.

disputes between China and other Southeast Asian countries, the trust that Beijing receives from the region will be crucial to how the Belt and Road Initiative is perceived and received. Finally, domestic conditions continue to affect how the Belt and Road Initiative is conceptualized and put into practice. While some Chinese scholars read the Belt and Road Initiative as an opportunity for China to "go out" and demonstrate its credentials and "striving for achievement" (*yousuozuowei,* 有所作为) to the world, others caution that China should not overstretch its resources and should instead focus on domestic development.[64] I argue that any economic or political turbulence in China's domestic conditions would affect Beijing's ability to conduct foreign policy, including aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative.

As part of the broader discussion of the Chinese worldview and its claims to exceptionalism, this chapter also raises the question of how *different* and *good* the Belt and Road Initiative can be said to be in comparison with existing economic institutions and initiatives. While many Chinese scholars shun the term "exceptionalism," instead preferring to frame their analysis of China's geopolitical worldview with the phrase "with Chinese characteristics" (*zhongguo tese,* 中国特色), whether these characteristics are unique remains an issue of considerable debate, particularly in terms of China's claims that its brand of global governance is superior to the West. Almost eight years (as of writing) after President Xi's high-profile proclamation of the Belt and Road Initiative, there is still a dearth of clear ideas about how the Belt and Road Initiative ought to progress, let alone actions. While some Chinese observers have attempted to recast the Belt and Road Initiative as not so much goals to be achieved, but instead an ongoing process underlying Beijing's long-term direction,[65] the fact that few substantive outcomes have been achieved suggests the need to reexamine the ideological foundations upon which the Belt and Road Initiative is built.[66] It also remains to be seen whether China's economic statecraft represents an utterly novel endeavor or instead merely rehashes the tenets of Western political norms which Chinese leaders often criticize. More crucially, whether these Chinese characteristics are universal enough that other countries will be attracted and attempt to emulate them will determine the extent to which China can be said to be a model for global governance and force for global good. As the responses of Southeast Asian

64 For a discussion of China's "striving for achievement," see Yan, "From Keeping a Low Profile."

65 See, Wang, "Belt and Road Initiative," *China Daily.*

66 Given the recent trade war between China and the United States, some Chinese scholars are also questioning the entire edifice of the Belt and Road Initiative, arguing that it has resulted in Chinese government profligacy abroad. See, Xu, "Women Dangxia de Kongju."

countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore to Beijing's global influence demonstrate, China's approach to international politics continues to raise the suspicions of political elites in the region, who question whether Beijing can be trusted to do good as a global power. In sum, I argue that if the Belt and Road Initiative is to be perceived as more than just China looking out for itself, Beijing might have to begin to assume a bigger share of responsibility for global public goods and burdens. Paradoxically, this may require a de-emphasis of "Chinese characteristics" and the articulation of a vision of political governance that coheres with the realities of international society rather than that of the Chinese Communist Party.

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6 Perceiving China

Case Studies from Indonesia and Vietnam

Abstract
This chapter examines the perspectives of Vietnamese and Indonesian elites towards China and the extent to which efforts to promote a positive Chinese national image have been successful in these two countries. Utilizing information gathered from field research, I argue that both countries perceive China as attempting to modify – not entirely revise – the rules of the international system to suit its purposes. Territorial issues remain a primary focus in the two countries' relationships with China, and they also express concerns that China's growing influence will cause an unstable regional environment. Interviewees also expressed considerable doubt about the idea of Chinese exceptionalism and tended to perceive China as acting like any other big power.

Keywords: Vietnam, Indonesia, China, Southeast Asia, South China Sea

In Chapter 4, I analyzed the priorities of China as seen in the speeches from President Xi Jinping's first eighteen months in office. In these speeches and elsewhere, images of China as a flourishing civilization, a peaceful and progressive country, and a moral example for international politics are frequently expressed by Chinese leaders in reference to international relations. However, the important question of how the outside world perceives China also needs to be asked. Just as China's view of the world is reflected in its foreign policy actions and international behavior, how other countries react and respond to China provides important insights into how China is perceived and, more crucially, whether its political worldview and thinking about the proper form of the global order are finding international acceptance. This chapter discusses the view of China from elite perspectives in Vietnam and Indonesia, and Chapter 7 addresses the same in Singapore. Looking at the case studies not only allows me to understand how other

Ho, Benjamin Tze Ern, *China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism: International Order and Global Leadership*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2021
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countries interpret China's political behavior, but also whether they consider China to be exceptional – that is, different and superior to the West in terms of Beijing's claim to global leadership.

In this chapter I examine how Vietnam and Indonesia perceive China in reference to their political relations, particularly focusing on the situation of President Xi's regime from 2013 onwards.[1] Vietnam's proximity to (and territorial disputes with) China means that it is highly sensitive to Chinese actions within its periphery. Its Communist government structure also mirrors that of Beijing, providing the opportunity for a deeper analysis the ways party dynamics factor into the broader scheme of policymaking. As one of the ASEAN region's major players that is also widely considered a middle-power, that is – a country with moderate international influence and international recognition – Indonesia's views are undoubtedly taken very seriously by China and other countries in the region. Indonesia-China tensions have also surfaced of late, with instances of Chinese fisherman being detained by Jakarta for allegedly illegal fishing activities within the maritime waters of Indonesia.[2]

These two case studies also allow us to analyze how historical events contribute to and color overall ASEAN-China relations. Both Indonesia and Vietnam have had turbulent relations with Beijing: in the mid-1960s many ethnic Indonesian Chinese were killed during President Sukarno's anti-communist purge; Vietnam has had border conflicts with China throughout its history dating back to imperial times, the latest being the 1979 Sino-Vietnam war. Contemporary studies of ASEAN-China relations tend to focus on economic and geopolitical themes, downplaying historical factors such as the Cold War period in Southeast Asia. How do local narrations of historical encounters with Chinese actions in Vietnam and Indonesia affect how China is perceived today? Given the Chinese leaders' frequent use of historical narratives, particularly a discourse of national humiliation, to highlight China's rightful place on the world stage,[3] it is useful to compare how Vietnam and Indonesia perceive themselves vis-à-vis their relations with China through their respective histories. Doing so highlights patterns that reflect both change and continuity in Beijing's regional relations.

Finally, this study also probes the extent to which norms and values matter in relations between China and its ASEAN neighbors. What do smaller states look for in their relationships with China besides economic

1 See, Singh, Teo, and Ho, "Rising Sino-Japanese Competition."
2 Morrie, "Indonesia-China Tensions."
3 See, Callahan, "National Insecurities."

opportunities? This is particularly salient given that China's economy has slowed down since late 2014 and is unlikely to return to the high growth of the 1990s and 2000s. This is not to suggest that economic inducements do not matter; indeed, China represents Indonesia's second-largest export market and largest source of imports, and is Vietnam's largest trading partner, with whom Vietnam has a huge trade deficit.[4] Yet, if we argue as Martha Finnemore has done that "state interests are defined in the context of internationally held norms and understandings about what is good and appropriate," it is important to determine both what norms and values China purports to hold and to what extent its regional neighbors "subscribe" to these values.[5] As Evelyn Goh has argued, China's record of influence in Southeast Asia is not simply a case of a bigger power compelling smaller countries to obey its will as "there are not many cases in which Beijing tries to make these countries do what they otherwise would not have done."[6] Does Chinese regional diplomacy then contain certain attributes of Chinese exceptionalism that are congruent with the social purposes and political values and objectives of these states? If so, it is possible that China's influence is not contingent on its ability to dole out economic incentives, but rather on certain normative and ideational aspects that are embedded within its political relations. This would provide support for proponents of Chinese exceptionalism to affirm the validity of China's claim to be good and different in relations with its neighbors. On the other hand, if there are few or only minimal common normative values shared by China and these two countries, then it severely weakens the claims of Chinese exceptionalism and calls into question the extent and sustainability of China's regional influence should its economic strength weaken.

In this chapter I first provide a brief overview of the state of relations between China and Southeast Asia since 2010 – a year that many scholars view as a turning point in Beijing's relations with the region, marked by a more assertive approach to China's territorial claims.[7] Next I examine the perceptions of Vietnamese and Indonesian scholars and senior policy makers towards China, utilizing data gathered during fieldwork trips to Hanoi and Jakarta in the fall of 2017.[8] Given that this chapter is not meant to be a

4 See U.S.- China Economic and Security Review Commission; Vietnamnet, "Vietnam – China Economic Relations."

5 Finnemore, *National Interests,* p. 2.

6 Goh, "Modes of China's Influence," p. 848.

7 Hoo, "Hardening the Hard;" Hong, "South China Sea Dispute."

8 In accordance with institutional review board requirements, the names of these respondents have been removed and only their institutional designations preserved. Some of them consented

comprehensive discussion of bilateral relations between China and the other two countries, but rather a snapshot of existing perceptions towards China, the focus is largely on how these countries react to China's image-promotion efforts. More specifically, I look at how the three images of China articulated by President Xi and discussed in Chapter 4 of this book are understood and appropriated in these two other countries. In my interviews, I posed three questions to my respondents – what do you think of the Chinese Dream; what do you make of China's peaceful rise; do you think China can be said to be a moral example in international politics? – and subsequently used their responses to elicit further observations and views about China.[9] Given the varying contexts that circumscribe these two countries' experiences with China, the responses of my interviewees particularly differ in how they perceive their respective countries' political priorities when dealing with China. From these, I identify points of convergence and divergence in the two countries' perceptions of China and how these views reflect a wider debate about China's international influence and global ambitions. I contend that, notwithstanding China's strong economic leverage among Southeast Asian countries, the experiences of Vietnam and Indonesia are illustrative of broader global perceptions towards China as well as reflective of the dynamics present in China-Southeast Asia regional relations.[10] I argue that despite its strong influence in the region China is still perceived with considerable suspicion by its Southeast Asian neighbors. This is in part because Beijing was seen as attempting to modify, though not entirely revise, the rules of Asian politics to suit its needs without taking into account the specific national interests of the ASEAN states. Further, how Beijing

to being interviewed only if key identifying details are removed. In such cases I have only indicated their professions and the date of interview. All whom I spoke to have extensive experience in either government and/or think-tank work for their respective countries and institutions.

9 Given that some my interviewees are well-known Sinologists in their respective countries and are more proficient in Mandarin than English, their interviews were conducted in Mandarin. On these occasions, I translate their responses to English while retaining the original quotation in Chinese in parentheses.

10 A 2018 survey on political developments in Southeast Asia conducted by a Singapore-based think-tank found that while many respondents agreed that China wields the most influence within Southeast Asia, more than half of expressed little or no confidence that China would "do the right thing" in contributing to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance. These findings further corroborate the overall perceptions held by respondents in this chapter. For results of this survey, see Tang et al., *State of Southeast Asia.* A similar survey was conducted in 2019 and a high percentage of Southeast Asian respondents again expressed uneasiness towards China, including a lack of confidence in China's willingness to act for the common good. See Choi, "Southeast Asia's Hopes and Fears."

is perceived is more related to what it does rather than what it says. In this respect, I argue that China's assertive actions in the South China Sea have generated a negative image of itself in the ASEAN region because of the importance these countries place on territory issues. Finally, relating this analysis to the overall study of Chinese exceptionalism, this chapter provides a textured understanding of China's regional diplomacy, and the extent to which Beijing's claim to be different and good is accepted by its neighbors during their conduct of international politics.

Return of the Dragon: Sino-Southeast Asia Relations Since 2010

China's political relations with the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have been unusually tense since 2010. Territorial disputes over maritime boundaries, which had existed in the past but were largely absent from political dealings in the 1980s to early 2000s, were again cast into the spotlight due to the perception that China was acting increasingly assertive about its territorial demands, particularly in the South China Sea (SCS).[11] In 2012, for the first time in its 45-year history, the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) found itself unable to issue a joint communique following its annual meeting of foreign ministers. Cambodia, who was then ASEAN chair, was criticized by many as choosing not to abide by ASEAN norms and instead allying with China in exchange for Beijing's economic benefits.[12] Subsequent years witnessed further clashes between China and several ASEAN states, most notably the Philippines and Vietnam, over what was perceived as further incursions into their maritime waters through Beijing's aggressive island-building work. Attempts to curtail China's territorial expansion through diplomatic means proved largely futile, as Beijing insisted that the disputed islands were under its jurisdiction, and thus within its sovereign right to do as it wished.

In July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) headquartered at The Hague ruled that there was no legal basis for China's claim of historical rights to resources within the so-called "nine-dashed line", a demarcation line that is used by Beijing for their claims in the South China. Among others, the PCA Tribunal also ruled that Chinese actions in the South China Sea, such as persistent interference with Philippine fishing and exploration activities and its failure to regulate its own fishing activities,

11 See for instance, Thayer, "Chinese Assertiveness;" Chapman, "China's Nine-dashed Map."
12 Sutter and Huang, "China-Southeast Asia Relations," pp. 69-80, 154-155.

were either in violation of the sovereign rights of the Philippines or had breached various obligations under the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).[13] Not surprising, Beijing's reaction was blunt. Its foreign minister Wang Yi described the judicial decision as a "political farce under the pretext of law," and President Xi stated, "China will not accept nor recognize the decision, and the country's territorial sovereignty and maritime interests in the South China Sea will not be affected under any circumstance."[14]

Notwithstanding this tough talk, scholars have observed that the PCA ruling may affect China's future ability to assert its territorial rights for a number of reasons: first, that China's own economic position would be weakened as a result of regional instability brought about by the South China Sea which will also consequently hamper China's to project its military might; second, that any future conflict in the South China Sea will inevitably be linked to and scrutinized in the context of the arbitration ruling;[15] and third, Beijing would not want to further provoke unnecessary conflict with its neighbors, so it might decide to rein in some of its aggressiveness in the wider interest of maintaining its regional relations.[16] At the same time, realist scholars have long highlighted the structural factors that could provoke yet another major power conflict.[17] Is conflict inevitable, as structural realists maintain, or will China be able to avoid the "tragedy of great power politics," as some of its leading scholars argue?[18]

As shown in Chapter 4, as Chinese leaders are highly sensitivity to the management of China's international image, the portrayal and perception of China's image represents a crucial aspect of its international diplomacy and foreign policy. This is not to suggest that China will compromise on its national interests to preserve a positive image. As Graham Allison writes in the aftermath of the PCA ruling, "China, like all great powers, will ignore an international legal verdict [...] except in particular cases where they believe it is [in] their interest to do so."[19] Still, taking seriously the importance of national image in international relations,[20] it becomes essential for China

13 Chan and Liow, "PCA Ruling and ASEAN."

14 Beech, "China slams the South China Sea Decision."

15 Li, "South China Sea Arbitration."

16 Hayton, "What Will Follow China's Legal Defeat."

17 See for instance, Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

18 See for instance, Qin, "Continuity Through Change;" Yan, "China's New Foreign Policy;" Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony*.

19 Allison, "Of Course China."

20 See for instance, Valencic and Chong, *The Image, the State*; Kaplowitz, "National Self-Images."

to be able to project a favorable national image, especially if it wants to assume a greater share of global leadership.

Indeed, I argue that the cultivation of the Chinese national image is a crucial element of its regional diplomacy, given that Chinese leaders constantly exhort the need to differentiate and distinguish China's international relations from those of the West (as seen in Chapter 2). While much has been made of China's economic relations with its neighbors in Southeast Asia, and the substantial diplomatic goodwill that they bring to Beijing's policy makers,[21] political tensions continue to fester in the form of contentious territorial claims – to the extent that they might possibly upset the balance of power in the region. As Singapore's former top diplomat has pointed out, "these developments are reinforcing powerful centrifugal forces that are pulling ASEAN away from its preferred balance, with potentially profound political and strategic consequences."[22] With this in mind, I now turn to the examination of the perceptions of China in Vietnam and Indonesia.

China and Vietnam: The Meeting of Two Dragons

Brantly Womack's description of the inherently asymmetrical character of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship represents a valuable framework with which to consider the interactions between the two countries.[23] Observing that contemporary international relations scholarship is accustomed to view "asymmetry as a disequilibrium rather than as a sustained condition," Womack argues that "disparities in capacities create systemic differences in interests and perceptions between the stronger and weaker sides of the relationship [and] mutual perceptions and interactions in an asymmetry relationship will be fundamentally shaped by the different situation of opportunity and vulnerability that each side confronts." At the same time, Womack suggests that "given that the basic disparity of capacities between the two is unlikely to change, and the stronger power is unlikely to be able to eliminate the weaker power," asymmetrical relations tend to be robust, as "both sides manage their affairs with the confidence that the power of the larger side will not be challenged and the autonomy of the smaller

21 Chin, "China's Bold Economic Statecraft;" Goh, "Modes of China's Influence;" Wong, Zou, and Zeng, *China-ASEAN Relations.*

22 Kausikan, "ASEAN Will Not Drown."

23 Womack, *China and Vietnam.* Other sustained studies of Sino-Vietnam relations that I have consulted in this analysis include Hiep, "Vietnam's Hedging Strategy;" Hoang, *Evolving Hedging Strategy;* Thayer, "Vietnam's Foreign Policy;" Thayer, "Vietnam and Rising China."

side will not be threatened."[24] In other words, this nature of asymmetry has generated a certain de facto state of affairs in which the weaker (or smaller state) is consciously aware of its inferiority and thus desist from challenging the bigger and more powerful state. At the same time, the larger state – knowing that the smaller state is unable to pose any existential threat to it – is unlikely to make any moves that would otherwise cause the smaller state to react aggressively towards it.

Notwithstanding the fundamentally asymmetrical character of the relationship, the Vietnamese scholars I spoke with were determined to ensure that Vietnamese national interests, particularly territorial ones, were not compromised during bilateral relations. For example, at a meeting in Singapore, in response to the question of "what your country fears most about China," posed by a Chinese IR scholar, a senior Vietnamese scholar gave the feisty answer "Vietnam does not fear China," before adding that Vietnam hopes to "find ways to live harmoniously with China."[25] This need to live with China (as a big brother) is etched into the mindset of the Vietnamese individuals I spoke with: they acknowledged the benefits that a prosperous China would bring to Vietnam while also being cautious, and at times suspicious, towards Beijing's long-term intentions. Given this ambivalence, this section examines how the three images discussed earlier (of the Chinese Dream, China's peaceful and progressive rise, and China being a moral example in the international system) are thought of and understood by Vietnamese elites.

