

74

FIIA Working Paper  
April 2012

Jyrki Kallio  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

# WATCHING A DRAGON'S EGG HATCH

## THE MAKINGS OF A SINOCENTRIC WORLD?



ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI  
UTRIKESPOLITISKA INSTITUTET  
THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs  
Kruunuvuorenkatu 4  
FI-00160 Helsinki  
tel. +358 9 432 7000  
fax. +358 9 432 7799  
[www.fii.fi](http://www.fii.fi)

ISBN: 978-951-769-340-0  
ISSN: 1456-1360

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs is an independent research institute that produces high-level research to support political decision-making and public debate both nationally and internationally. The Institute undertakes quality control in editing publications but the responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.





## Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chinese traditional foreign relations.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Confucian foreign relations .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Conciliation versus control .....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>The Confucian Golden Rule .....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Aiming for the top.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<b>The Sword Scabbard Declaration of China’s foreign relations.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Concluding remarks .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Sources.....</b>	<b>21</b>

*The author gratefully acknowledges the help of Research Assistant Keegan Elmer,  
Global Security research programme, FIIA.*

## **Abstract**

As China's hard power is growing, the Party-state is keen to construct a new narrative which legitimizes China's position as a world leader also from the soft power perspective. It has even been suggested that a Chinese international relations theory or model will inevitably emerge as a consequence of China's growing role on the world stage on the one hand and the rise of traditional values in China on the other.

Apparently, academics across the country have been enlisted to work on the project to create a Chinese international relations model. They rely very much on the main politico-ethical tradition in China, Confucianism. The Confucian version of the Golden Rule, "what you do not wish for yourself, do not do unto others", is said to lead to the principles of mutual non-interference, equality and peaceful coexistence.

A Chinese international relations model seems to suggest a rules-based community or commonwealth, global in scope and international or even supranational in character. The authority to define the rules would lie within the state, which manifests responsible and moral leadership.

Thus far, the project to create a Chinese international relations model seems to be just another effort to disguise China's real identity with the mask of benevolent Confucius. It remains to be seen to what extent the "model" will actually guide China's foreign policy decision-making.

## Introduction

What is the world view behind China's foreign policy orientation? How to interpret China's foreign policy-related statements and behaviour? If there was a "Chinese international relations theory", what would it be like? It has been noted, by Christopher A. Ford among others, that in order to formulate strategies for dealing with a rising China, it is useful to look at "how China appears from the inside".<sup>1</sup> "Specifically, whether one's objective is to check Beijing's advance or simply to shape and moderate its likely future behaviour ..., some advantage could presumably be had in better understanding the cultural and political undercurrents ... and the characteristic patterns they seem to keep displaying in Chinese behaviour."<sup>2</sup>

A corresponding sentiment, although stemming from an altogether different reason, is present in the white paper discussing China's peaceful development (*Zhongguo de heping fazhan, baipishu*), published by China's State Council in September 2011. The white paper calls for appreciation for the cultural tradition that the Chinese government fosters out of responsibility to the people: "We sincerely hope that the international community will have a deeper appreciation of China's time-honored cultural traditions, and respect its sovereignty, security, territorial integrity and social stability, which the Chinese people hold dear."<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, China aims to alleviate fears about its growing strength by stressing the benevolent and peaceful nature of its foreign policy. In the official rhetoric, China's growing strength is dubbed a "peaceful rise" and its ambitions are depicted as a "harmonious world".<sup>4</sup> China's leadership assures that aiming for hegemony is not part of Chinese cultural heritage. The above-mentioned white paper states: "The world has been believed to be a harmonious whole in the Chinese culture ever since the ancient times. This belief has a lasting impact on the thinking and acts of the Chinese nation, which is an important value that the Chinese people follow in handling interpersonal relationships, the relationship between man and nature and relations between different countries. ... China's peaceful development has broken away from the traditional pattern where a rising power was bound to seek hegemony."<sup>5</sup>

Such an approach – seeking "humane authority" instead of hegemony – is the key to success in the international arena today, argues Yan Xuetong, one of the most famous foreign policy thinkers in China. According to Yan, the competition between international actors over power status is

---

<sup>1</sup> C. A. Ford, *The Mind of Empire – China's history and Modern Foreign Relations*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2010, p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> English translation at the Chinese Government's Web Portal, September 2011, accessed on 21 November 2011, [http://english.gov.cn/official/2011-09/06/content\\_1941354.htm](http://english.gov.cn/official/2011-09/06/content_1941354.htm).