I The Chinese Dream

When asked how the Chinese Dream was understood in Vietnam, one scholar from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam stated that it was perceived as a "long term and strategic goal of China to become a world power."[26] To some extent, this desire for China to become a strong and prosperous nation was considered legitimate; Vietnamese scholars could see no reason to deny this, particularly given the interconnectedness of their respective economies. Another view understood the Chinese Dream in the context of China's own domestic conditions, particularly as an attempt to foster a strong sense of nationalism that could result in a "zero-sum" outcome in the

24 Womack, *China and Vietnam,* pp. 17-18.

25 Roundtable meeting in Singapore, October 11, 2017.

26 Interview with scholar from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV), September 19, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.

pursuit of national interests in which both Vietnam and China do not gain anything from. The Chinese dream was also seen as a project of national rejuvenation, in which President Xi is attempting to "look backwards in history in terms of thinking" to fan the flames of nationalism.[27] One scholar also highlighted the notion of "Han nationalism" (*dahan minzuzhuyi,* 大汉民族主义), in which the ethnic Han Chinese people were considered to be superior to other ethnic minority groups in China[28], resulting in the interests of these groups being marginalized or even unacknowledged. Such an ideology, it was pointed out, could also generate additional problems with citizens from regions such as Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan who do not see themselves as Chinese nationals, notwithstanding China's jurisdiction over their territories.[29]

From this vantage point, I argue Vietnamese scholars are united by the keen, and sometimes cynical, perception that the Chinese Dream was ultimately conceived with China's interests in mind, and that the national interests of other countries are only peripheral or coincidental if they are considered at all. They also commonly noted that the pursuit of the Chinese Dream is fueled by rising nationalism which, according to one Vietnamese scholar, could result in China "abdicating its socialist responsibilities" – resulting in further conflict between China and socialist Vietnam.[30] Indeed, this observation suggests the perception that Chinese leaders – in their foreign policy making – are more likely to act in accordance with China's national interests than according to the ideological motifs of socialist ideals. While Vietnamese scholars perceive the Chinese Dream as a slogan of sorts, not unlike those articulated by President Xi Jinping's predecessors,[31] it was also observed that President Xi was viewed to be "relating with the world from a position of strength," so the Chinese Dream also reflects a China that is much more confident about its ability to effect changes in the world.

A number of scholars have described "hedging" as the favored strategy adopted by Vietnam towards China.[32] According to one definition, hedging

27 Interview with senior policy maker from the DAV, October 11, 2017, Singapore.

28 According to the China's 2010 population census, 91.51 per cent of the China's population comprise of Han Chinese.

29 Interview with scholar from the Institute of Chinese Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam, September 29, 2017.

30 Interview with scholar from the Institute of Chinese Studies, September 29, 2017.

31 For instance, former president Hu Jintao is credited with the slogan of "harmonious society" (和谐社会) while the slogan of "Three Representatives" (三个代表) is attributed to his predecessor Jiang Zemin.

32 Hiep, "Vietnam's Hedging Strategy;" Hoang, *Evolving Hedging Strategy*; Do, "Firm in Principles."

is "an insurance-seeking behavior under high-stakes and high-uncertainty situations, where a sovereign actor pursues a bundle of opposite and deliberately ambiguous policies vis-à-vis competing powers to prepare a fallback position should circumstances change."[33] For this reason, the United States and to some extent the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are considered important parts of Hanoi's hedging strategy. Despite the history of the Vietnam war, Vietnamese policy-makers view the presence of the United States in the region as an important stabilizing factor that ensures the continuation of the present configuration of power, which is geared to best serve Vietnam's national interests.[34] Despite the best efforts by Chinese leaders and diplomats to convince Southeast Asia countries that China will not become a hegemonic power, the Vietnamese I spoke with remain cautious of Chinese intentions, especially given the ongoing territorial disputes.

II China's Peaceful and Progressive Rise

Virtually none of the Vietnamese interviewees I spoke with expressed the belief that China's rise would be inherently peaceful. One Vietnamese military officer summed up the general Vietnamese view towards China as follows:

> China has always been crystal clear that there are limits to its peaceful intentions: China will not rule out the use of force or coercion where matters of its territorial integrity are at stake. The most obvious example is Taiwan, but China also includes its maritime territories in the East and South China Sea in this category. To the Chinese mind, there is no contradiction between Beijing's peaceful inclinations and a strong defense of its own territory.[35]

This is similar to the questions raised by scholars like Barry Buzan, who asks whether Chinese leaders' pronouncements that China will experience a peaceful rise/development represent a means to an end (i.e., China's global dominance) or instead represents a desirable end in and of itself.[36] From the response quoted above, it seems that Chinese claims to peacefully

33 Kuik, "How Do Weaker States Hedge?" p. 504.

34 Interview with senior officials from Vietnam's Ministry of Defence, September 26, 2017, and October 3, 2017.

35 Email interview, October 28, 2016.

36 Buzan, "Logic and Contradictions;" see also Guo, *China's "Peaceful Rise*;" Yee, *China's Rise.*

rise are not unconditional, and are premised upon the preservation of China's own territory. Unlike countries that state peaceful intentions but subsequently become hostile when threatened or invaded, China's vision of territoriality is constantly expanding and thus provides Beijing with the justification to attack other countries on the pretext of safeguarding its expansive territorial interests.

Indeed, one senior Vietnamese military officer observed to me that China presently faces the dilemma of simultaneously trying to "pursue stability and protecting its own rise."[37] In this view, Chinese national interests are considered as a "zero-sum game" – a perspective that directly contradicts the "win-win" rhetoric that Chinese leaders frequently mention.[38] This became most visible during the Haiyang Shiyou 981 incident of May to August 2014, in which a Chinese oil rig conducted drilling activities within a Vietnamese-claimed exclusive economic zone. The actions of the Chinese demonstrated the intractable nature of territorial issues, and the difficulty of compromising given the fact that national pride was at stake. Further, as noted by one Vietnamese military officer, "China generally frames its 'peaceful rise' as an overt comparison to the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. By promising a 'peaceful rise', China is, in effect, promising not to use force to expand its territory – but this promise has no bearing on the areas China already claims. Thus, China's peaceful rise should not be read as a promise to compromise on issues such as the South China Sea."[39] From this perspective, it is possible to argue that the term "peaceful rise" is irrelevant to Vietnam; instead, discussion of a peaceful rise is only considered relevant when China is trying to differentiate itself from the West (which it frequently criticizes as hegemonic). In Vietnam's view, *it is more important that these territorial disputes are peacefully resolved.*

One impediment to China's peaceful rise, one scholar pointed out, lies in the tendency for Chinese leaders to project internal problems onto the external environment. In other words, it is China's domestic environment, more than external conditions, that "sets the rhythm" for how its foreign policy is constructed.[40] This view posits that the biggest obstacle to China's

37 Interview with a senior officer from the Institute of Defence and International Relations, Ministry of Defence of Vietnam, Hanoi, September 26, 2017.

38 Interview with DAV scholar, September 15, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam; interview with a director-general of the DAV, October 11, 2017, Singapore.

39 Interview with a senior officer from the Institute of Defence and International Relations, September 26, 2017.

40 Interview with scholar from the Institute of Chinese Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam, September 29, 2017. For in depth studies of the nexus between China's

projection of global influence is the presence of strong "interest groups" (*lijituan,* 利集团) within the Chinese political system, with which President Xi is attempting to wage an internal struggle. For instance, Chinese observers have highlighted the crucial role of the People's Liberation Army in Beijing's foreign policy decisions, particularly those pertaining to territorial claims.[41] A source who works in a Chinese construction company pointed out to me that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) gave Chinese businesses the opportunity to "park" their money in overseas assets to deal with the perceived slowing down of the Chinese economy and the strict capital controls recently enforced by the Chinese government.[42] The future contours of Chinese foreign policy – and whether it will be peaceful – are dependent on the outcome of Xi's power contest with his domestic constituents. As of this writing, President Xi is said to have cemented his influence within the CCP, rivaling those of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.[43] Assuming Xi's power is not challenged within the party, it is likely that China's foreign policy in the coming years will reflect the vicissitudes of domestic politics playing out in the foreign arena.

III China as a Moral Example in International Politics

According to my Vietnamese interviewees, the biggest problem in China's international relations is the disparity between word and deed: as one respondent put it, "[Chinese] words are usually not in line with their acts."[44] When asked whether China's rise would be peaceful, another scholar commented that one should examine "what China does, not what it says" (*kantazenyangzuo bushizenyangshuo,* 看它怎样做，不是怎样说).[45] One policy-maker also described Chinese foreign policy as inconsistent, stating that Chinese leaders are "only concerned with China's own national interests with little regard for international norms."[46] It was also observed that China was amenable to changing the rules of the international order to suit its

domestic and foreign policies, see Nathan, "Domestic Factors;" Bhalla, "Domestic Roots;" Liao, "Sources of China's Assertiveness."

41 Saunders and Scobell, *PLA Influence;* You, "Xi Jinping and PLA Centrality;" You, "PLA and Diplomacy;" Segal, "The PLA and Chinese Foreign Policy."

42 Personal conversation, October 19, 2017, Singapore.

43 Brown, *CEO, China*; Mitchell, "Xi Jinping."

44 Email interview with Vietnamese army officer, October 28, 2016.

45 Interview with scholar from the Institute of Chinese Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam, September 29, 2017.

46 Interview with senior policy maker from the DAV, October 11, 2017, Singapore.

own interests, thus reinforcing the perception that it is a "self-centered and selfish nation."[47] When asked how this was different from normal foreign policy approaches (i.e., countries generally act in line with their own national interests), one interviewee contrasted China's approach to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) with US actions: "China is party to UNCLOS, the US is not. In the East Sea disputes between Japan, China uses UNCLOS to support its claim but refuse[s] to acknowledge UNCLOS guidelines in their South China Sea disputes with ASEAN countries. If China signs up to UNCLOS then it is obliged to abide by the rules, it cannot just pick and choose what is convenient."[48]

Another scholar from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam expressed the view that "how China does things" is "not noble."[49] When asked to clarify what this meant, it was stated that, unlike the US which is more "straightforward" with its demands in its bilateral relations, the Chinese "tend not to be transparent" in their diplomatic actions and prefer using "under-table methods" to achieve their goals. For instance, this interviewee shared with me that Chinese companies involved in the ongoing construction of the Hanoi metro trainline had understated the costs of the project during the bidding process; the additional hidden costs only surfaced in subsequent years.[50] One respondent also pointed out that following the PCA's ruling on the South China Sea in July 2016, Chinese leaders had increased the frequency of high-level visits to Southeast Asian countries to "put pressure on their leaders to keep quiet about the South China Sea issue."[51]

China's claim to being a moral example in international politics was also limited by a perception that its ideas were of an inferior quality. Despite Vietnam and China having similar party structures, my interviewees shared that many Vietnamese – including national leaders – prefer to look to the West (especially the United States) and its institutional systems in their governance work. When asked the reason for this, the reply was, "Vietnam is so much like China, there is nothing to learn from them. If we want to learn, we need to learn ideas from the West."[52] Beyond ideas, some Vietnamese respondents also highlighted the inferior quality of the Chinese-manufactured products and goods that were being sold in Vietnam, which consequently affected trust in China. In addition, the issue of Chinese

47 *Ibid.*
48 *Ibid.*
49 Interview with DAV scholar, September 15, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.
50 *Ibid.* On the Hanoi metro line, see Tatarski, "Vietnam's Tale."
51 Interview with senior policy maker from the DAV, October 11, 2017, Singapore.
52 *Ibid.*

companies bringing in their own workers, and thereby alienating the local population, was a frequent gripe among those I spoke with.[53] Officials from the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense shared the view that China needs to "be more responsible for the region" and to consider the views of other regional countries if its influence is to be perceived positively.[54]

Vietnamese respondents cited China's lack of "soft power" influence and its "values deficit" as formidable obstacles to the possibility that it could provide an alternative form of global leadership. When asked what this meant, interviewees cited day-to-day encounters, such as the "low quality goods of China to export to Vietnam" and "Chinese tourists' bad behavior when visiting Vietnam" as problems peculiar to Vietnamese experiences with the Chinese.[55] One respondent also cited "socialization issues," stating that Chinese tourists were not "civilized" (*buwenming,* 不文明), as issues that affect Vietnamese perceptions of China. Further, China's growing relationship with other Southeast Asia countries such as Malaysia was described as "the exportation of corruption" (*chukoufubai,* 出口腐败): Chinese entrepreneurs and businessmen were seen to be lacking transparency in their business relations, unlike their Japanese counterparts who were perceived as more upfront and honest in cutting deals. Given these experiences, it was said that China was not presently suited to be a model for the developing world because it did not possess the level of transparency (*toumingdu,* 透明度) that would allow other countries to trust it. Its development model was also not considered sufficiently attractive, and interviewees noted that at present it is not prepared to provide a greater share of global public goods.[56] More crucially, a senior defense official observed, aggressive Chinese behavior in its territorial dispute with Vietnam had affected the stability of the Southeast Asia region and undermined efforts to forge regional unity.[57]

Notwithstanding these criticisms, Vietnamese respondents did highlight some of China's economic initiatives as a positive model to be emulated,

53 Interview with DAV scholar, September 15, 2017; interview with senior official from the Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam, September 18, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.

54 Interview with officials from the Ministry of Defense, October 3, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.

55 Email interview with senior army officer, October 28, 2016; interview with DAV scholar, September 15, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam; interview with officials from the Ministry of Defense, October 3, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.

56 Interview with professor from the Institute of Chinese Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam, September 29, 2017; interview with DAV scholar, September 19, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.

57 Interview with a senior officer from the Institute of Defense and International Relations, September 26, 2017.

particularly its ability to modernize much of its economy in a short span of time. One respondent also pointed out that in the future China's claim to international leadership would not be based on indicators such as human rights and democracy, but rather on how it fared in environmental matters – especially in its relations with developing countries like Vietnam, where issues like human rights and freedom of speech are not as emphasized as in the West and matters pertaining to livelihood and subsistence are considered more immediate and relevant concerns.[58] Another interviewee acknowledged the ongoing tension in China between growing modernization and the ideas that come with it (discussed in Chapter 3) versus the "old thinking" that dominates China's political culture, which is potentially problematic for the future of China.[59]

From these responses, it can be surmised that China's growing influence has generally not been perceived positively by Vietnam, and that territorial disputes have further exacerbated Vietnamese distrust towards the Chinese. This is not unexpected, given the long history of Sino-Vietnamese conflict, particularly 1979 to 1990 when relations between the countries were overtly hostile.[60] Indeed, Womack's observation of the problems caused by "systemic misperception" remains valid today: "Vietnam's oversensitivity to China's actions and China's insensitivity to Vietnam's security concerns led to a vicious cycle of Vietnamese escalation and Chinese bullying, culminating in the border war."[61] In addition, many Vietnamese also continue to harbor negative views of China in their day to day relations with the Chinese. While in some sense this can be attributed to a lack of cultural awareness and misperception, particularly when it involves ordinary Chinese citizens, Chinese foreign policy is also seen as assertive, and even condescending, towards smaller countries like Vietnam. Still, the similarity in the governing ideologies of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the CCP means that the legitimacy of the CPV is, in some respects, intricately tied to the fortunes of the CCP. Hence, the extent of its criticism towards China is generally confined to expressing its disagreement over foreign policy matters and not the political system of the Chinese government as this would also affect the CPV's moral standing domestically.

58 Interview with senior official from the Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam, September 18, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.

59 Interview with senior policy maker from the DAV, October 11, 2017, Singapore.

60 For a brief discussion of the events of this period, see Womack, *China and Vietnam,* pp. 186-211.

61 *Ibid*., p. 209.

China and Indonesia: Whither Regional Influence and Domestic Politics

While Indonesia's relations with China are less encumbered by the memory of historical conflict and Jakarta's geographical position affords it some distance from Beijing's geopolitical orbit, Indonesia's perceptions of China are no less important than those of Vietnam – not least because of Indonesia's important role as a key player in the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific, as well as because of its economic relations with China and the ongoing racial issues in its domestic politics that involve ethnic Chinese Indonesians. Despite the palpable development of Sino-Indonesian relations since the post-Suharto era, which coincided with China's growing influence in Southeast Asia, academic materials related to China and Indonesia-China bilateral engagements are relatively new.[62] According to Indonesian analysts, however, the growing Indonesian interest towards China since the 2000s can be attributed to Jakarta's growing recognition that China is "the biggest game in town" and deserves greater attention. This has forced Indonesian policy makers to reinterpret and reapply its "free and active foreign policy", which traditionally sees Indonesia seeking to play a role in regional affairs but avoiding being caught up in conflicts among major powers.[63] To this end, it was noted that Indonesia-China relations had improved substantially during the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) presidency between 2004 and 2014, which witnessed the signing of the 2005 Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership and the subsequent elevation of the countries' relationship to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, including a visit by President Xi in October 2013.[64] Furthermore as observed by Lalisang, Indonesians had regarded the Chinese government as "strong and unified [… and] able to mobilize domestic support to execute its policy effectively and sustainably."[65] Notwithstanding the view of China as an "undemocratic state ruled by a communist regime that limited significantly the people's freedom," China under the current Xi's administration was perceived as *not* having "evil intentions, unlike when China was perceived as Indonesia's enemy during the Suharto regime."[66] China was instead described as a "pragmatic government, whose ultimate goal was providing welfare for its people,"

62 See, Tjhin, "Introduction," p. 85.
63 Almuttaqi and Arif, "Regional Implication," p. 95.
64 Lalisang, "Indonesians' Perceptions."
65 *Ibid*., p. 163.
66 *Ibid*.

which it had adroitly done through the fusion of an illiberal political system and semi-liberal market economy. More than that, "maintaining domestic stability and national unity were perceived as even more necessary in order to concentrate more on the country's national economic development."[67] This suggests that China is focused on its domestic environment and that its foreign policy is primarily geared towards addressing the needs at home. One recent study of 1620 adult Indonesians shows that more than three-quarters of those polled admired China and viewed Beijing as an important country for Indonesia's foreign affairs – although this was still lower than other major countries including the United States, Japan, and Australia.[68]

Given this backdrop and my interviews with Indonesian scholars, I argue that two key themes prominently feature in the analysis of Indonesia's perceptions towards China: first, the issue of regional/international norms and the extent to which China is contesting these norms to gain influence; and second, domestic Indonesian politics, which frame how ordinary Indonesians perceive China. These mattered more to Indonesian respondents than the themes of the China Dream, China's peaceful rise, and China's moral example. For instance, Indonesian scholars generally perceived the China dream as mostly targeted at a Chinese domestic audience to generate a stronger sense of nationalism, so they do not worry that such a dream would come at the expense of Indonesia's own national interests – unlike the fears expressed by my Vietnamese interviewees.[69] Indeed, as noted by a senior Indonesian policy-maker, Indonesia *hoped* to engage with a strong China, even though this relationship cannot be divorced from "the baggage of history."[70] It was also observed that as a great power China would naturally want to play a bigger role in international affairs, as witnessed by economic projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).[71] Unlike Sino-Vietnam relations, in which similar Communist party structures generated shared ideological motifs, Indonesia's relations with China were reported to be motivated by the economic opportunities offered by Beijing, particularly given the emphasis of Indonesian President Joko Widodo on the country's economic growth.[72]

67 *Ibid.*

68 See Herlijanto, "Public Perceptions."

69 Interview with scholar from the Habibie Centre, November 14, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia; interview with Iis scholar from Centre for Strategic and International Studies, November 17, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

70 Interview with senior Indonesian policy maker, October 9, 2017, Singapore.

71 Interview with scholar from the Habibie Centre, November 14, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia

72 Wong, "Indonesian Leader Widodo's Emphasis."

At the same time, China's growing influence in the region and territorial differences with Indonesia over the Natuna islands continue to weigh heavily in the minds of Indonesian China-watchers as they interpret China's foreign policy actions in and around Southeast Asia.[73] In the following section, I examine how China's national image, interwoven with Beijing's contestation of regional/international norms and domestic politics within Indonesia, has resulted in considerable ambiguity in the overall impression of Indonesian scholars towards China.