<sup>4</sup> The phrase "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*, 和平崛起) was coined in 2003 by Zheng Bijian, the then Vice-President of the Central Party School. Note that the words 'peace' and 'harmony' both contain the character *he*.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

essentially a zero-sum game. In order to define and measure power status, Yan has presented a formula for calculating a country's "comprehensive national power". Yan defines comprehensive national power as the product of "hard power" and "soft power". This formula rules that if either one of the factors is zero, the sum will be zero. Yan argues that a country's hard power is seldom zero, but soft power can sometimes turn out to be so. As both China's economic and military resources are growing, political power must also be strengthened accordingly.<sup>6</sup> Yan notes that in 2009 President Hu Jintao particularly emphasized the need for a greater political and moral impact in China's foreign policy.<sup>7</sup>

Yan asserts that the existing schools of international relations, realists and liberalists alike, focus on material benefit and material force, and suggests that the theories would carry more weight if they also recognized the role of morality. Yan believes that traditional Chinese thought could prove helpful in providing the existing theories with such new impetus.<sup>8</sup>

More boldly, other scholars in China have suggested that a Chinese international relations theory will inevitably emerge as a consequence of China's growing role on the world stage on the one hand and the rise of traditional values in China on the other. Wang Jisi noted a tendency in the early 1990s in Beijing to view Chinese foreign policy as "the most moral foreign policy in the world", thus making China deserve greater influence in world affairs.<sup>9</sup> In 2009, the vice-director of the Foreign Office of the Communist Party Central Committee stated that for a rapidly rising major power, such as China, it was "unacceptable" not to have its own theory.<sup>10</sup>

Based on the abundance of related essays and articles, produced in many different institutions across China, it seems that academics across the country have been enlisted to work on the project to create such a theory over the last few years. Political culture has long historical roots, and tradition is a living entity in China. It is therefore no surprise that the project to create Chinese international relations theory feeds very much on both historical precedence as well as the main politico-ethical tradition in China, namely Confucianism, which is often seen as having guided imperial China's foreign relations as well as the society as a whole.

Just how important the perceived Confucian foreign policy tradition is for the narrative of China's "Peaceful Rise" has been noted by John Dotson among others. The way Imperial China supposedly conducted its foreign relations is often used to emphasize China's moral superiority

---

<sup>6</sup> Yan X., "The Rise of China and its Power Status", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, No. 1, 2006, pp. 5–33.

<sup>7</sup> Yan X., *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2011, p. 216.

<sup>8</sup> Yan, *Ancient Chinese ...*, op.cit., p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> Wang J., "International Relations Theory and the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy: A Chinese Perspective", *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, edited by T. W. Robinson & D. Shambaugh, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 502.

<sup>10</sup> Yan, *Ancient Chinese ...*, op.cit., p. 200.



“as compared to the bullying and hegemonic ways of Western societies”.<sup>11</sup> For the Communist Party, Confucianism allows “the regime opportunities to dress itself in the themes of benevolence and humanitarianism” and to present “a gentler face both at home and abroad.”<sup>12</sup>

This paper discusses the elements in the Chinese tradition that have been identified as having an impact on China’s foreign policy by both Chinese scholars and outside analysts. The first part sheds light on the historical – true or supposed – modes of behaviour which are said to be ever visible in Chinese foreign policy, at least on an implicit level. The second part discusses the role of Confucianism. Confucian ideals are tightly connected with the current pet slogan of the Communist Party, “harmonious society”.