I Contestation over Regional Order and Norms

The Indonesian scholars I spoke with did not think that China would engage in open conflict, as that would be disastrous for China. At the same time, they still express caution in taking Chinese pronouncements about its goodwill and benign intentions at face value. According to a Chinese specialist at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, China's rapid rise to global prominence has resulted in Beijing having difficulty in coming to grips with global norms and values. This is seen most vividly in China's South China Sea disputes, which indicates that "China does not care about international law," given its controversial use of the nine-dashed-line to demarcate its SCS territorial rights.[74] As put, "If China wants to show the world that it is a responsible power that can be trusted, then it needs to follow and play by international law. China must prove to the world that its rise is peaceful, otherwise this notion of peaceful rise is problematic and will create fear among its neighbors. How China communicates and interacts with countries around them will be a test."[75] Another scholar likewise noted that China's peaceful rise had not been inherently self-evident in the years since President Xi took office: "We do not hear of many Chinese scholars and leaders talking about peaceful rise these days. This is because China has already risen. It talks about peaceful rise because it needs to reassure the region. Do we believe it? We want to believe that what China says is true, but Indonesia cannot construct a foreign policy simply on this belief alone. We need to have as many friends as possible."[76]

Thus, it seems that Indonesian scholars perceive China's diplomatic moves as fundamentally at odds with the norms and practices of Southeast

73 For scholarly discussions of Indonesia's Natuna island disputes with China, see Johnson, "Drawn into the Fray;" Supriyanto, "Out of Its Comfort Zone."

74 Interview on November 20, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

75 *Ibid.*

76 Interview on November 14, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Asian countries. While this does not mean that conflict is inevitable, it does suggest that China's actions are interpreted as a challenge to the long-term stability of the region. For instance, Haacke and Morada argue that ASEAN member states, in their various intramural dealings, prefer an approach that is consensus-seeking and, where possible, non-confrontational.[77] Whatever the limitations and problems of such an approach, Indonesian scholars perceive China as mounting a challenge to the security architecture of the region, based on Beijing's increase in initiatives that parallel existing regional arrangements in which Western countries already play a substantial role.[78] According to a military analyst at the Centre of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Chinese initiatives are conceptualized with the goal of "entrenching Chinese centrality" in the long run.[79] This is contrasted with Indonesia's preference which is to preserve ASEAN centrality and maintaining the US "hub-and-spokes" system, which preserves American regional primacy in East Asia vis-à-vis its bilateral alliances.[80] China's desired regional order is therefore seen as fundamentally at odds with Indonesia's vision, which is said to be "all inclusive" (unlike Beijing's, which excludes the United States).[81] Relating this to the South China Sea disputes, it was observed that Beijing's maritime claims were made with the ultimate goal of reducing American presence in the region. As such, China's stalling of discussions over the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea disputes was seen as a means of "buying time until its influence is such that these disputes would no longer be relevant" as China would by then have exercised control over these waters.[82]

Another scholar captured the situation more starkly, describing China as a "lonely superpower" and arguing that Beijing's actions had "created problems everywhere."[83] In his view, China was, hypocritically, acting like the West, and that in territorial disputes, it had attempted to "Balkanize ASEAN" by challenging the "comradeship" among ASEAN member states. Further, he notes that China's dogmatic insistence on remaining a "non-aligned superpower" also limits Beijing's ability to make friends with smaller countries and provide genuine global leadership: "no superpower can solve

77 Haacke and Morada, *Cooperative Security;* Ba, "Institutional Divergence and Convergence."
78 See Chaturvedy, "Beijing Xiangshan Forum."
79 Interview on November 17, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.
80 See also, Goh, "ASEAN Regional Forum;" Simon, "US-Southeast Asia Relations."
81 *Ibid.*
82 *Ibid.*
83 Interview on November 20, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

all the world problems on their own. To be a superpower means that you need allies all over the world. If China insists on being non-aligned, then it would not be able to lay claim to global leadership."[84]

What, exactly, a Chinese version of the world order portends for the conduct of international relations has been the subject of global debate in both academic scholarship and public discourse.[85] As discussed in Chapter 2, the notion of Tianxia represents one possible way of thinking about a Chinese world order and its relationship with international and regional norms. However, as highlighted by one Indonesia scholar, China's biggest problem lies in the inherent inability of its rules to be universalized, and consequently, for them to obtain the necessary "buy-in" from other countries. Other scholars have also pointed out that China's worldview contains an "unspoken Sinocentrism in the guise of critiquing Euro-American-centrism. The struggle over which version of universalism is more productive is a familiar story of postcolonial resentment."[86] In my interviews with Indonesian scholars, Chinese alternatives were perceived to be highly problematic. For instance, one scholar at the Habibie Centre expressed doubt about the Chinese model of global leadership in general, despite Chinese "flexibility:" "In terms for investments, the Chinese are quite flexible compared to the Japanese and Americans. It is easier to initiate projects with the Chinese, for instance, the Jakarta-Bandung high speed railway [...] however at the end of the day, we will have to face the reality of business interests. The Chinese promise a lot, but can they deliver?"[87]

While the inherent problems behind Chinese attempts to be a global leader were highlighted, due to the perceived "mess" of US domestic politics under the Trump administration, countries would "not [have] much of an option" but to acknowledge a larger Chinese role in international affairs.[88] At the same time, there was great uncertainty about how an increase of Chinese leadership and influence would transpire in the region, given that China was seen as previously trying to divide ASEAN member states. Echoing the Vietnamese interviewees' views, the Indonesians I spoke with also mentioned that "China says a lot of good things, [but] it needs more actions to back up its words."[89]

84 *Ibid.*
85 See for instance, Wang, *Chinese Visions of World Order*; Wang, *China Order.*
86 Chang and Chen, "Tracking Tianxia," p. 284;
87 Interview on November 14, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.
88 *Ibid.*
89 *Ibid.*

II Domestic Politics and the Ethnic Chinese Factor

Given the history of tensions between Indonesian Chinese and the majority Muslim population of the country, Indonesian domestic politics have affected the country's relationship with China.[90] This tension was most vividly seen during the final days of the Suharto regime in the late 1990s, when anti-Chinese riots and violent clashes between indigenous Indonesians and Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent took place. More recently, similar racial tensions were revived when the ethnic Chinese governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (who is also a Christian), was forced to step down and was subsequently imprisoned after he was accused of making a blasphemous speech against Islam in September 2016.[91] In the words of Leo Suryadinata, a scholar of diaspora Chinese studies, the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia represent "an unresolved dilemma" that has complicated the theatre of Indonesian domestic politics. Reflecting on the 1998 and 1999 B.J. Habibie administration, which came into power after the fall of Suharto, Suryadinata observes:

> [Habibie] is under pressure to improve the Indonesian economy and he needs the full-cooperation of the ethnic Chinese. Besides the economic importance of this community, he must also take into account pressure from indigenous Indonesians in human rights abuses against the Chinese. However, once the situation has stabilized, he will face growing pressure from pribumi [native Indonesians] for a larger economic stake. His ability to address both issues will be an important determinant of whether or not he can control Indonesia's politics in the lead-up to new general elections.[92]

Two decades on, racial dynamics between ethnic Chinese and native Indonesians continue to exert a not-insignificant force on Indonesia-China relations, and have been particularly salient in the realm of domestic politics. Part of this, as one scholar notes, is because of the economic disparity between ethnic Chinese and native Indonesians, where the former are perceived to be wealthier than and benefitting at the expense of the latter.[93] According to an

90 For further studies, see Suryadinata, *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia*; Tan, "From Sojourners to Citizens."

91 Wijaya, "Ahok Guilty."

92 Suryadinata, *Chinese and Nation-Building,* p. 141.

93 Interview on November 20, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia. According to one study, of the top 100 private enterprises in Indonesia in 1995, only 23 were owned by indigenous Indonesians, and the eight largest companies were solely owned by ethnic Chinese. *Eksekutif,* "100 Konglomerat."

Indonesian senior diplomat, "there is still lingering worry that the Indonesian Chinese are loyal to the mainland and that the ethnic Chinese are supportive of China."[94] Another Indonesian researcher, who has previously conducted research into Indonesian "Millennials"[95] (those born from the mid-1990s to early 2000s), told me that Islamist groups in Indonesia tend to vilify China and that Chinese were frequently used as a "bogeyman" in domestic politics more generally. For instance, a photograph of tourism minister Mari Elka Pangestu (who is ethnically Chinese) posing in a Huawei business venture in Indonesia led to speculation that ten million illegal Chinese workers would be brought into Jakarta. This highlights the ongoing debate about whether fears about the Chinese are being manufactured or reflect the realities on the ground.[96] The same researcher also said that Indonesians working in the field of infrastructure had a more negative disposition towards China, given the accusations of opposition politicians that President Jokowi's pro-business approach resulted in the "selling of Indonesia's assets to China."[97] Another analyst from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies highlighted the view that the presence of an ethnic Chinese community in Indonesia meant that international issues would inevitably be framed in domestic terms: "If China becomes assertive in the South China Sea, that will affect the perception of native Indonesians towards the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. Whenever we talk about China in Indonesia, it is somehow being associated with communism and the ethnic Chinese."[98]

In addition to the issue of ethnic Chinese and the political sensitivities generated between Indonesia and China, Chinese economic investments in Indonesia have also caused Beijing to be unwittingly drawn into the orbit of Indonesia's domestic politics, regardless of its own intentions. According to a senior Indonesian policy-maker, while Indonesia does not view China as a colonial power (unlike the Dutch, British, or Americans), Beijing was perceived as being able to intervene in local politics if needed. This is because many Chinese companies working in Indonesia preferred to bring in their own workers instead of hiring from the local population, which has created mistrust and jealousy among the local population. In this respect, Indonesia's economic vulnerability is perceived as an area that the Chinese could potentially exploit to extending its influence within the domestic sphere.[99]

94 Interview, February 28, 2017, London, United Kingdom.
95 Centre for Strategic and International Studies, "Ada Apa dengan Milenial?"
96 Interview, November 16, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.
97 *Ibid.*
98 Interview on November 17, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.
99 Interview on October 9, 2017, Singapore.

Although China's anti-corruption drive had received considerable admiration among Indonesian leaders, overall the Indonesian scholars I spoke with had reservations about Chinese global leadership and the extent to which that leadership could be perceived as beneficial to the wider world. One senior Indonesian diplomat shared the view that as a major power China would have to assume a heavier responsibility, but stated that it was unlikely to do so, except in an incremental way, for instance through peace-keeping operations and the mitigation of climate change. This was unlike the United States' role following the Second World War, when it assumed "a much heavier burden of the reconstruction of the world."[100] Scholars also noted that China was highly sensitive to external criticism, thus rendering international cooperation difficult and further augmenting the view that Beijing was only prepared to work with the international community on its own terms. For instance, one interviewee recounted that "when working with Chinese academia, the Chinese would insist that negative stuff written about them be taken out. This is different from the United States, which is more willing to accept negative views written about it. The Chinese are more dominating and micro-managing, thus compromising academic freedom."[101] When I pointed out that the United States could also resort to "double standards," especially where its own national interests are concerned, the reply was, "the US sets high standards and has low achievements, but China sets low standards, and has even lower achievements [...] how do you expect us to follow its lead?"[102]

Finally, interviewees also highlighted that China's policy of non-interference into the domestic politics of countries to which it renders economic assistance is not entirely consistent with what happens on the ground.[103] One scholar observed that "China has other conditions which it does not spell out in its economic relations," including the right to "[exploit] these countries for natural resources." He added the view that "we would have to wait and see what happens in the long run" to ascertain the results of this strategy. He also shared his opinion that despite China's insistence on being inclusive and respectful to other countries, it was Beijing – and not smaller countries – that wrote the "rules of engagement," and consequently

100 Personal interview, February 28, 2017, London, United Kingdom

101 Interview with CSIS researcher, November 16, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia

102 *Ibid.*

103 For studies of China's relations with countries in the global South, see Alden and Large, "China's Exceptionalism;" Alden and Hughes, "Harmony and Discord;" for a discussion of China's non-interference approach, see Pan and Ping, "Logic of Contingency."

possessed the authority to push for its own preferences concerning the norms of international order.[104]

Based on these discussions with Indonesian experts, I argue that despite Indonesia's strong economic imperative to cultivate good relations with China, there continues to be deeper feelings of animosity and suspicion toward Beijing's long-term objectives vis-a-vis the Southeast Asia region. Indeed, Jakarta's preoccupation with the overall balance of power within the region (given its disposition toward seeing itself as a leader-of-sorts in ASEAN) means that it sees China's growing influence as a potential catalyst for future conflict. Ethnic issues also further complicate Sino-Indonesian ties, particularly if Beijing tries to impose some form of cultural hegemony over ethnic Chinese Indonesians. Indonesians do not see China as exceptional or that different from others, particularly in geopolitical matters. From the perspective of Indonesia, Beijing's claims to uniqueness stem less from what it stands for than what it stands against. While many of my Indonesian interviewees expressed China's rise providing an alternative form of regional order, one which is not tethered to Western rules and norms, Jakarta's fundamental insistence that its foreign policy be "free and active" (*bebas-aktif*) means that it sees any attempts by bigger countries – including China – to constrain its decision-making as inherently bad.[105]

Conclusion

Based on the evidence presented in this chapter, it appears that China has been unable to translate its regional influence and political worldview into a favorable national image in the view of two of its most important Southeast Asian neighbors. Indeed, China was seen to be attempting to modify the rules of Asian politics to suit its needs without sufficiently accounting for the national interests of other ASEAN states. All of my respondents observed that it would not be in China's interests to become a revisionist power and seeking to create a new international order as by doing so it would undercut China's own national interests. China's assertive rhetoric at international and multilateral forums has also resulted in a negative impression of the type of leadership it purports to undertake. The South China Sea tensions, for example, have led both Vietnam and

104 Interview on November 20, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.
105 Sukma, "Evolution of Indonesia's Foreign Policy."

Indonesia to strengthen their own militaries in anticipation of further Chinese aggression and welcoming the presence of the United States to limit China's territorial appetite. While ASEAN states have, for the most part, accepted China's criticism of the West for interfering in regional issues, they were not prepared to jump on China's bandwagon and propagate an "Asia for Asians" sphere that would limit the role of the United States and other Western allies.

The need to maintain regional stability features prominently in the priorities of both Indonesia and Vietnam. For this reason, Chinese diplomatic maneuvers to influence ASEAN's decision-making processes vis-à-vis countries like Laos and Cambodia were seen as unduly infringing on ASEAN's political prerogatives and driving a wedge between ASEAN states. Moreover, these actions were considered antithetical to the promotion of Chinese interests in Asia, as they reflect Chinese impatience and lack of respect towards the national interests of smaller ASEAN states. As observed by Goh, ASEAN states are not passive recipients of the foreign policy decisions of major powers; rather, through the practice of "omni-enmeshment" and via a complex balance of influence, they have actively tried to influence the shape of the regional order to arrive at an "interim power distribution outcome" – a hierarchical regional order that retains the United States' dominant superpower position while also incorporating China in the position of a regional great power just below the United States.[106]

Finally, both Vietnamese and Indonesian respondents expressed considerable ambivalence towards the notion of Chinese exceptionalism, and whether China's claim to be "good" and "different" from the West was even possible in practice. Most importantly, China's actions in the South China Sea have dimmed the credibility of Chinese rhetoric, particularly when core national interests are at stake. Its political worldview was also considered highly problematic and lacking in broader appeal. From this it seems that China has not been successful in persuading other countries that it is inherently peaceful or that its claim to leadership would be beneficial to the region. In fact, China was seen as "not any different" from other powerful nations; as a powerful nation, it would necessarily want to extend its sphere of influence in East Asia, primarily through economic means but not ruling out the possibility of military might when territorial matters are concerned. An uneasy relationship with China remains the likely outcome for the foreseeable future.

106 Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order."

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7 Deciphering China

Views from Singapore

Abstract
This chapter examines Singaporean elite perspectives towards China and how China's rise is understood and debated in Singapore. It argues that Singapore's reading of China's rise is broadly divided into three schools that parallel theories of mainstream international relations, namely, the realist, economic institutionalist, and the constructivist positions. By analyzing the views put forth by three Singaporean thought leaders that are representative of each of these schools, the chapter argues that at the crux of Singapore's perspectives on China is a contestation between these three schools of thought as well as the extent to which Singapore perceives China as exceptional.

Keywords: Singapore, China, realism, economic institutionalism, constructivism

In the previous chapters, I have sketched how the Chinese political worldview and conceptions of Chinese uniqueness and exceptionalism are fleshed out through Chinese international relations theories (Chapter 2), the articulation of a Chinese national identity (Chapter 3), and the construction of its national image as different from the West (Chapter 4). In Chapter 5, I have examined the discourse surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative and identified some key themes that are salient to China's view of global order, while in Chapter 6, I have explored how China's national image is perceived by its neighbors (Vietnam and Indonesia) and analyzed the extent to which Chinese interests are being acknowledged and shared by those countries. Building on these ideas, this chapter examines the degree to which the Chinese worldview regarding domestic governance and international order – and the exceptionalism discourse surrounding it – is accepted by overseas Chinese communities. Specifically, I focus on the case

Ho, Benjamin Tze Ern, *China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism: International Order and Global Leadership*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2021
DOI: 10.5117/9789463725149_CH07

of Singapore, a city-state whose majority population is ethnic Chinese and whose approach to governance has been closely studied by Chinese leaders in the past.[1] Unlike Hong Kong and Macau, which fall under Beijing's rule, and Taiwan, which China claims sovereignty over, Singapore's sovereignty as a nation-state has never been questioned by Beijing (at least publicly) since its independence from Malaysia in 1965, despite the substantial presence of an ethnic Chinese community there. In recent times, however, Singapore's relations with China have undergone some turbulence due to its strong support for an American presence in the region and support for using international law to resolve territorial disputes – both of which run against Beijing's preferences.[2] This was most vividly magnified in November 2016, when nine Singapore military vehicles were impounded in Hong Kong while enroute to Singapore from overseas training in Taiwan.[3] According to some observers, the conditions underpinning the relationship between the two countries have changed substantially over the past decade (given China's rise) and Beijing's view of key security and strategic issues remains fundamentally at odds with Singapore's positions.[4] At the same time, the two visits by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to China in September 2017 and April 2018, including meetings with President Xi on both instances, suggests that the relations between the two countries have improved since the impounding of the Singaporean military vehicles in late 2016, and that Singapore has made strategic changes to its foreign policy positions to accommodate China's preferences.[5]

In this chapter, I examine how China's international relations' behavior is understood and interpreted by Singaporean observers and detail the ongoing debates that characterize Singapore's perspectives towards China.[6] This is

1 The Singapore government broadly divides its population into four main ethnic categories: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others. According to the 2017 population statistics, 74.3 percent of residents in Singapore are Chinese. *Population Trends 2017*. Department of Statistics Singapore. https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/population/population2017.pdf (retrieved December 25, 2020). For a more detailed exposition of Singapore-China relations after Beijing's opening up, see Ho, "Learning from Lee."

2 Tai, "Singapore's China Conundrum." For background on Singapore's foreign policy vis-à-vis China, see Tan, "Faced with the Dragon."

3 See Boey, "China Has Always Kept Mum."

4 Interviews with Chinese scholars in Beijing and Guangzhou, 2017 and 2018; for a recent analysis of China's perceptions of Singapore, see Zhang, "Assessing China's Attitudes."