Paul A. Cohen has remarked that “the Western Enlightenment project that has resulted in the radical separation of history from folklore, literature, and memory never had the same impact in China.”<sup>13</sup> The same could be said about the separation of theory and practice. It is perhaps partially due to this cultural background that the scholars quoted in this paper tend to talk less about a “Chinese international relations theory” than a Chinese “orientation” to world politics, or more broadly, a world view.

According to Samuel S. Kim, world view could be said to constitute the most constant level of input into China’s foreign policy decision-making process.<sup>14</sup> However, a world view can be an artificial construct, reflecting the current needs and trends of its time and its creators. It may be argued that the “rise of traditional values” in China is as much a result of an orchestrated effort by the Party machinery as a spontaneous phenomenon.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, there is reason to assume that, at least in the short term, the project to outline a Chinese orientation to world politics is part of the efforts to legitimize China’s foreign policy actions. While building harmony within the country, the Communist Party is equally eager to assert that China’s foreign policy goal is harmony on a global scale. In the longer term, the key issue concerns the impact that the possible outcomes of the theoretical work will have on Chinese foreign policy action.

---

<sup>11</sup> J. Dotson, “The Confucian Revival in the Propaganda Narratives of the Chinese Government”, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Research Report of July 2011, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> P. A. Cohen, *Speaking of History – The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth Century China*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2009, p. xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. S. S. Kim, “Chinese Foreign Policy in Theory and Practise”, *China and the World—Chinese Foreign Policy Faces the New Millennium*, ed. by S.S. Kim, Westview Press, Boulder, 1998, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> J. Kallio, *Tradition in Chinese Politics – The Party-state’s reinvention of the past and the critical response from public intellectuals*, FIIA Report 27, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki, 2010.

## Chinese traditional foreign relations

It is relatively easy, thanks to the seminal works of, inter alia, Lucian Pye and John K. Fairbank, to deduce the elements in the imperial-era foreign politics and political philosophy which would form the basis of a Chinese orientation to international relations.<sup>16</sup> The central concept is *Tianxia* (天下), All-Under-Heaven, which was the word used of the world known to the Chinese. It happened to be a world where China had no contenders as a civilization, and thus *Tianxia*, the world and China were effectively the same. The Emperor was the Son of Heaven, and “under the wide heaven, there was no land that was not the king’s.”<sup>17</sup> All the lesser states within *Tianxia* but outside the realm of the empire were expected to recognize the overlordship of the Emperor.

The system was held together by surveillance of rites (*li*, 禮), which included the duty of the lesser rulers to pay tribute to the Emperor who, in return, provided protection and trading rights to them (i.e. the tributary system). Ideally, the rites were the manifestation of the heavenly order, the Way of Heaven (*Tian Dao*, 天道). *Tianxia* was thus a ‘value regime’ and permanent as such, so that the multiple states which had coexisted during the pre-imperial era (prior to 221 BCE) could be written off as just ‘power regimes’ reflecting a temporary historical phenomenon.

Heaven was also the source of the rulers’ legitimacy, called the Mandate of Heaven (*Tian Ming*). The pet idea of the Confucians was that Heaven would discard a morally unworthy ruler and that the measure of a ruler’s moral worthiness (*de*, 德) was the wellbeing of the population. Wellbeing, in turn, was evidenced by the placidity of the people and the stability of the empire. The ideal form of *Tianxia* was *Datong* (大同), Great Community (or Universal Commonwealth). It was believed that the golden age of *Datong* had once existed in the distant past, and that it would return with a ruler of sage morality one day. Due to the moral character of the rule of the true Son of Heaven, no coercion would be needed to make the lesser rulers pay homage to him, but their respect would come as naturally as stars orbit the Polestar.<sup>18</sup>

If we read ‘morality’ as a ‘code of conduct’, then we may interpret *Tianxia* in “modern” terms simply as a rule-based community or commonwealth, global in scope and international or even supranational in character. From the “Chinese” perspective, the Westphalian system, in contrast, signifies merely a loose collection of states driven by their own national interests; in the words of one Chinese scholar, it is a “non-world”.<sup>19</sup> The question remains, however, as to where the

---

<sup>16</sup> See L. Pye’s *Spirit of Chinese Politics* (1968) and J. K. Fairbank’s *The Chinese World Order* (1969, ed.).

<sup>17</sup> *Shijing*: Xiaoya; CText.org 北山詩 2. – All translations from the Chinese are by the author, except for the quotations from the white paper on China’s peaceful development.

<sup>18</sup> See *Analects* II.1.

<sup>19</sup> Zhao Tingyang, “Wei shenme tichu ‘Tianxia tixi’ lilun”, *Zhong Ping*, Vol. 62, 2005, accessed on 13 March 2012, <http://www.china-review.com/gao.asp?id=16575>.

Polestar is and who gets to define the rules. The centrality of the tributary system is a major challenge for transferring the Chinese imperial “international relations” practices into the international community of today.

As C. A. Ford has illustrated, there are Chinese international relations theorists who look for inspiration in the only time when “interstate relations” actually existed in China. This was the Warring States Era (475–221 BCE) which, as the name implies, bears a certain resemblance to classical Greece with its city-states. Yan Xuetong is one such theorist. He has published extensively on – to paraphrase the title of his English language monograph – the benefits of ancient Chinese thought for modern Chinese power.

Yan’s two main premises are that foreign politics is a zero-sum game and that the central attribute of political power is “morally informed leadership”. Based on these premises he states that between the USA and China, “the country that displays more humane authority will win”.<sup>20</sup> Yan is drawing inspiration from several ancient Chinese thinkers who “hold that morality and the interstate order are directly related, especially at the level of personal morality of the leader and its role in determining the stability of interstate order”.<sup>21</sup> Moral leadership requires worthy leaders, and ancient thinkers therefore put a lot of emphasis on recruiting talented people in the service of the rulers.

Yan stresses that many ancient thinkers, particularly two Confucian thinkers – Mencius and Xunzi, made a clear distinction between ‘hegemons’ as undesirable tyrants and ‘sage kings’ as ideal, humane rulers. While this is applicable with regard to Mencius and Xunzi, Yan has a tendency to see this division even where it is not really present. This is unfortunately further amplified by the translation, where the word *wang* (王) is translated as ‘sage king’ or ‘humane authority’, even when it should be understood just as ‘king’. Yang Qianru also notes this in his comment on Yan’s thesis.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that Yan wishes in every possible manner to promote the idea that it is in the genes of China to follow the way of the sage kings when she one day replaces the hegemonic USA as the world leader.

For China’s international security policy, the ancient thinkers convey two messages according to Yan: “First, China should mainly rely on its own military construction to maintain its own peaceful environment.”<sup>23</sup> As the world is not peaceful, it means that China should increase its military capacity. “Second, China should press for the establishment of an international security

---

<sup>20</sup> Yan X., “How China Can Defeat America”, an opinion piece in New York Times, 20 November 2011, accessed on 21 November 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/21/opinion/how-china-can-defeat-america.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Yan, *Ancient Chinese ...*, op.cit., p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> In Yan, *Ancient Chinese ...*, op.cit., p. 150.

<sup>23</sup> Yan, *Ancient Chinese ...*, op.cit., p. 63.

system and norms, and promote the realization of universal world peace.”<sup>24</sup> According to Yan, this cannot be done by the creation of a world government, which is impossible due to the growing number of countries. Instead, the world leadership belongs to the state which manifests responsible and moral leadership. Which country that is, is a matter of judgement by other states. If China wishes to reach that position, it must first attract more talent than the USA, says Yan.