5 Wang, "China's Welcome;" Chan, "Singapore-China Relations."

6 It must be said that the bulk of these scholarly observations are not aimed directly at China, but rather at understanding what China's rise means for the world, and more specifically for Singapore. Nevertheless, as my subsequent analysis shows, these ruminations and writings

important to this study of Chinese exceptionalism for the following reasons. First, if a Chinese global order can truly be said to be good and different (from the West), then this would be expected to reflect in Singapore's perspective on China, particularly if Beijing is associated with a benevolent form of global leadership. As a city-state whose national interests are closely intertwined with those of the global community, Singapore is acutely sensitive (and vulnerable) to international geopolitical moods and shifts in the balance of power.[7] Indeed, its founding leader Lee Kuan Yew was considered an expert observer of China, and his views were frequently sought after by American leaders.[8] This indicates that despite Singapore's small size, its reading of international politics is generally accurate, especially given the national interests at stake.

Second, given Singapore's majority Chinese racial composition and Chinese leaders' frequent use of themes of racial nationalism to muster support for its political objectives,[9] the city-state represents an ideal platform for assessing Chinese claims of exceptionalism and China's purported worldview. For instance, when Chinese defense minister General Chang Wanquan visited Singapore in February 2018, he commented that "coming to Singapore, is not like going away, but visiting good friends in the *same town* [italics mine]."[10] Similarly, during a visit by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in April 2018 the Shanghai Party chief Li Qiang said in an interview that "the Chinese community accounts for about 70 per cent of the total population of Singapore [...] we must appeal to the emotional affinity among the people."[11] These statements suggest that in the minds of Chinese leaders, Singapore – by virtue of its demographic make-up – should be favorably predisposed to China in its foreign relations and should also act as a bridge between China and other countries (particularly those in the West).[12]

provide clues about how Chinese exceptionalism is understood and indicate that there is a wide spectrum of views of Chinese exceptionalism compared to the West.

7 For an in-depth discussion of Singapore's foreign policy, see, Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy;* Ganesan, *Realism and Interdependence.*

8 See, Allison, Blackwill, and Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew.*

9 For a recent study of how this plays out, see Carrico, *The Great Han.*

10 *Channelnewsasia,* "Singapore and China Armies."

11 Sim, "Singapore Can Help Shanghai Companies."

12 This shared race/ethnicity/civilization narrative is frequently touted in Sino-Singaporean relations. The Chinese state and its relationship with the overseas Chinese diaspora is an increasing area of concern among many Western countries, including Singapore, but a larger discussion of this is beyond the scope of this book. For a more comprehensive study, see To, *Qiaowu.*

Third, given that Singapore's model of domestic governance has frequently been touted as an inspiration for China's own governance system following its opening up, some features of China's political life are derived from the Singapore's experience, making the latter well-placed to comprehend and explain political developments in China.[13] As such, Singapore is a rich repository of perspectives towards China, and a number of its top minds and influential institutions are keen observers of China's foreign policy and its international relations.[14]

In this chapter I examine the varied Singaporean perspectives towards China and how it has responded to China's global influence, with a particular focus on Beijing's geopolitical actions within the Asia-Pacific region. To do so, I analyze the ideas promulgated by three Singaporean thought leaders, Bilahari Kausikan, Kishore Mahbubani, and Wang Gungwu, whose reading and appraisals of China's international relations represent several strands of the Singaporean elite view of Beijing. Both Kausikan and Mahbubani have had long careers in the Singapore foreign service and have continued to actively publish their views in both domestic and international media on aspects of Singapore's foreign policy after retirement, including their thoughts about Singapore's political relations with Beijing. Similarly, between 2007 and 2018 the historian Wang Gungwu led the Singapore-based East Asia Institute, which specializes in the study of contemporary China and East Asia. The views of these three thought leaders are supplemented here by interviews and discussions with other scholars and observers of China based in Singapore as well as well as observations obtained from senior policy-makers, including several government leaders that I had spoken with.

The rest of the chapter proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of Singapore's political relationship with China after the commencement of diplomatic relations in 1990, focusing particularly on key economic and security initiatives undertaken by the Singapore government to foster bilateral relations with Beijing. I then analyze the ideas put forth by Kausikan, Mahbubani, and Wang. I propose that Singapore's position(s) towards China can be broadly divided into three schools, which parallel the theories of mainstream international relations: first, the realist position (represented by Kausikan), which sees the global ascension of China as a challenge to the existing international system and its associated norms; second, the economic

13 For studies of what China has learned from Singapore, see Ortmann and Thompson, "China's Obsession with Singapore;" Ho, "Learning from Lee."

14 The author's own China Program at the Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies is a case in point.

Table 7.1 Singapore's perception of Chinese exceptionalism

	Is China Unique?	Is China Good?
Realist School	NO	NO
Economic institutionalist	YES	YES
Constructivist-ideational	YES	DEPENDS

institutionalist view (as advocated by Mahbubani), which perceives a shift of global power from the West to the East, in which Chinese economic institutions lend Beijing a greater say in the nature of this transition and share of international political influence; and third, the constructivist-ideational view (proposed by Wang), which privileges the contribution of ideas from history, culture, and social patterns in states' perceptions of their own national identities and their international relations. I argue that at the crux of Singapore's perspective(s) towards China is a contestation between these three schools of thought as well as regarding the extent to which Singapore perceives China as exceptional, that is, different and good. While the realist position sees China as no different from other countries and its rise as posing problems for the existing world order, economic institutionalism is highly persuaded by China's economic might and is more optimistic about Beijing's ambition to become a global power. The constructivist-ideational position, while seeking to celebrate the uniqueness of China as a global power, is agnostic about whether China represents a force for global good and uses a comparative perspective to understand the differences between China and the West. I contend that each of these three schools reaches a different conclusion as to whether China is exceptional, and each of these conclusions reflects an ongoing debate within Singapore about how best to engage with China (see Table 7.1). I conclude by arguing that Singapore's perceptions of China and China's role in the world are highly ambiguous, paralleling their historical administrations. A more basic problem, I suggest, is China's political system and the distrust it generates among Singapore's leaders.

Engaging China: The Security Dimension

While official relations between Singapore and China only began in 1990, unofficial interactions date to more than a decade earlier, to Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's maiden trip to China in May 1976 and Deng Xiaoping's subsequent visit to Singapore in November 1978. The geopolitical scenario of the time, Singapore's dominant Chinese population amidst a Muslim

majority region, and the prevailing Cold War environment meant that Singapore remained careful about establishing diplomatic ties with China in the 1980s.[15] Hence Singapore did not want to be seen as a "third China" and thus only established official relations with China after Jakarta had normalized relations with Beijing. Following the end of the Cold War, one of Singapore's strategic priorities was to manage China's rise as a peaceful great power. Like other Asian nations, Singapore believed that Deng's economic reforms would make China into the most important regional great power, and hence the challenge was to ensure that Beijing would in bring prosperity to and stabilize – rather than threaten and disrupt – East Asia in the process.[16]

Regionally, Singapore strongly supported ASEAN's engagement with China, first by inviting it to become a consultative partner in 1991 and then a full dialogue partner in 1996. Singaporean leaders attempted to influence the crucial debate about whether to engage or contain China. As observed by Goh and Chua, Singapore was ASEAN's "most strenuous advocate of engagement," with its leaders arguing that a policy of containment towards China would create a self-fulfilling prophecy: it would "fuel Chinese paranoia and hostility and strengthen the hardliners among China's leaders who believed that the West wanted to encircle and weaken China."[17] Singapore's leaders believed that as China prospered and its stake in the global economy grew, its interest in upholding the norms of international practices would also increase. As Singapore's Prime Minister at the time, Goh Chok Tong, put it, "by giving China space and time, the world will accelerate [...] China's ability and willingness to play by global rules."[18]

Still, given the pervasiveness of realist thinking among Singapore's leaders (as discussed later in this chapter), the possibility that China might well choose to throw its weight around was also anticipated, particularly in the context of regional sovereignty disputes.[19] The United States' ongoing presence in East Asia provided Singapore with assurance and the ultimate

15 For an analysis of Sino-Singapore ties before the 1990s, see, Lee, "China's changing attitudes;" Lee, "Sino-Singaporean relations."

16 See Goh and Chua, *Singapore Chronicles,* pp. 49-51.

17 *Ibid.,* pp. 49-50.

18 *Straits Times,* "Give China time to integrate – PM."

19 Besides China's South China Sea disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines, the Taiwan issue also loomed large at the time. Between 1995 and 1996, China protested Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the US by conducting military exercises and test-firing missiles across the Taiwan Straits. The US responded by moving two aircraft carrier groups into the area, causing Singapore considerable anxiety about whether it would be forced to choose between China and the US.

deterrent for potential Chinese aggression, thus enabling Singapore leaders to continue to reiterate their support for engaging Beijing. Indeed, Lee Kuan Yew termed this line of reasoning the "fall-back position should China not play in accordance with the rules as a good global citizen."[20] At the same time, the need to diversify its sources of security so that it would not depend solely on the US prompted Singapore to embark on the building of multilateral regional institutions, thus generating new conduits for diplomacy that would in turn promote multilateral and institutional cooperation between the great powers, and consequently stabilize their relationships with smaller countries in the ASEAN region.[21]

With these objectives in mind, Singapore was instrumental in setting up the region's first annual security dialogue, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), in 1994, the overall conceptualization of which stressed the leadership and "centrality" of ASEAN, which privileges ASEAN at the core of regional institutional arrangements.[22] In 1997, the ASEAN Plus Three dialogues and summit were launched, which involved meetings concerning economic cooperation between the Southeast Asian countries, China, Japan, and South Korea. The East Asia Summit was inaugurated in 2005, which involves the leaders of ASEAN Plus Three members, the US, India, Australia, New Zealand, and Russia in dialogues about strategic issues and cooperation. From 2010, ASEAN has also included these eight countries in a biennial defense dialogue, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus.

According to Shunmugam Jayakumar, who was Singapore's foreign minister between 1994 and 2004, these efforts to build regional security institutions were meant to help create "political discipline in the way regional countries conduct their relationships" and maintain a "predictable pattern of political relationships" by building confidence and trust, especially among the major powers.[23] To this end, these regional multilateral institutions serve

20 Lee, "How the United States Should Engage Asia."

21 For discussions on ASEAN's relations with major powers, see Ganesan, "ASEAN's Relations;" Yoshimatsu, "ASEAN and Evolving Power Relations;" Katsumata, "What Explains ASEAN's Leadership."

22 The ARF presently consists of 27 member countries, namely, the ten ASEAN member states (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Burma, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam), the ten ASEAN dialogue partners (Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States), one ASEAN observer (Papua New Guinea), as well as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Timor-Leste, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. See. "ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)", *Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, http://dfat.gov.au/international-relations/regional-architecture/Pages/asean-regional-forum-arf.aspx (April 21, 2018).

23 Jayakumar, *Diplomacy,* p. 82.

three functions. First, they help maintain ASEAN's voice in regional affairs by establishing the Association that is in the "driver's seat" to coordinate wider regional cooperation. Second, they provide a means to "socialize" China into regional cooperation and rules, while still keeping the US politically and economically engaged in the region. Third, by enmeshing the major powers within the region's own organizations, ASEAN diversifies the sources of strategic and economic stability for Southeast Asia. For instance, the strategic imperative for deeper engagement with India is both to "supplement China's role [...] due to [China's] growing economic and military strength" and also because "Singapore needed to find a counterbalance to regional heavyweights such as China and Japan" should the US draw out.[24] These considerations suggest that notwithstanding its growing engagement of China, Singapore remains cautious about Beijing's long-term geopolitical intentions, and thus feels the need to diversify its security ties to protect and preserve its independence amidst China's growing influence in Asia.

Engaging China: The Economic Dimension

As a nation that is highly dependent on trade for its economic well-being, Singapore has intensively used trade and trade agreements as strategic tools to develop regionalism and diversify relations with multiple economic powerhouses since 1990.[25] In this respect the opening of Chinese markets to foreign investment was a boon to Singapore, which quickly took advantage of the new economic opportunities. In 1994, Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Chinese Vice President Li Lanqing inked an agreement to develop an industrial park in Suzhou, China. Following the formation of a Joint Council of Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) in 2003, which institutionalized ties between both countries at the highest levels of government, further projects came about including the Tianjin Eco-City in 2007, the Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City in 2016, and the Chongqing Connectivity Initiative in 2017. Notwithstanding the mixed success of these initiatives (particularly the Suzhou Industrial Park), both countries have benefitted from their economic cooperation. In 2015, Singapore was China's largest foreign investor, while Singapore was also China's largest investment destination in Asia and one of the top destinations for Chinese companies investing abroad overall.[26]

24 *Ibid*., p. 90.
25 Goh and Chua, *Singapore Chronicles,* p. 53.
26 Aggarwal, "S'pore is China's largest investor."

But more than just economic cooperation, Singapore's ability to somehow marry a semi-authoritarian government with single-party dominance to economic prosperity presents a useful political template for China's reforms of its own political system.[27]

Seen this way, one might argue that what binds Singapore and China together is their respective governments' insistence that economic prosperity remain fundamental to the establishment of political legitimacy. This is somewhat unlike Western polities, in which other issues such as human rights and individual freedoms are enshrined and remain sacrosanct, and economic growth is just one of many indicators determining state success. Yet, I have pointed out, Singapore's general preference for a Western-led, rules-based international order remains fundamentally at odds with the Chinese worldview. The fact that Singapore looks to the United States and other Western allies for its security needs but relies on the Chinese market for economic prosperity can become problematic, particularly should China seeks to extend its geopolitical influence through economic means. In the following sections, I examine Singapore public intellectuals' three major strands of thought about how Singapore should position itself vis-à-vis China's growing influence. My intention in doing so is to capture the key dynamics and considerations behind Singapore's international outlook and reading of China's potential future, both within the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.

The Realist Position: Maintaining Balance of Power

Among the major Singaporean advocates of the need to maintain a balance of power – however precarious and difficult doing so might be – is Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan, a career diplomat with the Singapore's foreign ministry who served as its permanent secretary from 2001 to 2013. Following his retirement, Kausikan continued to write and give speeches in a personal capacity, many of them touching on Singapore's foreign policy, which have been compiled in a single book that I use in the following discussion.[28] I have also had the opportunity to interview Kausikan twice, in 2015 and 2017, and his views can be largely said to resonate with a realist reading of

27 You, *Xinjiapo Daxuan;* Lu et al., *Wenzheng Liguangyao.*

28 See, Kausikan, *Singapore Is Not An Island.* Given his position with the government, one might also argue that Kausikan's views reflect Singapore government's thinking and consideration to its foreign policy positions and preferences.

international relations, particularly in reference to the importance of power and the need for small states like Singapore to maximize their policy options by ensuring that a balance of power is maintained in international politics.

In Kausikan's view, China's size and population creates a "fundamental asymmetry" in its relationship with smaller countries in Southeast Asia, including Singapore:[29]

> This asymmetry of size and thus of power is an empirical fact that cannot be wished away. Big countries are always going to provoke a degree of anxiety in smaller countries on their periphery. This has nothing to do with the intentions of the big country; it is a reality faced by all big countries in every region throughout history. Big countries have a duty to reassure, a duty that China has only partially fulfilled. Small countries look at the world very differently from big countries.[30]

In the above, China is described as a big country as compared to Singapore being a small one and the former consequently generating inevitable concern and worry in the latter. Embedded in this statement, I argue, is a deep and pervasive belief that structure trumps agency in matters of international politics. Regardless of even the best intentions of Chinese leaders, China's size and growing strength means that its actions would automatically be read by other countries as threat-evoking, unless proven otherwise. Moreover, in Kausikan's mind, Chinese leaders are unable to perceive how smaller states view China. As he puts it,

> [t]hroughout my diplomatic career, I have failed to get Chinese friends to understand [how small countries think]; they may intellectually grasp the difference but do not emotionally empathize with small countries. This is probably true of all big countries everywhere. But it may well be particularly difficult for China to empathize because of justifiable pride in its achievements, the growing role of nationalism in the Chinese body politic, and, above all, Chinese sense of destiny in reclaiming its historical place in East Asia and the world after a 100 years of humiliation.[31]

Kausikan's realist perspective is further evidenced by his observation that China's claims in the South China Sea or military modernization program are

29 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
30 *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.
31 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

"nothing unusual," given the need of any country to preserve its sovereignty.[32] China is therefore well within its rights to protect what it sees as its legitimate territory. At the same time, Kausikan expresses the view that "claims of sovereignty [ought to] be pursued within [a] common framework of norms, including procedures to change norms considered obsolete or unjust" rather than resorting to "unilateral actions based on superior force."[33] In addition, Kausikan sees China's increasing reliance on history as problematic, first because contemporary maritime issues ought not to adjudicated based on historical claims, and second because such arguments "arouse anxieties among claimants and non-claimants alike."[34] He also notes, "history is always subject to multiple interpretations, and interpretations are constantly being revised as new facts come to light and interests change. There is therefore a danger that our own historical narratives will lead us in directions that we do not intend to take."[35]

Kausikan cautions against taking China's rise as a given, and for countries to assume that their national interests are naturally aligned with Chinese political preferences:

> The essential complication confronting all of us as we decide how to position ourselves vis-à-vis the US and China is that neither Washington nor Beijing themselves know what they really want [...] the US has not yet decided how much help to ask for to maintain order in East Asia, in what areas to ask for help. And what price to pay for help. Beijing has neither strong reason nor the capability to kick over the table even as it seeks arrangements that will better reflect its new status. And so, China on its part does not yet know whether to offer help to maintain order, in which areas to offer help, and what price to ask for its help.[36]

Given this uncertainty, Kausikan suggests that Singapore's interests are best served by encouraging both the US and China to utilize multilateral forums like ASEAN-led institutions as much as possible, as "this gives us and other lesser beings a modicum of influence and helps mitigate the trials and tribulations that inevitably arise when strategic adjustments of this scale are underway between major powers."[37] He therefore argues for

32 *Ibid.*, p. 97.
33 *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.
34 *Ibid.*
35 *Ibid.*
36 *Ibid.,* pp. 166-167.
37 *Ibid.,* p. 168.

the need to maintain balance "conceived of as an omnidirectional state of equilibrium that will enable Asean to maintain the best possible relations with all the major powers and thus preserve autonomy."[38]

Kausikan's arguments detailed above reflect a realist line of thinking that guides Singapore's foreign policy towards China. Indeed, Leifer's suggestion that Singapore's fundamental approach of coping with its vulnerability through foreign policy negotiations[39] means that China's rise is inherently viewed with suspicion, particularly if it results in a challenging of the existing global order and the primacy of US influence in the Asia-Pacific. According to one study of Sino-Singaporean relations, the "practical and paradoxical quality of Singapore's foreign policy" means that no amount of insistence about China's peaceful development on the part of Chinese leaders is likely to assure Singapore, especially when China's growth might (or has already) come at the expense of the rest of Asia.[40] In 2017, Kausikan and his contemporary Kishore Mahbubani (who was then the Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and whose views I examine in detail below), were involved in a protracted public debate about how Singapore should position itself internationally in the context of China's renewed strength and rising influence. Kausikan's view was that Singapore should not accept subordination "as a norm of [the] relationship," and that its leaders should "stand up for their ideals and principles when they had to" instead of "being meekly compliant to the major powers."[41] From this perspective, the realist position can be stated as follows: the rise of China represents a challenge to regional stability and consequently poses problems for Singapore's national interests, which historically are tied to a Western-led order. For this reason, it is proper to be concerned about the possibility of a Chinese-dominated international order that is seen as attempting to revise the accepted rules of international conduct and thus would be fundamentally inimical to Singapore's approach towards international relations.