Although Yan is talking about the pre-imperial era, when the tributary system did not exist, he is in some sense promoting a “mental” tributary system based on a moral as opposed to a power-related hierarchy. As Xu Jin points out in his comment, the challenge here is how to avoid other states thinking that China is pursuing hegemony.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Yan, *Ancient Chinese ...*, op.cit., p. 64.

<sup>25</sup> In Yan, *Ancient Chinese ...*, op.cit., p. 180.

## Confucian foreign relations

Yan Xuetong has been discussing ancient Chinese (pre-221 BCE) thinkers *en masse*. However, such generalizations are not without problems. Ja Ian Chong notes in his book review that Yan and the other collaborators on the book should have taken into account the varying opinions that Chinese thinkers across time have expressed about the concepts that are central to classical Chinese thought.<sup>26</sup> The same challenge lies ahead for those scholars who have tried to outline what Confucian foreign policy would specifically look like. An added difficulty there is that the early Confucians were mostly concerned with affairs inside the country.

First, one has to ask whether Confucianism actually suits the purposes of foreign policy soft power. Sam Crane answers in the negative. He quite rightly points out that the core Confucian principles, such as “rejection of the profit motive; advocacy of material simplicity; and subordination of the individual”, have little material grounding or support in contemporary China.<sup>27</sup> In particular, “[t]he emerging marketplace society works against the practical performance of Confucian ideals and this undercuts the attractive potential of Confucianism as soft power”.<sup>28</sup> It is indeed difficult to see how “rejection of profit motive” has any relevance in today’s China, especially in the light of the incredible concentration of wealth among China’s top legislature.<sup>29</sup> Crane concludes that while opportunities will arise for the expansion of China’s soft power in the wake of her economic growth, “that soft power will be a modern Chinese soft power, it will not be Confucian soft power”.<sup>30</sup>

While Crane’s argument may well be right in principle, there are two practical counter-arguments. First, the interpretations of Confucianism have always fluctuated with the times. As Crane himself points out, “[w]hen the Chinese economy was weak, Confucianism was interpreted as an impediment to economic transformation; when the Chinese economy is strong, Confucianism is framed as a facilitator of growth and development”.<sup>31</sup> Second, what probably matters more to the Communist Party is what Confucianism may be made to look like rather than what it really is. After all, the venerable philosopher is so much better as a figurehead for China than, for example, Chairman Mao Zedong. It is no coincidence that the spearheads of the efforts of China’s Ministry of Culture to spread the country’s cultural influence have been named Confucius Institutes.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ja Ian Chong, book review on *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* in *The China Quarterly*, 208, December 2011, pp. 1033–1034.

<sup>27</sup> S. Crane, “Confucianism as Soft Power”, March 2010, accessed on 21 November 2011, <http://uselesstree.typepad.com/files/confucianism-as-soft-power.doc>, p.10.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> See “China’s Billionaire People’s Congress Makes Capitol Hill Look Like Pauper”, Bloomberg News, 27 February 2012, accessed on 28 February 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-02-26/china-s-billionaire-lawmakers-make-u-s-peers-look-like-paupers.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Crane, *op.cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> Crane, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

In any case, Chinese academics are busy providing content for a Confucian foreign policy. For example, Gai Yannan helps to make the connection between the rites (*li*), a central concept in Confucius's *Analects* denoting the code of propriety, and foreign politics.<sup>32</sup> Gai repeats the traditional, culturalist interpretation of imperial China: the *Tianxia* was a cultural union with the empire as the centre. It was surrounded by widening circles of "the other": first vassal states ruled by the Emperor's blood-relatives closest to the centre, then the tribute-bearing nations, and other barbarians furthest away. This ideal dates back to the mythical past preceding the great Confucian thinkers, as Yan Xuetong notes in his chapter discussing Xunzi's interstate philosophy.<sup>33</sup> Tellingly, Ford notes how during the last imperial dynasty, the Qing, the Board of Rites was responsible for overseeing the relations with the Confucianized tributaries in South East Asia, while the Board of Barbarian Control managed relations with the Tibetans and Mongolians, as well as Russians, too.<sup>34</sup>