Not surprisingly, this position eschews any mention of Chinese exceptionalism, taking the stance that China, like all rising powers, would necessarily want to challenge the existing status quo and modify the rules and norms of the international order to best suit its own priorities and preferences. Interestingly, however, Kausikan does perceive China's attempts to procure

38 *Ibid.*

39 Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy.*

40 Tan, "Faced with the Dragon," p. 253.

41 Kausikan, Facebook post dated July 1, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/bilahari.kausikan/posts/1948237095433710 (retrieved April 28, 2018).

political influence internationally as different from the practices and behaviors of other major powers in two ways. First, China uses a wide range of tactics, from legitimate diplomacy to the more covert and often illegal deployment of agents of influences and operations (such as those undertaken by intelligence operatives) to sway decisionmakers and public opinion leaders. Secondly, and more importantly, the aim of China's influence operations is not just to direct behavior, but also to condition behavior. As by Kausikan, "China doesn't want you to comply with its wishes, it wants you to [...] do what it wants without being told."[42] From this, we could say that while China's ultimate goal is unexceptional (i.e., it is behaving as all major powers tend to do), the strategies and tactics employed to achieve its objectives are exceptional in that it does not seek to play by the rules of the international system but instead attempts to subvert existing practices to achieve its goals. For instance, while many Western countries seek to distinguish between political and commercial objectives – however difficult that differentiation might be – the Chinese government perceives commercial relations as ultimately an extension of political objectives, and interferes when it perceives commercial relations to be posing challenges to its political rule.[43] However, this brand of exceptionalism is considered lacking in moral quality and therefore is counterproductive for China's goal of being seen as an exceptional power, in the sense of being different and good.

The Economic Institutionalism Position: New Rules for Changing Times

The second position is that proposed by Kishore Mahbubani, who argues for the need to reconceptualize and rethink Singapore's fundamental national interests to best adapt to the changing configuration of power (as evidenced by China's rise) and take advantage of China's global prominence. In an essay entitled "Qatar: Big Lessons From a Small Country" published in Singapore's main daily newspaper *The Straits Times*, Mahbubani alludes to the decision of several Gulf states to break off ties with Qatar to argue that "small states

42 Cited in Yong, "S'poreans Should Be Aware."

43 One recent example is the detaining of Canadian citizens in China following the arrest of Huawei's chief finance officer Meng Wanzhou in Canada. As further proof that Chinese commercial enterprises are not free of political objectives, the Chinese ambassador to Canada warned of repercussions if Ottawa were to block Huawei from supplying equipment to Canada's 5G networks.

must always behave like small states."[44] According to Mahbubani, Qatar had made the mistake of thinking that because "it sits on mounds of money [...] it could act as a middle power and interfere in affairs beyond its borders."[45] Applying this analogy, Mahbubani suggests that Singapore should be "very restrained in commenting on matters involving great powers" – something it had failed to do in its comments in the aftermath of the judgement on the South China Sea disputes between the Philippines and China. Mahbubani criticizes Singaporean diplomatic representatives' view that the nation should take a "consistent and principled" stand on geopolitical issues, saying that being consistent and principled cannot be the only traits that define Singapore's diplomacy, and that it would be better for Singapore to remain silent when big powers are in disagreement. As a small state, Mahbubani elaborates, there is a need to be "Machiavellian" in international affairs: "Being ethical and principled are important in diplomacy. We should be viewed as credible and trustworthy negotiators. But it is an undeniable 'hard truth' of geopolitics that sometimes, principle[s] and ethics must take a back seat to the pragmatic path of prudence."[46]

In response to this article Mahbubani was roundly criticized by senior members of Singapore's foreign policy establishment, most notably Singapore's Law and Home Affairs minister K Shanmugam, who commented that the piece was "questionable, intellectually" and that Singapore had "to be clear about our interests, and go about it smartly. But not on bended knees and by kowtowing to others."[47] While the minister did not mention which country Singapore might be compelled to kowtow to, given Beijing's influence and other circumstantial evidence at that time it was generally believed by most political observers that he was referring to China.[48]

Of course, this example should not be viewed in isolation, but instead from within Mahbubani's broader worldview, which sees a shift in power dynamics from the West to the East, and consequently predicts a far more influential future role for countries like China and India in global leadership and the determination of international affairs.[49] Indeed, Mahbubani has also explicitly stated his belief that the era of Western domination (led by the US) was coming to an end, and that the world was moving from a Western-led

44 Mahbubani, "Qatar: Big Lessons."

45 *Ibid*.

46 *Ibid*.

47 Salleh and Chew, "Minister Shanmugam, Diplomats Bilahari and Ong Keng Yong."

48 This was from my own discussions with various Singapore-based scholars and a number of former policy-makers. See also for instance, Jaipragas, "In Post-Lee Kuan Yew Era."

49 Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere*.

"mono-civilization" to a "multi-civilizational" world.[50] In other words, the ongoing hegemonic influence of the West should not be taken for granted and it is likely that the future – in Mahbubani's view – would be one in which other countries and civilizations (particularly those in the East) compete for global influence, including the right to set the rules of international society. In one sense, Mahbubani is highly "realist" in his ideological position in that Singapore should align itself with China given the certainty of Beijing's future prosperity. At the same time, his view also presents the East (and China) as the future of a pan-global society in which the West will be replaced by an idealized East and the entire world will witness a "great convergence" that is similar to globalization, except that it is led by the East.[51] This exposition and interpretation is similar to Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia system (described in Chapter 2), in which the establishment of a global society under norms derived from the East is predicted to ultimately render conflict obsolete, thus ushering in an age of prosperity and political goodwill. This optimism, I argue, lies at the crux of Mahbubani's worldview: he perceives the West to be in decline and thus the rise of the East (and China) is an undisputed global reality.[52] Moreover, he generally views China as non-threating because its fundamental goal is the protection and prosperity of its own domestic market. This view is also shared by Singapore's former foreign minister George Yeo, who has said that "China's ambition is not to surpass the United States but to look after its own people."[53] From this vantage point, then, the economic institutionalism position is as follows: the rise of China is an opportunity to take another look at the rules of the international system and reexamine Singapore's national interests to ensure they match the predicted new reality in which Western power is diminished and the East (as represented by China) is in ascendance, particularly in the economic sphere.

I argue that this theoretical perspective sees both China as an exceptional power (whose time has come) and its methods of procuring political influence as largely legitimate (since they are mostly aimed at fulfilling domestic requirements). In other words, China's international behavior is seen as largely unproblematic because it is mostly meant to achieve domestic objectives and not to challenge the existing international rules and norms.

50 Mahbubani, "It's a Problem that America."

51 See Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence.*

52 For an extended discussion of Mahbubani's ideas, see his interview with Zhang Weiwei during his sabbatical at Fudan University, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RDDL4pNHHA (retrieved January 21, 2019). His most recent book, *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy*. New York, PublicAffairs: 2020, further explicates this position.

53 Email interview, June 10, 2015.

And even if it were to challenge those norms, this perspective argues that the global system is fundamentally flawed to begin with (because it was designed to serve Western needs) and that the ascendancy of China is a remedy for the global problems caused by Western rules and practices. Unlike the realist position, which considers the rise of China to pose a fundamental challenge to the existing international order due to the different political ideologies of the West and China,[54] I argue that economic institutionalism posits that economic indicators are the ultimate building blocks of political order. This logic therefore perceives Chinese economic contributions in a largely positive light in the context of its growing participation in international institutions (particularly economic ones), and argues that China's political behavior is not in violation of any sacrosanct tenets of international diplomatic practices. In addition, given that China's ultimate goal is the preservation of its own domestic interests, Beijing is not considered to be harboring hegemonic designs towards other countries, except to safeguard and secure what was seen as rightfully belonging to them.[55] This perspective is therefore largely optimistic about China's exceptionalism and generally sanguine towards Beijing's global influence, especially in terms of China's ability to contribute to other countries' economic fortunes. Indeed, in the 2019 Davos meeting Singapore's finance minister Heng Swee Keat (who is the front-runner to be the country's next prime minister) praised China's Belt and Road Initiative and expressed confidence that other countries would enjoy the benefits of the BRI in times to come.[56] Given that much of Singapore's economic success is contingent on trade networks, the institutionalist position views initiatives like the BRI as an unmitigated good, which contributes to the overall wealth and prosperity of the participating countries by facilitating further opportunities for trade ties and economic development.

The Constructivist Position: A View from History

A third position, this one articulated by the renowned historian Wang Gungwu, maintains that the analysis of the rise of China requires an

54 For an updated discussion on this debate, see Mearsheimer, *Great Delusion*.

55 This view does not seek to adjudicate between territorial disputes, but only to caution against the use of force and seek a peaceful resolution. Interestingly, this approach has been taken by Singapore's foreign ministry in various discussions about the South China Sea, as Singaporean leaders do not, at least publicly, state their opinion about which countries have a more legitimate claim to the territories.

56 Tan, "WEF Panel Upbeat."

appreciation for its history and culture.[57] Unlike Kausikan and Mahbubani, whose views are largely circumscribed by the importance of power and economic indicators, Wang focuses on historical and ideational forces to understand modern Chinese political behavior. In an interview, Wang pointed out to me that China's history was intrinsic to its identity as a nation and that Chinese thinking about international relations and the global order was fundamentally colored by its past.[58] In an opinion piece written at the height of Sino-Japanese tensions over the East China Sea in 2013, Wang argues that "China's history has warned of dangers when both internal unrest (or neiluan), or external turbulence (waihuan) are present."[59] Cognizant of these dangers, Chinese leaders (particularly Deng Xiaoping) have adroitly used the Western-led international system "to help China's economic reforms and this has ensured China's high level of dependence ever since."[60] At the same time, observes Wang, the Chinese "are now discovering that full membership of the [present international] system exacts a high price," but "Chinese leaders realize they do not have an alternative system to sustain future development."[61] Elsewhere, Wang also writes that China is not entirely out to revise the rules of the international system, but is instead "interpreting them, or hiding behind them, using them in flexible ways to fit different situations [… The Chinese] don't want to take the initiative because they don't want to be seen to be challenging the rules or even questioning them."[62] According to Wang, one key difference between China and the West lies in how the law is perceived:

> The West probably has a much more pious attitude towards the law. I call it piety because it also involves a lot of hypocrisy; piety in the sense that you pay tremendous reverence to something and you treat it as sacred.

57 Given this chapter is not an attempt to plumb the vast repository of Wang's scholarly works, I confine my analysis to a recent publication, *The Eurasian Core and its Edges*, which comprises a series of interviews of Wang conducted by Kee Beng Ooi. Chapter 4 of the book, "China's Struggle with the Western Edge" (pp. 141-213) is particularly salient for my analysis. I also draw on material obtained from a personal interview with Wang conducted in Singapore on January 5, 2018. Two other works by Wang, *Renewal* and *Ideas Won't Keep,* are also consulted to provide a sketch of Wang's thinking, insofar as they relate to his understanding and analysis of China's international relations and political worldview.

58 Interview, January 5, 2018, Singapore.

59 Wang, "Getting China to Play by the Rules." https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/getting-china-to-play-by-the-rules (retrieved May 2, 2018).

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*

62 Ooi, *The Eurasian Core,* p. 153.

> The Chinese don't have that kind of piety. They don't treat the law as sacred. Law is just one of the instruments of the state, of society, of any group of people where you need rules. Law is an extension of rules. It's a higher order of rule-making perhaps, but it's no more than a set of rules.[63]

Wang's analysis suggests a deep, fundamental cleavage between Western conceptions and Chinese conceptions of international order. Indeed, he observes that the West and China have "two very different starting points" in how rules are conceived and adhered to: the Chinese cultural lack of a transcendental starting point means that "it's not part of their tradition to say that there's something over and above that determines a universal or natural law, and from which you cannot deviate." Wang therefore suggests that "for the Chinese, there are no fundamentals, while the West argues as if there are such things."[64]

I argue that Wang's reading of international politics takes culture and history as its starting point. This means that certain political concepts are not understood in the same way in China and in the West, particularly the idea of a nation-state. According to Wang, the idea of a modern nation-state is problematic to the Chinese mind, as it has "exposed [China] to a plethora of concepts, like citizens, nationals, nationalities, ethnicities and minorities."[65] Further, Wang notes that "every country's history has deep roots that cannot be easily ignored. No country can really begin only with the modern. China has its own heritage that serves as valuable social capital. Its people are still attached to their own history. Its historians also know that no narrative is final. Each country's past experiences remained embedded in how its people think and act in the present."[66] In this respect, one might say that it is the historical and cultural conditions experienced by China that has resulted in a sense of Chinese exceptionalism (i.e., we are Chinese and we are different) among the Chinese people.

When asked whether this line of argument was an attempt to "essentialize" differences, Wang responded that there were evident differences between Western and Chinese cultures and that it is impossible to avoid differentiating them. As he put it, "when the social scientists criticize people for essentializing, they want to get rid of it altogether, they think there is no justification at all, I am not sure about that. I think there is justification,

63 *Ibid.,* pp. 153-154.
64 *Ibid.*, p. 156.
65 Wang, *Renewal,* p. 21.
66 *Ibid.*

but whether it extends to the present, that is another question." He then added that the peoples of the West and East "originated in ways that have no connections with each other."[67] Seen this way, I argue that in Wang's mind there is a foundational chasm between the belief-systems of the West and of the Chinese, thus rendering their worldviews fundamentally at odds with each other notwithstanding the fact that there might be common elements to both worldviews. This incongruence, as Wang relates, is seen most vividly in the study of international relations: the discipline itself is inherently framed by an Anglo-American worldview (given the pervasiveness of English as the language medium) and together its associated assumptions. Citing the ideas of Yan Xuetong (discussed in Chapter 2) as an example of trying to fit Western paradigms into a Chinese worldview, Wang observed that "[Yan] himself realized after a while [...] what he said just didn't match what the Chinese were doing and thinking. He fought for a while to persuade them to understand what he was trying to say, but soon realized that it was not a question of them not understanding him. It was because it didn't fit their understanding of how things were, and because his ideas were based on Western historical experience."[68]

Indeed, it is China's encounter with modernity, and to some extent Westernization, that Wang perceives as problematic for the Chinese today. In his discussion of China's attempt to come to terms with modernity, Wang argues that three main forces have deeply influenced the modern Chinese mind: "The first is the strong desire to build the future on the best of the traditional 'national essence' (国粹, guocui). The second is to be open-minded and select from the new ideas that come from the liberal and pluralist world outside. The third is the view that the CCP itself favors: that all ideas and values from past and present be placed within the framework of socialism with Chinese characteristics."[69] While Wang does not clearly state his view about which of these three main forces would eventually prevail, he seems to prefer the second. He observes that

> the Chinese people will want their modern civilization to be represented by a much wider spectrum of the most talented, creative and adventurous people that the country can produce [...] future generations of Chinese leaders will recognize that a new Chinese civilization will not depend on China remaining a party-state or becoming a nation-state. A broad

67 Personal interview, Jan 5, 2018, Singapore.
68 Ooi, *The Eurasian Core,* pp. 188-189.
69 Wang, *Renewal,* p. 122

> and inclusive Zhongguo (China) will need to go further to establish a civilization that its people all agree will be modern and admirable.[70]

I argue that Wang's insights represent a middle ground between Kausikan and Mahbubani, which views China's rise within a comparative framework vis-à-vis the West where both challenges and opportunities exist as a result of the deep, foundational differences between the Chinese and Western societies. Unlike Kausikan and Mahbubani's emphasis on the role of power and economics in international affairs, Wang perceives China through an ideational prism conditioned by Beijing's own history and cultural traditions. He is largely agnostic in his assessment (both in his writings and in the interview) of whether China's rise would be a force for good, as he considered it to be contingent on ongoing political dynamics within China. Wang's vantage point, I contend, also places Singapore's perspective towards China in a highly fluid framework in which the need to understand China becomes paramount. In this view, cultural ties, not just geopolitical ones, are paramount for the direction of future Sino-Singaporean relations.

A Contestation of Spheres: Geopolitical, Economic, or Cultural

Based on this discussion, I argue that at the heart of Singapore's perspective(s) towards China is a contestation over which spheres, namely geopolitical, economic, or cultural, matter the most in present Sino-Singaporean relations, as well as the extent to which Singapore perceives China as exceptional, or different and good. In addition, each of these perspectives reflects an emphasis or preoccupation of Singaporean Chinese-observers about what Beijing stands for and how best to engage with or benefit from China's rise and global prominence. For example, an emphasis on the importance of geopolitical dynamics in Singapore's relations with China leads to issues like territorial sovereignty and Chinese maritime claims causing the most anxiety and concern for Singapore. Conversely, if economic priorities are considered fundamental to Singapore's future prosperity, then Beijing's recent slew of economic initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiatives become sources of blessings and good news for Singapore, particularly if a potential Western decline compels Singapore to align its interests with Beijing. At the same time, what China's long-term interests might be are open to question, highlighting the larger puzzle of whether Chinese leaders will choose to play by existing global

70 *Ibid.,* p. 124.

norms, or instead elect to challenge those norms. One fourth-generation Singapore leader shared the view that "due to China's sheer size and pace of development, its influence will surely increase. China is growing within the context of a global economic and governing architecture. It is in its strong interest to continue to be an integral part of the global community, as the global community as a strong interest to see it succeed."[71] Such comments reflect the overall preference of Singapore's leaders towards China's abiding by the existing rules of the international system which are also viewed as being favorable to Singapore pursuing its national interests. Finally, emphasizing the cultural sphere and the ideological composition of China's foreign policy practices and political beliefs fundamentally calls into question the universality of Western beliefs about the political order and the organizing principles behind world politics. At the same time, the very fact that China is criticizing the West for wanting to impose its Western-centric hegemony on others presupposes that its alternative is closer to that which is more universally demanded by the world. In other words, a Sino-centric worldview is seen as superior to the Western worldview because it is more inclusive, and thus more universally applicable. Given its emphasis on "The Middle Way," Wang considers Chinese culture more flexible than the West, allowing it to avoid the extreme positions that might be caused by a Western worldview.[72]

Perhaps the best example of this flexibility is the issue of human rights. Singapore and other Southeast Asian neighbors have historically been antagonistic towards Western standards and expectations of what these rights ought to entail. This was seen most vividly in the 1993 United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna which the notion of human rights as understood by Asia was pitted in sharp relief against those framed by a Western worldview.[73] Indeed Singapore's then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew was one of the strongest proponents of "Asian values" in the 1990s, advocating the importance of collective responsibilities over individual rights.[74] From this perspective, Singapore – notwithstanding the Western orientation in its legal sphere – can be said to be traditionally conservative preferring to emphasize collective responsibilities over individual rights, and its political model presents striking parallels to the Chinese communist one.[75] However, at present Singapore's leaders are generally ambivalent

71 Email interview, dated September 14, 2017.

72 Ooi, *The Eurasian Core,* p. 210.

73 Chong, "Singapore Foreign Policy."

74 Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew."

75 For example, members of Singapore's People's Action Party are called cadres (or *tongzhimen,* 同志们), similar to the terminology adopted by the Chinese Communist Party. More crucially,

towards Beijing's overall brand of global leadership, preferring to adopt a wait-and-see position, particularly concerning national security issues.[76] The case for Chinese exceptionalism, as it were, remains a divided issue in Singapore, with some like Kausikan unpersuaded by Beijing's political actions and electing to resist it, while others like Mahbubani, perceiving the coming of a golden moment in global history when the East – led by China and to some extent India – will surpass the West, express exuberance over China's growing involvement in international institutions. Yet others like Wang, while are more reserved (or agnostic) about China's ultimate geopolitical objectives, emphasize the need to glean ideas from Chinese culture and history to understand and best engage with China.

Sino-Singaporean International Relations and the Differences that Matter

How then does Singapore's understanding of its own place in the world relate to China's analysis of its global position? I argue that there is a deep cleavage between fundamental aspects of how Singapore perceives its national interests and how China perceives its own interests. In the case of Singapore, I argue that an innate sense of vulnerability has consistently shaped how its leaders think about Singapore's place in the world, and consequently, how they have applied the tools of foreign policy to achieve Singapore's national interests.[77] In the case of China, I argue that a sense of victimhood pervades the thinking of Chinese leaders, which then shape its foreign policy and how it conducts its international relations.[78] This foundational difference between the self-identity of the two nations is reflected in their respective approaches towards diplomacy. In reference to Singapore the argument is often made that, as a small state, it needs "to be friends with everyone" and that it must support "a rule-based global community" through which the rights and sovereignty of states are upheld regardless of their size.[79] Beijing, I argue,

the PAP and CCP possess shared views about the necessity of a strong party-state for political governance.

76 A case in point can be made in the Singapore air force purchase of Western-made F35s for its new generation of aircraft instead of Chinese J20s.

77 For a detailed exposition, see Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy*.

78 See for instance, Callahan, "National Insecurities;" Renwick and Qing, "China's Political Discourse;" Gries et al., "Patriotism, Nationalism and China's US Policy;"; Gries, *China's New Nationalism*.

79 Cheong, "As a Small Country."

maintains an acknowledgement of the inherent inequality between states and believes that the practice of international politics is but a reflection of that disparity.[80] This line of thinking was most vividly illustrated during an international meeting among Southeast Asian countries and China in 2010, where China's foreign minister Yang Jiechi was reported to have said (in response to Southeast Asia's countries' concerns about Beijing's South China Sea claims) that, "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact."[81]

Further, as a small state Singapore sees itself as a "pricetaker" in international affairs, and assumes that it has to take the world as it is, not as it wishes it would be.[82] This is not the case in China, where the existing international system is considered fundamentally antagonistic to Chinese interests and thus there is a need for a change in the rules that govern global order to better reflect China's preferences.[83] One could make the case that Singapore's claim to exceptionalism – in the dominant narrative – is based on its ability to turn its limited resources into strength: the roots of Singapore's foreign policy lie not in a position of power but one of weakness. Given that its statehood could not be taken for granted following its separation with Malaysia in 1965, its success is due to the ingenuity of Lee Kuan Yew and the first generation of leaders' work in nurturing and sustaining it.[84] In China, on the other hand, the claim to exceptionalism is premised on the view that China is presently powerful, and thus is entitled to a greater share of, and say in, the rules of the international system. In other words, China sees itself as a "price-setter" and is attempting to negotiate from a position of strength in which its interests and rights are being respected by others. In this way, Singapore's vision of global order can be said to be significantly different from that envisaged by Beijing. While Singapore perceives its interests to be best aligned with the present US-led international system (certain problems notwithstanding), China sees the problems in the international system as evidence that the current order is indeed unravelling, presenting it with an opportunity to shape the rules of the game in the near future, particularly through economic means.

80 See for instance, Kang, "Hierarchy and Legitimacy;" Sun, "Rethinking East Asian Regional Order;" Zheng and Lim, "The Changing Geopolitical Landscape."

81 Pomfret, "U.S. Takes a Tougher Tone."

82 Chong, "Singapore's View;" see also, Kausikan, *Singapore Is Not An Island.*

83 See for instance Breslin, "China and the Global Order;" Foot and Walter, *China, the United States, and Global Order;* Brown, "Xi Jinping and China's Role;" Callahan, "China's 'Asia Dream.'"

84 This is not to say that Singapore was handed a "bad hand" in the early years of its statehood. Recent scholarship has attempted to challenge this mainstream understanding of Singapore's nation-building. See, Low et al., *Hard Choices.*

Conclusion

Singapore's perceptions of China and China's role in the world are highly ambiguous, paralleling historical relations between the countries across administrations. The two countries differ significantly in their international relations, with Singapore generally embracing Western norms and practices towards which China continues to harbor strong suspicions. A more fundamental difference relates to China's political system and the lack of trust it engenders amongst Singapore's leaders. Indeed, Lee Kuan Yew's anti-communist stance in the early days of Singapore's statehood has had a deep and lasting impact among subsequent Singaporean leaders and provided the ideological lens framing Singapore's foreign policy decisions. To be sure, following the commencement of diplomatic relations in 1990 official Sino-Singaporean relations have generally been positive, with the two countries sharing strong economic relations. At the same time, this strong economic interdependence cannot ameliorate Singapore's deeper concerns about Beijing's long-term territorial ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region, concerns that are shared by Vietnam and Indonesia (as discussed in Chapter 6).

Given Singapore's majority-Chinese demographic composition, the ethnic and cultural dimension of its relations with China cannot be ignored – and indeed continue to be a key factor framing Sino-Singaporean relations. For instance, the Business China initiative launched by Lee Kuan Yew in 2007 describes its mission as: "[to] nurture an inclusive bilingual and bicultural group of Singaporeans through extensive use of the Chinese language as the medium of communication, so as to sustain our multi-cultural heritage, and to develop a cultural and economic bridge linking the world and China."[85] Indeed, Lee himself exhorted Singaporeans on their need to gain "fluency in the Chinese language, knowledge of China's traditional culture and an understanding of the on-going changes in the social, economic and political conditions [of China]" if they are to conduct business in China, suggesting the ongoing relevance of cultural linkages for Singapore's relations with Beijing.[86] Recent attempts by the Chinese state to cultivate the overseas Chinese community to promote its international influence might render Singapore highly susceptible to China's actions, notwithstanding its leaders' frequent characterization of Singapore's multicultural, multilingual

85 Business China Singapore. https://www.businesschina.org.sg/en/about-us/mission-and-vision/ (retrieved May 10, 2018).
86 *Ibid.*

national identity.[87]Callahan suggests the need to question and problematize the notion of civilization in our understanding to political questions, to "resist the temptation of coherent and singular definitions of civilization as a substance [and instead] to suggest that civilization and barbarism are best understood as a contingent relation: each continually produces the other."[88] With this in mind, I argue that Singapore's relations with China can be seen as a complex relationship in which the leaders of each country attempts to "attract and resist" one another simultaneously to meet their own political objectives. However, given Singapore's historical alignment with the West, particularly for meeting its security needs, it is difficult to foresee its leaders altering their worldviews to accommodate, let alone embrace, Chinese preferences. Chinese scholars have also expressed pessimism towards long-term Sino-Singaporean relations, as they perceive Singapore's fundamental reading and preferences of the international system to be at odds with Beijing's national interests.[89]

Finally, Singapore's perspective on China is instructional for our understanding of broader Chinese relations with the world. The three perspectives premised on the contestation of the geopolitical, economic, and cultural spheres, as described above, and the degree to which each of these spheres matter, likewise provide a useful lens to examine other countries' relations with China, especially those countries in East Asia where Chinese influence can be most keenly felt. More crucially, I argue that such lens also necessarily problematizes how national interests are defined and highlights how the influence of China is not necessarily a one-way street, despite Beijing's might: the leaders of other nations use international ties with China to serve their own political agendas, and in some cases to strengthen their domestic legitimacy by tapping on China's economic wealth.[90] I argue that at the heart of China's quest for global influence is the goal of "proselytizing" other countries to accept and acknowledge its way of seeing the world and, where possible, to seek common ground (particularly through economic initiatives) with the countries it seeks to "convert" to its camp. However, there is significant resistance to Chinese's attempts to propagate its worldview outside of China, even in countries that share ethnic similarities with

87 For a recent study into China's extraterritorial diaspora policies, see To, *Qiaowu*.

88 Callahan, *Contingent States,* p. 27.

89 Interviews in Beijing and Guangzhou, 2017 and 2018.

90 This was the case in Malaysia under Prime Minister Najib Razak's administration between 2009 and 2018. However, a new government was voted into power during the 2018 general elections that has made changes to Kuala Lumpur's relations with Beijing. See, Heydarian, "Malaysia's Bold Play."

Beijing. As the responses of Singapore's public intellectuals indicate, China's political worldview and claims to exceptionalism are understood by other countries in ways that can run contradictory to China's own claims and preferences of global order. While countries within Beijing's geopolitical orbit will continue to be particularly susceptible to China's attempts to project its political influence, the outcome of these political interactions may not always be that which Beijing desires.

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8 Conclusion

From Chinese Exceptionalism to Chinese Universality

Abstract
In this chapter I summarize the discussions of the previous chapters and argue that Chinese exceptionalism provides a more comprehensive interpretation compared to mainstream IR theories in explaining Chinese international politics. However, I also note that China's claims to exceptionalism lack universal appeal and are fundamentally self-serving rather than outward facing. This suggests that Beijing's political worldview reflects a narrow vision of what the international political order should entail and is largely developed with China's own interests in mind.

Keywords: Chinese exceptionalism, universality, international order, political worldview

The central claim of this book is that *China's political worldview is deeply influenced by a sense of exceptionalism* – that is, China sees itself as *good and different*, and *this perception is fundamental to shaping how it sees the world and consequently influences its approach to international politics*. While exceptionalism is by no means the only way to interpret China's international relations and foreign policy, it represents a vital lens for making sense of the Chinese political worldview. Such exceptionalist dynamics, I argue, provide a more comprehensive interpretation of China's international relations than that given by mainstream IR theories. By taking material, ideational, and structural factors seriously, this book seeks to locate the key driver behind China's international politics in the sense of exceptionalism within the Chinese Communist Party led by President Xi Jinping, which perceives the existing international order as ripe for change, China playing a more influential role and having its interests acknowledged by others.

In this chapter I first summarize my main arguments and findings. Then I discuss the implications of Chinese exceptionalism and the extent

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to which such thinking represents a Chinese claim to universal validity. Finally, I identify some areas for future research.

Main Findings

As discussed in Chapter 1, all countries – big or small – are wont to perceive themselves as exceptional. This allows them to distinguish themselves from others and provide a source of social and cultural identity, which in turn facilitates the work of political governance. In this respect, China is no different. What makes Chinese exceptionalism the subject of my sustained enquiry is China's status as a global power and the general sense that it often seeks to pursue its international objectives outside of, or at the very least apart from, the existing norms and rules of the international system. Unlike small or even medium size states, whose exceptionalist claims (if any) may be said to be of limited significance and relevance to the wider world, Chinese exceptionalism is far more consequential because of China's size and the magnitude of its global reach. Indeed, it has been observed that since Xi Jinping came into power in 2012 China is not only seeking global parity with the West (specifically the United States), but it is also seeking to surpass the West. Through a discourse of Chinese exceptionalism, Chinese leaders articulate a sense of difference ("we are unlike the West") while accentuating their claim to superiority ("we are better than the West"). In this book, I have examined the pervasiveness of the attitude of Chinese exceptionalism in various contexts germane to Chinese international relations.

In Chapter 2, I have looked at how China's political worldview and sense of exceptionalism are fleshed out in the discipline of international relations within China. I have examined the ideas promulgated by four Chinese IR scholars in recent years, and how each of these scholars engage in the analysis of international relations using indigenous Chinese ideas. At their core, each of these ideas seeks to relate the practice of international politics with Chinese self-identity while simultaneously challenging the universal validity of Western social and cultural systems. Thus, mainstream international relations theories such as realism, constructivism, and liberal institutionalism are subjected to a Sinicization process whereby Chinese scholars translate them into a Chinese identity framework in the hope of uncovering unique traits that better explain Chinese social and political life. However, my analysis suggests that Chinese IR theories contain little universal traction and are mostly used to lend legitimacy to Chinese political actions, both internally and externally. More importantly, Chinese IR theories purport

to relativize the universal insights claimed by Western IR paradigms and while simultaneously attempting to accentuate, or even universalize, the insights proffered by Chinese IR ideas. It is therefore possible to read Chinese political thought as heavily infused with Occidentalism, according to which the West is perceived as the wholly Other and blamed for any ills plaguing Chinese society. I also argue that Chinese IR scholarship remains largely Sino-centric and anti-Western, that it assumes benevolence on the part of Chinese leaders, and that it is premised on a simplistic and essentialized view of both East and West that is linked to a deeper identity dilemma in Chinese society.

Chapter 3 elaborates further on this identity issue and the contradictions that have arisen in China through the process of opening up and coming to terms with modernity and globalization. In this chapter, I focus mostly on the domestic aspect of exceptionalism, demonstrating how the CCP uses Chinese exceptionalism to provide a "unified identity" that provides legitimacy to its governance of China. I also argue that the question of identity represents a key starting point for understanding the Chinese worldview. Using the concept of liquid modernity, I argue that Chinese national identity is currently subjected to heightened stress. The deepened cleavage between what is formally demanded by the state and what is practiced by Chinese citizens in their private lives has generated incongruities that challenge the social contract between the Chinese state and its citizens. To preserve the stability of the country, the Chinese government has chosen to promote a unified sense of Chinese identity through the idea of Chinese-ness, used nationalism to foster cohesiveness among its citizens, and projected an image of the goodness of the Chinese state while vilifying the outside world (especially the West) to generate mistrust and suspicion amongst the Chinese people. To further illustrate the political narratives that China wants to convey to the world, I looked at the high-profile Beijing Olympics in 2008, particularly the theme song associated with the event. I argued that notwithstanding the all-out-effort made by the Chinese government to promote itself to the global community, the degree to which the outside world is persuaded by Beijing's outreach and gestures of goodwill is questionable. Similarly, the Chinese state's attempt to generate feelings of patriotism and nationalism may not always be successful since individual citizens have appropriated nationalism for their own ends. Finally, I discuss how scapegoating the West provides a conduit by which the Communist Party can transfer blame to others, thereby maintaining its claim of being infallible and preserving its moral standing among the people. Taken together, I argue that China faces social and political dilemma which are accentuated by its closed political

system. While it seeks to be exceptional from the West in international politics, it simultaneously faces domestic problems that sharply mitigate its claims of exceptionalism.

Chapters 4 and 5 shift the study of Chinese exceptionalism from the domestic context to the theatre of international politics, particularly concerning the Chinese national image and China's claims to global leadership. In Chapter 4, I argue that for a country to be seen as exceptional, it is necessary for it to have a positive national image. To discover how the Chinese government seeks to project a favorable image of itself, I examine the speeches made by Xi Jinping, which have been helpfully compiled into two volumes of more than 150 speeches made during his first term in office (November 2012-October 2017). In this analysis, three themes stood out as key narratives in China's image promotion efforts: the Chinese Dream and the image of China as a flourishing civilization; the image of China as a peaceful and progressive nation; and the idea of China as a moral example worthy of international emulation. Notwithstanding the glowing rhetoric of Xi's speeches, all three of these narratives suffer from deep, fundamental flaws. The need to preserve party centrality and control *at all costs* sharply limits the ability of the Chinese government to respond to the deeper moral and existential aspects of the Chinese dream. Similarly, institutional reforms (*gaige,* 改革) are often conceptualized as a way to strengthen government rule, thus limiting their scope and making it contingent upon broader political exigencies. The emphasis of Chinese leaders on the nation's peaceful rise has not been matched by actions on the ground, particularly in East Asia where territorial disputes with its neighbors have dented the Chinese national image. Consequently, I argue that the heavy use of moral undertones in policy making remains largely symbolic and aims at supporting the Party's claim to successfully ruling China. In sum, the efforts by Chinese leaders to improve China's national image remain unconvincing at present, not least because its domestic and international actions do not match their lofty promises. Ironically, China's insistence on its uniqueness (or "Chinese characteristics") means that characteristics governing its behavior are less likely to be emulated by other countries, which do not share its sociocultural assumptions and political values. In other words, a less Sino-centric way of seeing the world might be necessary for China to achieve its goal of improving its national image and being considered exceptional by others.

In Chapter 5, I continue my study of China's political worldview and its claim to exceptionalism by analyzing the discourse surrounding the high-profile Belt and Road Initiative. I contend that – notwithstanding its emphasis on fostering economic linkages between China and other countries

– the Belt and Road Initiative represents a grand strategy in which economic tools are primarily used to generate soft power and bring targeted countries into the orbit of Beijing's geopolitical influence. Analyzing the existing body of work by Chinese IR scholars on the Belt and Road Initiative, I argue that three key themes stand out: first, that China is challenging the rules of the international system; second, that China is competing with the United States for regional influence; and third, China's domestic environment and the need to generate economic growth to legitimize Chinese Communist Party rule. Taken together, these three areas provide the key to how the Belt and Road Initiative is conceptualized and discussed by Chinese scholars. While the Belt and Road Initiative does provide China opportunities to highlight its political model and project its influence to the rest of the world, I argue that it is highly unclear whether this influence can be translated into a general perception that the Chinese model is truly good and different from that of the West. Similarly, the notion that countries would automatically buy into Beijing's global vision as a result of their economic cooperation is overly deterministic: *economic power alone does not constitute sufficient grounds for generating political affinity*. Finally, Chinese economic resources are not infinite, and the possibility of that China will suffer an economic slowdown or even crisis cannot be ruled out. This calls into question the legitimacy of the Communist Party's rule and the ability of the Chinese government to meet its international obligations.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I investigate how China's international image, political worldview, and claims of exceptionalism are understood by three of its Southeast Asian neighbors, namely Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore. In Chapter 6, I look at Vietnam and Indonesia, two Southeast Asia countries with long and ambivalent political relationships with China. By talking with scholars and senior policy makers from both countries about their perceptions of China, I was able to obtain a highly contextualized and textured picture of how Chinese diplomatic actions and international behavior is being interpreted by regional interlocutors. While territorial disputes feature substantially in the overall perceptions of China expressed by each of my interviewees, internal domestic politics are equally important for each country's relations with Beijing. In Vietnam, maintaining domestic and party stability is crucial; Vietnamese policy makers are careful to ensure that their ambivalent relationship with China does not threaten the party's legitimacy to rule domestically. Indonesia, on the other hand, is more concerned with how China's growing geopolitical might could change the configuration of power in the Asia-Pacific theater. In addition, the large population of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia has generated considerable ambivalence in Jakarta's

perception of potential Chinese influence within its shores via the overseas Chinese. Based on these two case studies, I argue that China's promotion of a national image is met with considerable suspicion, thus mitigating its claim of exceptionalism, particularly regarding whether it is or would be a force for greater good.