As Gai Yannan explains, such a world view included the thought that when the centre was at peace, there would also be prosperity outside. Gai quotes a saying which is part of a longer sentence, recorded in two historical writings: "Shun (a mythical sage ruler) sent eight talented envoys to preach the Five Teachings – father must be just, mother must be caring, elder brother must be supportive, younger brother must be reverent, son must be filial – to all four compass points, and then there was peace inside (the land) and prosperity outside (its borders)."<sup>35</sup> According to this idea, it was necessary to make the tributary states embrace the Confucian code of propriety in order to maintain peace and co-prosperity within the *Tianxia*.

### **Conciliation versus control**

Li Fawei analyzes traditional Chinese foreign relations on the basis of another core concept in the *Analects*, namely *ren* (仁), often translated as 'humaneness'.<sup>36</sup> It is usually seen as the balancing partner of propriety. Li writes that the essence of *ren* is to love one's fellow men, and in order to be able to do that, one has to cultivate oneself through following propriety. The final goal of self-cultivation (of a ruler) is the ability to pacify All-Under-Heaven. Li quotes Mencius who wrote that when a ruler governs through humaneness, he has no enemies. In other words, when the Son of Heaven was virtuous, the barbarians in all directions would submit to his authority. This is the idea of a "sage king" which Yan Xuetong also refers to.

---

<sup>32</sup> Gai Y., "Zhongguo wajiao sixiang chuantong lilu de diandi kaoding", *Shehui Kexuejia*, No. 6, 2010, pp. 72–73.

<sup>33</sup> Yan, *Ancient Chinese* ..., op.cit., pp. 95–99.

<sup>34</sup> Ford, op.cit., p. 99.

<sup>35</sup> *Shiji*; CText.org 五帝本紀 5, and *Zuozhuan*; CText.org 文公十八年.

<sup>36</sup> Li F., "Rujia xinxing lilun dui chuantong Zhongguo duiwai guanxi de yingxiang", *Ningxia Shehui Kexue*, No.3, 2011, pp. 120–123.

Li then extrapolates humaneness into the realm of foreign relations. First, traditional Chinese foreign relations – according to Li – followed the principle of conciliation. As written in the *Analects*: “If far-away people are not submissive, one must attract them to become so through the cultivation of culture and virtue.”<sup>37</sup> Li also reminds readers about the conciliatory foreign policy of the Ming Dynasty, and quotes Emperor Xuanzong, who wrote in 1428: “In controlling the barbarians, defence is the best method.”

Li omitted a part of the quotation where Emperor Xuanzong also said that the barbarians are uncivilized vermin that must be kept at bay: “The sages (of old) compared All-Under-Heaven to a household: The Central Kingdom is the building, and the barbarians of the four compass points are what is outside the garden walls. In the house there are people living, rites and music, and a proper hierarchy; whereas only grass, trees and insects live outside the walls. Such is the Heavenly Order.”

Second, Li explains that the proprietary formalities – rites – associated with the tributary system signalled comity between China and the tribute-bearing nations. Li quotes *Hanshu*, the history of the Han dynasty: “Rites are necessary for regulating external relations and setting the differences; ... the differences mean fear and respect, ... and when there is fear and respect, there is no contention”.<sup>38</sup> Although Li says that this exemplifies the tradition of courtesy and reciprocity in China’s external relations, the quotation and historical facts speak of a rather unequal system.

Third, Li states that the ultimate goal of the Confucians was to bring peace to All-Under-Heaven. Li uses the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty as an example of corresponding foreign policy which emphasized civilian virtue instead of military strength. Li quotes the emperor: “We have been made the Ruler of the Central Kingdom by Heaven but We fear that there are those far and near who have not heard this, and this is why We now make this known to you, kings. ... Make no mistake! ... Those who have already recognized Our legitimacy may coexist peacefully with their neighbours far and near and jointly enjoy the prosperity brought by this era of perfect peace”.