Chinese overseas influence and China's pursuit of global leadership is further discussed in Chapter 7, which examines how Singapore, as a city-state with a majority ethnic Chinese population, perceives China's global ambitions. By analyzing the thinking of three prominent Singaporean public intellectuals, I uncover several contending discourses in the Singaporean reading of China's international relations – and consequently different prescriptions for how Singapore ought to relate with Beijing. I propose that Singapore's position towards China can be broadly divided into three main schools that parallel mainstream IR theoretical frameworks, and which have varying opinions on whether China is exceptional. First, the realist position sees the global ascension of China as a fundamental challenge to the rules and norms of global order. It also views China as unexceptional and its political influence as problematic for other countries. Second, the economic institutionalist view interprets China's global prominence and growing economic footprints as a prima facie case of the shifting of global power from West to East. It therefore advocates for the reexamination of Singapore's foundational national interests and its greater participation in Chinese global institutions. More importantly, it sees China as an exceptional power and celebrates Chinese global influence as a good thing. Finally, the constructivist approach uses ideas inspired by the analysis of history and culture to interpret Chinese political behavior on Chinese terms, taking seriously the ideational roots of China's political worldview. The constructivist school is less concerned with universal explanations, instead choosing to emphasize particularities within Western and Asian traditions and find ways to negotiate their differences. As of this writing, there continues to be an ongoing and lively debate over how Singapore should position itself vis-à-vis Beijing to best secure its own national interests. I argue that such debates are reflective of more foundational differences between the political ideologies of Singapore and China, which mitigate how much common ground can be found between the two countries. From this, I deduce that claims of Chinese exceptionalism and benevolent global leadership do not find sympathetic ground among Singaporean observers. Instead, the city-state remains more closely aligned with the global leadership norms associated with the West, particularly the United States.

From Chinese Exceptionalism to the Quest for Universality

As this study has demonstrated, much of what China has said and done internationally over the past decade after its rise to global prominence is concerned with articulating its political worldview and claim of exceptionalism, defined as being both different and good compared to the West. From the manner it seeks to differentiate its international relations practices and the management of its national image, to the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, everything is done with the objective of telling the world the story of a confident nation – in Mao's words, that "the Chinese people have stood up."[1] However, this narrative of China as a powerful and wealthy nation is not without its own blind spots, particularly in light of China's domestic challenges and the international anxiety – or even suspicion – about Beijing's long-term intentions. The crux of the discrepancy, I argue, lies in the Chinese political system*: the need to preserve Communist Party rule at all costs means that any challenge to the longevity and perpetuity of party interests is seen as a betrayal of the Chinese nation.* In short, the well-being of the party precedes the well-being of the nation: for China to succeed, the Party must be in charge. Ironically, this is where claims of Chinese exceptionalism fall short. To be truly exceptional is to have attributes that possess universal validity, but in China's case, these claims of exceptionalism are made mostly in reference only to China, with the priorities of the Communist Party in mind. *In other words, Chinese exceptionalism is fundamentally self-serving, rather than other-centered*. To the degree that the needs and interests of other countries are respected and accounted for, these concessions are made primarily with China's (and the Party's) interests in mind.

But might this not be said of all countries – should we not expect states to engage in international diplomacy with some level of concern for their own domestic political priorities? Perhaps, but what makes the Chinese case particularly problematic is the lack of institutional oversight – what is more commonly called the "checks and balances" to political power – such as the rule of law, open elections, and an independent media. Without these, it is difficult to ascertain the political legitimacy of a ruling administration and the extent to which "the will of the masses" is being respected and taken sufficiently into account. The issue of human rights in particular remains

1 "The Chinese People Have Stood Up!" Opening address by Mao Zedong, *First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference,* September 21, 1949, https://china.usc.edu/Mao-declares-founding-of-peoples-republic-of-china-chinese-people-have-stood-up (retrieved December 24, 2020).

China's Achilles' Heel: a country that does not sufficiently take into account the needs of its citizens (who it governs directly) is less likely to respect the rights and interests of the citizens of other countries (who come into contact with it indirectly). Moreover, if China's global influence is said to be for the better good, it raises the question of how a "global good" can be defined. Unless Beijing is able to convince the international community that it is prepared to *act sacrificially* (i.e., sometimes at a cost to its domestic prerogatives) to defend the interests of others, suspicions that it is free riding on Western initiatives will persist and limit the believability of its claim to be a force for good.[2]

With this in mind, I argue that if China wants to be seen by the rest of the world as a force for universal good, it needs to go beyond vague policy slogans (such as "the China model") and start delivering actual results on the ground that benefit the common good. While China's growing involvement in peace-keeping operations and infrastructure building in third-world countries has provided some measure of legitimacy about its ability to take up global responsibilities, Beijing's intentions and long-term commitment to these activities remain debatable.[3] Further, how different China's solutions to global problems are compared to existing initiatives proposed by the West is also debatable. While China's policy makers often criticize Western countries' interference into other countries' domestic affairs, Beijing is equally culpable – as evidenced by its growing extraterritorial activities in many countries worldwide. As my study of the Belt and Road Initiative shows, there is also a lively debate within China about the extent that China should be involved overseas (given domestic needs), a debate that is not unlike those in Western countries. All of these developments suggest that Beijing's quest for universality will not be easy and, given its ideological commitments, will certainly be more complicated than its leaders want to admit.

Finally, unlike many Western countries whose political systems are premised on certain claimed universal ideals (i.e., democracy, free trade, human rights), which can then be used to analyze these countries and which Western leaders are expected to live up to (however imperfectly), China does not have universal ideals that Chinese citizens or others can evaluate

2 One current line that some Chinese scholars take is that Confucian ideology is a self-limiting force that seeks harmony rather than conquest. Of course, this is highly debatable. For further studies, see Kang, *East Asia before the West;* Kelly, "A 'Confucian Long Peace;'" Phillips, "Contesting the Confucian Peace."

3 See Hoo, *China's Global Identity.*

against. This basic difference has profound consequences for the conduct of politics. It can be argued that the very sustainability of the Western political model lies in the fact that it possesses certain built-in mechanisms premised on universal standards that can be used to call individuals or institutions *to account* for their actions and political behavior, thus providing the roots of the political system's own renewal and vitality.[4] The Marxist-Leninist system of Communist rule, on the other hand, is designed to *maximize* the party's grip on power. In this context, universal ideals do not stand apart from political objectives (i.e., speaking truth to power), but are instead used to support political prerogatives. As a case in point, the practice of religion in China is increasingly being subjected to CCP control. Given that the practice of religion in general concerns ultimate beliefs and loyalties, this suggests that the Chinese state seeks to expand its political will on its citizens, and to tolerate no alternative loyalties save that of its own. In this way, it is possible to say that the quest for ever-greater power means that the party is ultimately accountable only to itself. Indeed, President Xi Jinping's decision to remove term limits for his presidency reflects a deeper political mindset at work: the party – and its leader – is *utterly indispensable* to China's future.[5]

It seems that China's pursuit of global greatness, especially through the concept of exceptionalism, rests on highly fragile foundations. While Chinese-led initiatives such as the BRI do provide China with opportunities to contribute internationally, a closer reading of Chinese discourse suggests a more limited and less generous vision of what global order entails. Indeed, one common theme that runs through my study of China's political worldview and its claims to exceptionalism is that *it is largely couched in anti-Western discourse and is geared to present all that China does as good and all the West has done as bad.* This binary worldview is problematic because it absolves China (and its government) of any blame while attributing all that is wrong with the world to the actions of the West, particularly the United States and its allies.[6]

Furthermore, as this book has highlighted, the more China proclaims that it is exceptional, the more it must live up to those claims in its international and domestic actions – which, because of the unique domestic political

4 See Fukuyama, *Origins of Political Order.* For a critique of how this political model is unraveling in the West, see Guinness, *A Free People's Suicide.*

5 Zhao, "Xi Jinping's Maoist Revival."

6 Not surprisingly, China chose to place the blame for the Covid-19 pandemic on the United States. This is discussed in Chapter 9.

system, could pose challenges to the Chinese government's legitimacy. To the extent that it is able to fulfill its claims, China must revisit the roots of its political model, including the possibility of forging a new social contract with its people that is not premised on a monolithic, party-centric narrative (like the Chinese dream, socialism with Chinese characteristics, or a new type of major power relations), but rather on a plurality of narratives that account for the aspirations and ambitions of its citizens – and which are therefore not solely defined by the political concerns of the party.[7] As such, these ongoing tensions are likely to underscore the ongoing social and political discourse about China's present and future place in the world.

Areas for Further Study

There are three areas relating to this book that require further study. First, it would be worthwhile to examine in greater detail the extent to which the issue of Chinese national identity plays a part in the formation of China's political worldview. Given China's encounter with globalization and modernity, the issue of Chinese identity and its relation with the modern world merits further analysis by IR scholars if we are to arrive at a more careful appraisal of Chinese political worldview even as China's international status grows.

Second, the relationship between Chinese political behavior and the personality of the leader should be analyzed in closer detail.[8] This is especially important given President Xi Jinping's consolidation of power, which suggests that much of Chinese foreign policy since 2013 can be traced to Xi's own worldview and political priorities. In this respect, I argue that Xi's speeches – analyzed in Chapter 3 – can provide some basic clues to Xi's vision of China's future. At the same time, further work should be done to explore the extent to which Xi's personality traits – as well as those of his closest advisors such as Wang Qishan and Wang Huning – are reflected in China's international practices. Questions concerning Xi's own personal ideology, his level of affiliation with Maoist ideas, his view of the United States, and his sense of security within the Party should be posed within the field of Chinese international relations studies.

Third, Chinese information operations and China's modes of political influence are worth studying. Given the sensitivity of this area of research

7 For a popular account of what some of these narratives might be, see Osnos, *Age of Ambition.*

8 See, Brown, *New Emperors.*

and the paucity of scholarly research on this topic in English, scholars in the West cannot conduct a sustained enquiry into the deeper considerations behind Chinese political thought, including understanding China's multi-faceted decision-making process.[9] Indeed, if we maintain that Chinese exceptionalism is fundamental to how Chinese political elites perceive China, then the question of how Chinese exceptionalism is used as not just a rhetorical device, but also an instrument of the Chinese state to generate political influence abroad is of crucial importance. Indeed, it has been observed that China's information operations have intensified over the years, particularly in target countries where they seek to cultivate more positive impressions of China to affect domestic policy choices.[10] To this end, several questions are worth asking. How have Chinese political elites used information operations to frame the arguments about China's rise and thus sought to gain legitimacy in the global arena of public opinion? How and to what extent have Chinese information operations sought to discredit the West? While I have tried to provide some of the answers to these questions in my book, further scrutiny will be of great importance in the coming years, particularly if China's global influence continues to grow.

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9 Some existing studies include, Eftimiades, *Chinese Intelligence Operations*; To, *Qiaowu;* Schoenhals, *Spying for the People;* Brady, "New Zealand."

10 To, *Qiaowu,* pp. 48-52, 65-68. This point was also made emphatically by Singapore's former top diplomat Bilahari Kausikan. See Yong, "S'poreans should be aware of China's influence ops."

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9 Afterword

Covid-19 and the Limits of Chinese Exceptionalism

Abstract
This chapter analyzes Chinese responses to the events of the Covid-19 global pandemic and identifies themes of Chinese exceptionalism and Chinese benevolence in Beijing's pandemic-related global interactions. Three core narratives have framed China's response: that China is a responsible power; that China is self-sacrificing; and that China is superior to the West. At the same time, however, the events of the Covid-19 pandemic have also generated considerable criticism of the Chinese government, and how it being perceived as being good and different from the West. All of these factors have long-term implications for China's claim to global leadership and the attractiveness of its political worldview.

Keywords: Covid-19, responsible stakeholder, global leadership, Chinese exceptionalism

In this final chapter, I relate the early events of the Covid-19 pandemic (until June 2020) to this study of Chinese exceptionalism and China's political worldview. I argue that – notwithstanding its early problems combating the virus – the Chinese government has attempted to communicate a sense of Chinese exceptionalism and benevolence through its diplomatic outreach about the pandemic. China's story highlights three themes: first, that *China is a responsible power*; second, that it is *self-sacrificing*; and third, that it is *superior to the West* (particularly the United States). While these are not new themes and each has been covered to some extent in my earlier chapters, the pandemic has thrown the global implications of China's political worldview and policy choices into relief. While territorial disputes and the Belt and Road Initiative represent matters of policy concern and scholarly interest, their effects are largely limited to the states and individuals involved in elite decision-making. The Covid-19 pandemic has moved China to the

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center of the international stage, and with it has come its competition with the United States for global leadership and influence. More importantly, the consequences of the pandemic affect more than decision-makers and policy elites, instead involving people from all walks of life. To this end, I argue that China's responses to the pandemic provide important clues to Beijing's view of itself and the world.

In this chapter I first discuss each of the three themes (a responsible China, a self-sacrificing China, and a superior China) in reference to the health pandemic. In particular, I look at some key speeches by Chinese leaders to demonstrate how these ideas are used in China's recounting of its response to Covid-19 and what these narratives mean for our understanding of China's role in the world. Next, I argue that the Covid-19 pandemic has also affected Chinese claims to exceptionalism as it seeks to recover from the massive domestic impact of the pandemic. While the long-term consequences (and possible fall-out) for China's international relations remains to be seen, the bigger challenge – I contend – lies in how the CCP is perceived at home and the impact of the pandemic on its political legitimacy. Finally, I conclude with some brief reflections on how the pandemic has affected China's claim to international leadership and what this might mean for policymakers and scholars of Chinese international politics in the years to come.

I China as a Responsible Power: Cooperating with the WHO to Mask Diplomacy

On January 23, 2020, the Chinese government imposed a lockdown in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province, to quarantine the epicenter of the Covid-19 disease. Coming on the eve of the annual Spring festival, the significance of the lockdown was not lost on many Chinese citizens: the Chinese government was prepared to take any measures, no matter how drastic, to prevent the broader spread of the disease. A week later, on January 28, President Xi Jinping met with Tedros Adhanom, the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO), in Beijing. Following the meeting, Adhanom expressed his appreciation to the Chinese government and praised the "seriousness" with which Beijing was treating the outbreak, "especially the commitment from top leadership, and the transparency demonstrated, including sharing data and [the] genetic sequence of the virus."[1] Given the fact that China was strongly criticized by the WHO for

1 *World Health Organization*, "WHO, Chinese Leaders Discuss."

its handling of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003, these remarks represent a public relations coup and an about-turn in its international standing in terms of public health. Notwithstanding the fact that the WHO was being criticized by many countries (particularly the United States) for its cumbersome response to the virus outbreak – especially what was perceived as a delay in terming it a global pandemic – and that there were also suspicions that it had acquiesced to Chinese political influence, the Chinese government and its state institutions were prepared to ensure that China's story was told in unequivocal terms: the China of 2020 is a different China from that of 2003, and Beijing's response to the pandemic had vindicated the Chinese government as not only more transparent than before, but also highly responsible. A published report on 21 April 2020 by Chinese scholars and experts from ChinaWatch (China Daily), the Institute of Contemporary China Studies (Tsinghua University), and the School of Health Policy and Management (Peking Union Medical College), states that the Chinese authorities had released timely data in an "open, transparent and responsible manner" to provide people with "dynamic, clear and important information." It added that ensuring "the public is fully informed" was the key to establishing a strong social consensus among the people.[2] This narrative of a "responsible China" subsequently played out on the international stage, even as the leaders of several Western countries (notably the United States and the United Kingdom) sought to lay blame on China for concealing the outbreak in the early days. In an article written by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on China's fight against the coronavirus, he emphasizes that China had acted responsibly as a major power in the global pandemic: "We have taken a proactive, responsible, creative and courageous attitude to fulfill our mission with regard to fighting the virus on the diplomatic front, so as to secure an enabling environment for the victory at home, contribute our part to the international cooperation, and add another dimension to major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics."[3] This narrative was further amplified by the Chinese government's "mask diplomacy," in which Chinese public and private institutions donated masks, test kits, and other personal protection equipment to some 83 countries that were hard hit by the coronavirus, including European countries like Italy, the Czech Republic, and Serbia as well as those in the Middle East and Africa. According to Deputy Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui, Beijing did this because "China empathizes and is

2 *China Daily*, "China's Fight Against COVID-19."

3 *China Daily,* "Following Xi Jinping Thought."

willing to offer what we can to countries in need" as well as wanting to share its experience of fighting the pandemic.[4]

I argue that this story of a responsible China has gained momentum over the past decade, particularly following President Xi's assumption of leadership in March 2013. According to Tiang Boon Hoo, China's global identity is related to its own identification as a "responsible great power" (*fuzeren daguo,* 负责任大国) – a phrase that has been a key motif in the Chinese foreign policy lexicon and discourse. As he observes:

> there is a vibrant epistemic terrain related to the responsible great power identity within China. For some time now Chinese elites have been debating intensely the kind of responsible power that China should be. That these identity debates take place frequently, away from the attention of most of the world, suggests the Chinese regard the idea of big-power responsibility far more seriously that had it been purely a convenient propaganda tool.[5]

But how is this big-power responsibility important for China's international politics, and how does it serve the interests of the Chinese state in real, tangible terms? Part of the answer lies in China's international image (discussed in Chapter 4): being seen as a responsible power would strengthen China's claim to global leadership. At the same time, I argue that to the Chinese government global leadership represents a *penultimate objective, not an ultimate one to be pursued at all costs.* As argued in this book, the Chinese government's goal of obtaining global leadership is highly self-serving: it allows the Chinese state to dictate the rules and norms of international politics and lends international political legitimacy to the CCP. I argue that the Covid-19 pandemic came at a particularly sensitive period for the CCP, when domestic and global events had generated considerable unease and distrust towards the Chinese government. The ongoing trade war with the United States, the street protests in Hong Kong (in 2019), and the re-election of President Tsai Ing-Wen (representing the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party) in the January 2020 Taiwanese presidential elections were all seen as threats to the CCP's stranglehold on power on the mainland. Given the country's one-party system, the CCP was in no danger of losing power, but the possibility of a brewing power struggle between President Xi and other party members could not be ruled out – especially if Xi and

4 Zhou, "Coronavirus."

5 Hoo, *China's Global Identity*, p. xv.

the party's top brass are considered culpable in triggering these outcomes. Any criticism – internal or external – of the Chinese government is viewed as an assault on the party, and by extension, as calling into question the political ability and legitimacy of its leaders.

A case in point can be seen in former Wuhan mayor Zhou Xianwang's admission that he was unable to reveal information about the virus in the early days of the outbreak because he was not authorized to do so. In response to a question about how the Wuhan authorities were able to obtain timely and accurate information that would allow them to make the correct judgments, Zhou said:

> Actually we aren't satisfied with the way information is released on this outbreak. We didn't publish some of the information timely enough and also, some say we were not able to use information effectively. About not publishing information timely enough, I hope the public can understand that we need to release information about infectious diseases according to the law. As the local government, I can only release the information after being authorized to do so.[6]

It can be inferred from this statement that the CCP's political structure effectively prohibited Zhou from revealing information without higher authorization. While such information safeguards are not unique to China, the wider implication of Zhou's admission is that the blame for the virus should be attributed further up the political chain-of-command. In other words, the political system of the CCP was a structural impediment to the effective dissemination of information. Any attribution of blame, then, ultimately goes to the very top: the Chinese government and its institutional structures were ultimately responsible for the outbreak, not so much for an act of commission (i.e., doing the wrong thing), but for one of omission (i.e., not doing the right thing).

Given this backdrop of the domestic struggle to contain the outbreak in the first place,[7] it was not difficult to see why the Chinese government subsequently embarked on an aggressive propaganda campaign in the

6 CCTV interview with Zhou Xianwang, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-8rvtceiLI (retrieved May 13, 2020), see 19:43-20:17.

7 The can be seen in the case of Li Wenliang, a Chinese ophthalmologist who was admonished by local authorities when he first raised awareness of the coronavirus in end December 2019. Li eventually died of the disease on 7 February 2020. The incident generated considerable public backlash by Chinese citizens against the Wuhan authorities, and by extension, the Chinese government.

attempt to demonstrate its credentials as a responsible great power. This not only gave China the opportunity to show its commitment to dealing with global issues and challenges, but more crucially, it also was used to confer the Chinese government with a moral quality, in that it was responsible and could be trusted by others.

II China the "Good Samaritan": From Medical Aid to Mask Diplomacy

A second key narrative of the Chinese government's response to the global pandemic is that not only was China responsible internally, but it was also prepared to be an international "good Samaritan" – even putting its own citizens in potential danger to help others. The outbreak of the virus in Western Europe, notably Italy and Spain, in early March saw the Chinese government send both medical supplies and Chinese experts to provide aid to the affected regions. While Chinese humanitarian assistance is not without precedence, a closer examination of China's participation in such activities during this pandemic suggest that a bigger narrative is at work here: *China wants to be seen as self-sacrificing and ameliorate international criticisms that it is a global free-rider.* Part of the reason for this, I argue, lies in the CCP's attempts to construct its international image, particularly under the leadership of President Xi. According to Yan Xuetong, under Xi China has moved from a period of keeping a low international profile to a new era when it "strove for achievement" (yousuozuowei, 有所作为).[8] The BRI is one example of China seeking for achievement, as seen in Chapter 5. In this context, I argue that China's provision of medical and humanitarian assistance is part of a wider political-diplomatic objective of projecting China's voice on the global stage and offering "Chinese solutions" (*zhongguo fangan,* 中国方案) to global problems. The reasons for this are twofold: first, it demonstrates the *viability* – and consequently *superiority* – of Chinese ideas for meeting global problems (this will be discussed in the final section of this chapter); and second, to cast a favorable light on the mainland Chinese government as part of a *political contest for influence* between the PRC and Republic of China (ROC-Taiwan) governments.

In recent years, the growing global prominence of China has resulted in the Chinese state conducting more activities to further isolate and erode the international influence of the Taiwanese government. This is particularly

8 Yan, "From Keeping a Low Profile."

true after the election of the DPP led by Tsai Ing-Wen in the 2016 elections, since they have generally adopted a more confrontational approach towards the PRC government. This is not the place to recount the complicated character of cross-straits relations,[9] but it is important to note that the Covid-19 pandemic has engendered considerable cross-straits dynamics with both the PRC and ROC government using the crisis to also showcase their success of combating the coronavirus to the international community. This suggests that despite the mainland Chinese government's formidable propaganda machine, the ROC continues to be a thorn in the side of CCP's international branding and attempt to obtain greater soft power. According to Ho, the issue of Taiwan remains a core national interest and Chinese leaders cannot be seen as compromising about it. One way for Beijing to pressure on the ROC government is to reduce the number of Taiwan's diplomatic allies. During the past few years under President Xi, China has been highly successful in pressuring countries to cut diplomatic ties with Taipei. In 2013, for example, Taiwan had official relations with 22 UN member states, but this has now dwindled to 15 UN member states, including seven states that cut ties with Taipei in 2019.[10] While most of the countries that have recently broken off official relations are small Pacific and Oceanic states that are not considered major international political players, their strategic locations in key maritime waters give Beijing increased opportunities to project its own international influence while further eroding Taipei's international presence and voice.

Given this backdrop of diplomatic competition, it is not surprising that the PRC and ROC governments have both been highly sensitive to each other's political maneuvers during the pandemic. Indeed, Taipei's considerable efforts and success in combating the virus have resulted in international praise and accolades, while Beijing's early problems have been criticized by a number of Western countries, especially the United States. This "diplomatic tug of war" – as one study describes it – pitches the PRC and ROC against each other in a tussle for recognition as the representative state of "China" in international society.[11] As such, it is possible to argue that the two governments are involved in a "one-upping game" of political brinksmanship, each trying to outdo the other in procuring international social capital and the moral high ground of recognition as a responsible stakeholder. However,

9 For an updated discussion of cross-straits relations since 2016, see Cole, *Cross-Strait Relations*. For more historical accounts, see, Hoo, "Reassessing the Taiwan-China Rapprochement;" Cai, *Cross-Taiwan Straits Relations Since 1979*.

10 Ho, "PRC Turns 70."

11 Hoo and Andy, "China and Lilliputians," p. 125.

there are some subtle differences in the diplomatic messaging of the two countries, as evinced by their mask diplomacies.

In early April the Chinese government offered Chinese citizens living or working in Singapore face masks, in part to assuage their concerns as infections in the city-state witnessed a sharp spike. This was a highly unusual move, since only Chinese citizens were given face masks (the masks were given out at the Chinese embassy) and the Chinese embassy also activated a number of organizational contacts in Singapore to help with the mask outreach.[12] In addition, the ambassador Hong Xiaoyong also visited educational institutions where high numbers of Chinese students were enrolled, including both secondary and tertiary schools. Given the lack of local reporting and the absence of official participation from the Singaporean side, these actions seem to have been done in a private capacity with the tacit acknowledgement and permission from the Singapore authorities. Shortly after this, Taiwan donated some 100,000 masks to Singapore through its Red Cross as part of the Taiwanese Foreign Affairs ministry's initiative to donate a total of 10 million masks to countries affected by the pandemic. Unlike the masks provided by Beijing, Taipei's donation was not targeted only at its own citizens, but instead at the broader Singaporean population.[13] While the donation was not part of official diplomatic arrangements, the Singaporean Prime Minister's wife did express her gratitude to Taiwan on social media. This suggests that it was also not purely a private matter, but instead had received acknowledgement from the highest levels, despite the lack of reporting in the local mainstream media.[14] Two weeks later, China donated 600,000 masks to Singapore at an event attended by representatives from the diplomatic and political community.[15]

As indicated by this series of mask donations, I argue that the pandemic has generated a competition "to do more good" between the PRC and ROC governments. In China this took on a "nationalist" character: the needs of "Chinese citizens" were accorded greater emphasis and importance compared to the citizens of other countries. The Taiwanese government, on the other hand, provided international aid on a more universal, less selective basis. To be fair, given the widespread presence of Chinese citizens

12 Sim, "Coronavirus."

13 Everington, "Taiwan's Donation."

14 There was social media speculation about the Prime Minister's wife's real feelings towards Taiwan, as evidenced by her cryptic social media post about the Taiwanese mask donation and whether the Taiwanese government had earlier restricted Singapore from obtaining masks from its Taiwanese supplier.

15 See, Yong, "Coronavirus."

in Singapore it was natural for the Chinese government to extend its diplomatic support to them. This is similar to how many countries worldwide activated repatriation flights for their citizens during the early stages of the outbreak. But what is notable about mainland China's mask diplomacy was its emphasis on "us and them" in its initial outreach, which indicated that Chinese citizens should be accorded "special privileges" or entitled to benefits beyond what ordinary citizens in their host countries received. This runs against diplomatic protocol (especially if a country's ambassador is involved) and is suggestive of a broader Chinese attempt to generate influence beyond traditional diplomatic channels.[16] For this reason I argue that China's international "good deeds" are framed with a narrow nationalist objective – a sharp contrast from the biblical injunction of "not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing."[17] These actions are also predominantly aimed at a domestic audience, especially given the fact that many Chinese people – as observed by Singapore's Kausikan – "understood their leaders had bungled the initial response to the outbreak in Wuhan [and] that the people bore the brunt of the mistakes and the drastic responses needed to recover from them." Indeed, "tightened censorship and the laudatory tone describing President Xi Jinping's role in the people's struggle against COVID-19 suggests that the CCP is still insecure that it has put its mistakes to rest."[18] To this end, I argue that the diplomatic efforts made by the Chinese government to showcase its contributions overseas are reflective of the attempt by the CCP to *reframe the domestic narrative* of the outbreak and emphasize how the Chinese state is sparing no effort to protect the well-being of its citizens.

III China Is Superior: The China Model of Fighting the Virus

A third theme, which also forms the central theme of this book, is the idea that China is superior by virtue of its ability to combat and effectively contain the virus – which in turn legitimizes the Chinese model of governance as

16 Singapore former top diplomat Bilahari Kausikan has highlighted Beijing's attempts to impose its own state identity on Singapore, including the use of information campaigns/operations to influence the Singapore identity. See Kausikan, *China is Messing with Your Mind*.

17 Certainly a cynic could insist that everything in international politics is rationally calculated and designed to serve a political purpose. I suppose this argument can be maintained, and I do not disagree. However just because it is possible to envisage a political objective in certain actions does not mean that all diplomatic actions are equally narrowly defined.

18 Kausikan, "No, China Will Not Get Away."

superior to that of the West. In a speech at the CCP's headquarters in Zhongnanhai on May 8, President Xi stated, "the experience of fighting Covid-19 has demonstrated again the strong vitality and remarkable superiority of the Chinese system. [China] can overcome any obstacles and make huge contributions to the progress of human civilization."[19] Coming at a time when China was being accused by the United States and several other Western countries of being dishonest and covering up the real causes of the virus, I argue that Xi's words reflect an attempt by the Chinese leadership to go on the diplomatic offensive to counter the narratives that Beijing does not like. Framing China's response to Covid-19 as *inherently* superior to that of the West allows Chinese leaders to not only maintain domestic political stability, but also not give the international community the opportunity to blame China. Following the drop in Covid-19 infections and easing of lockdown measures across Chinese cities in late March, the Chinese foreign ministry went on a diplomatic offensive to tell the Chinese version of the story while challenging the narratives in the Western media that it perceived as biased against or critical of China.

According to Zhu Zhiqun, this increasingly strident tone against the West (dubbed Wolf Warrior diplomacy) has found increasingly popular traction within China. This indicates that there may be a transition of Chinese diplomacy from "conservative, passive, and low-key to assertive, proactive, and high profile."[20] While part of this Wolf Warrior diplomacy can be attributed to soaring nationalistic sentiments in China, I argue that a more important factor is Chinese political elites' perception that the Western media is inherently biased against Beijing and that it was therefore of paramount importance that China tell a *better* Chinese story as a challenge to its critics. As Zhu puts it, "From China's perspective, wolf-warrior diplomacy is a direct response to 'unfair' approaches by other countries, especially the US, toward China and the Chinese people."[21]

This emphasis on a superior China model, whether it be in fighting Covid-19 or in other fields of study, I argue, reflects the Chinese elite mindset *that the West is intentionally trying to keep China down and constraining its rise, and that it therefore must respond forcefully by demonstrating that its social policies and approach to governance were as good as, if not better than, countries in the West.* Indeed, in recent years the idea of a "China solution" (*zhongguo fangan* 中国方案) has attracted substantial attention among

19 Xie, "Chinese Parliament."
20 Zhu, "Interpreting China's Wolf-warrior."
21 *Ibid.*

Chinese scholars and policy makers.[22] This is best exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative analyzed in Chapter 5. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has provided even greater impetus for the Chinese government to promote its unique approach to tackling global problems. Unlike the BRI, which is mostly infrastructural and economically driven with minimal existential implications, Covid-19 is considered a high-stake issue of global proportions with millions of lives at stake. More than just as a humanitarian concern, the pandemic has been perceived by Chinese leaders as an opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of its single-party authoritarian system compared to Western political models. In other words, if China were able to demonstrate that its approach to combating the pandemic was *good and better* than that of the West, it would represent not only an about-turn in its international standing (given its early mistakes), but also, and more crucially, provide the CCP with the moral justification to challenge the claim that liberal democracy (as practiced in the United States and the West) is a superior model of political governance compared to China's one-party system.

COVID-19, Chinese Exceptionalism, and Global Leadership

I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed blunted the claims of Chinese exceptionalism, particularly those that portray China's rise and global prominence within a triumphalist framework. The considerable slowdown in the Chinese economy caused by the trade war with the US and the impact of COVID-19 has certainly resulted in a more realistic appraisal of China's long-term economic development, as well as highlighted the implications of a weakening economy for the overall international stature of China. This economic uncertainty was most vividly demonstrated during the 2020 National People's Congress in which the CCP conspicuously announced that it would not set a GDP growth target for the year and instead emphasized the need to boost Chinese government spending on job creation.[23] That said, I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in a *siege mentality* among the top Chinese leadership, who feel that they are under attack by Western forces and therefore further need to emphasize the *distinctiveness* and *uniqueness* of the Chinese system vis-à-vis the West. In other words, Chinese exceptionalism remains an integral aspect of China's political

22 For scholarly discussion of the China model, see Zhao, "The China Model."

23 *Bloomberg News,* "NPC."

worldview because it allows Chinese leaders to claim that its response to the pandemic was entirely in accordance with the characteristics of Chinese socio-political culture, and consequently cannot be judged by the so-called universal standards that are designed to maintain Western dominance and Chinese acquiescence.

At the same time, Beijing's claim to international leadership means that it is unable to hide behind the curtain of *everything with Chinese characteristics*. As mentioned in Chapter 8, one requirement to be a great power is adhering to certain universal ideals that transcend geopolitical and cultural boundaries. Indeed, over the years China has embraced multilateralism as a foreign policy instrument for the promotion of its own national interests.[24] While the merits and faults of multilateralism are beyond the scope of this book, the need to engage with a plurality of states through a multilateral framework requires certain changes to the Chinese mindset and political worldview, especially in matters pertaining to domestic and international governance. Indeed, President Xi's appearance at the World Health Assembly in May 2020 and his subsequent profession of commitment to fighting the virus suggests that China sees itself as an international leader in this matter – which requires Beijing to go beyond pithy statements and provide real service to the world. In other words, part of the responsibilities of being a leader is the need to demonstrate servant leadership, described by Robert Greenleaf as: "the servant leader is servant first [...] it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first."[25] Is this idea of servant leadership an anathema to Chinese politics, or for that matter international politics in general? Does it run against the ideological contours of the practice of Machiavellian politics, of which realism is the mainstream exponent? Within Chinese political thought there is the idea of "virtue" (*ren,* 仁), which is exemplified by seeking the welfare of others, not for one's own benefit but for theirs. This is seen in the Chinese Communist Party frequently exhorting on the need for it to "serve the people" (*weirenmin fuwu,* 为人民服务) in domestic politics. While such statements are often dismissed as pure propaganda, I argue that it is backed by a deeper moral vision that Party members must acknowledge – even if only through lip service. Indeed, Xi's revival of Confucian ideas suggests that the absence of a moral framework within Chinese social life has generated

24 Wu and Lansdowne, *China Turns to Multilateralism;* Kastner, Pearson, and Rector, *China's Strategic Multilateralism.*

25 Greenleaf, Robert K. "What is Servant Leadership?" Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. https://www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership/ (retrieved May 18, 2020).

considerable tension and structural contradictions in China's encounter with modernity (as discussed in Chapter 3). Indeed, without some form of common moral imagination that frames the relationship between the government and its citizens, it would be impossible to generate social trust between those who govern and those who are governed. In other words, a purely transactional relationship between the Party and Chinese citizens would only paralyze both the Party and the citizens – even if everything in Chinese socio-political life can be codified into laws.

Seen this way, China's claim to be superior to the West is essentially a *moral claim*, in that the West and its political and social institutions are considered the personification of all that is problematic in Western culture. Under the CCP's leadership, on the other hand, China exemplifies all that is good and virtuous in meeting the challenges of the 21st century, including the COVID-19 pandemic. This moral narrative feeds into China's political worldview and claims to exceptionalism by indicating that China's time has finally come to demonstrate its superiority over the West and the United States.

Conclusion: From Political Fault Lines to Personal Redemption

In the 2019 Hong Kong martial arts movie *Ip-Man 4: The Finale,*[26] Ip Man (played by Donnie Yen), an exponent of the Chinese martial art Wing Chun, travels from Hong Kong to San Francisco to look for a new school for his son after he is expelled from school for fighting back against a bully. To be enrolled in a local school, however, a referral letter from the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association is required. In exchange for this letter, Ip was asked to rein in his protégé Bruce Lee from teaching foreigners Chinese martial arts as the members of the association felt that Chinese martial arts was a privilege only meant for Chinese people. But Ip, considering Chinese martial arts to be of universal value, refuses to do so and thus was denied the letter he required.

The film subsequently explored Ip's travails in San Francisco, including coming to the aid of the young daughter of the president of the association which had denied Ip the letter, who was being bullied by her American classmates. Ip would go on to encounter a US Marine of Chinese descent who wants to incorporate Wing Chun into US Marine combat practices as

26 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ip_Man_4:_The_Finale and https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2076298/ for the movie plot.

well as defeating a Marine sergeant who insists that karate is superior to Chinese martial arts. In the end, despite being given the referral letter by the association's president for his bravery and courage in standing up to the unjust system in the West, Ip decides not to enroll his son in the school and to return home.

As a microcosm of broader East-West Sino-American relations, Ip Man tells the story of how civilizational differences – whether real or imagined – have significant repercussions in how individuals perceive one another. While the West is imagined as a place of opportunity and promise (hence Ip's initial plan to enroll his son in school there), it is also a destination fraught with social and racial discrimination and other negative habits. Instead of typecasting all Chinese (or Asians) as good and benevolent and Americans as evil, however, this movie also flags the blind spots and problems in Chinese social life. These include a father whose patriarchal attitude towards his daughter generates familial tensions over her individual freedom, the need to blindly abide with traditions to "give face" or curry favor with higher-ups, and the familiar insistence that Chinese martial arts are only for the Chinese and not be shared with "outsiders".

As this study of Chinese exceptionalism has highlighted, social and cultural identity are crucial elements of a country's political worldview and claims to exceptionalism. At the same time, as shown by films like Ip Man, these identities are not inherently fixed but instead are malleable to some extent, given particular social exigencies and situational needs. More importantly, such stories are a reminder that the pursuit of personal redemption and aspirational goals can be achieved *outside* the political conditions of our times. In other words, there are limits to political action and there is the possibility of undertaking moral actions outside the realm of political institutions – or, as one maxim puts it, "the first thing to say about politics is that politics is not the first thing." Individuals can still make meaningful decisions beyond the existing political paradigms and systems of their times. Similarly, in the realm of international politics, the current political fault lines between China and the United States (and a number of Western countries) are not the ultimate determinants of a future international configuration of power, nor do they determine how individuals as moral agents are able to act and choose.

While the pandemic has clearly shown both the flaws and the strengths of countries all over the world, the increased international attention on China is challenging Beijing's ability to act – either within or outside China – to promote and safeguard its interests and international image. The Covid-19 pandemic has raised fresh questions about not just the objectives of China's

international relations, but also its domestic well-being. While it is well within the ability of the Chinese Communist Party to overcome challenges to its political governance, it would be naïve to imagine that the party-state has all the answers to all of China's problems, for it is in the end neither omnipotent nor omniscient.

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