Li seems impervious to the assertiveness of the quotes by the Ming emperors. This is perhaps because the conventional image of that dynasty, visualized by the impressive but ultimately defensive Great Wall, built to its glory during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, is one of a peaceful nation. According to Li, this peacefulness was due to the agricultural (as opposed to nomadic) roots of Chinese society. The historical facts, again, point towards a less idealistic interpretation of the *Zeitgeist*. Alistair Iain Johnston has demonstrated that the foreign relations of the Ming

---

<sup>37</sup> *Analects* XVI.1.

<sup>38</sup> *Hanshu*; CText.org 禮樂志 3.

dynasty were marked by constant warfare and that the Chinese were the initiators of hostilities, even expansive wars, whenever they had the ability to do so.<sup>39</sup>

An oft-cited example of the inherent peacefulness of Ming Dynasty foreign relations are the sea voyages led by the eunuch admiral Zheng He. In the white paper about China's peaceful development, the sea voyages are described as follows: "Under the influence of the culture of harmony, peace-loving has been deeply ingrained in the Chinese character. ... The famous Ming Dynasty navigator Zheng He made seven voyages to the Western Seas, visiting over 30 countries and regions across Asia and Africa. He took along with him the cream of the Chinese culture and technology as well as a message of peace and friendship. ... We respect different cultures and views, treat others in the same way as we expect to be treated, and do not impose our will upon others. We treat all foreign countries with courtesy, foster harmonious ties with neighbours and make friends with distant states."

The historical reality, however, is somewhat different. The fleets were heavily armed, and the sheer size of the flagships and the number of vessels in the fleets were enough to discourage any resistance. Furthermore, there is evidence that the fleets did interfere in some internal conflicts at their ports of call.<sup>40</sup>

### ***The Confucian Golden Rule***

Tang Li and Hu Biyu identify three further conceptual ideas from Confucianism which they believe have an effect on contemporary China's foreign policy.<sup>41</sup> One is *zhongyong* (中庸), an ambiguous term usually translated as 'doctrine of the mean'. It carries several meanings, such as moderation, propriety, equilibrium and objectivity. Tang and Hu connect *zhongyong* with the maxim "strive for harmony but allow for the existence of differences". According to them, the idea manifests itself in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence which have been the cornerstone of China's foreign policy rhetoric since the Bandung Conference in 1955. Another is the idea of "emphasizing justness and downplaying profit". According to Tang and Hu, this idea has been manifested in China's principled opposition towards US hegemony in Indo-China and on the Korean peninsula.

The third idea which Tang Li and Hu Biyu highlight is a pair of concepts formed by *zhong* (忠) and *shu* (恕). They originate from the *Analects*. Tang and Hu explain *zhong* as an earnest desire to

---

<sup>39</sup> A. I. Johnston, *Cultural Realism – Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998, pp. 236–242.

<sup>40</sup> See e.g. H. M. Tanner, *China, A History, Volume I – From Neolithic Cultures through the Great Qing Empire*, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., Indianapolis, 2010, p. 290.

<sup>41</sup> Tang L. & Hu B., "Qianxi Rujia sixiang dui dangdai Zhongguo wajiao de yingxiang", *Suihua Xueyuan Bao*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2010, pp. 44–45.



do good for one's fellow men and society. *Shu* is explained through the Confucian version of the Golden Rule: "what you do not wish for yourself, do not do unto others".<sup>42</sup> According to Tang and Li, *zhong* is reflected in China's support for global equality and solidarity. *Shu*, in turn, is reflected in the principles of mutual non-interference, equality and peaceful coexistence.

It must be pointed out that the above-mentioned interpretation of *zhong* is rather original. I agree with Bryan W. Van Norden who argues that in the *Analects*, *zhong* has the meaning of 'loyalty' towards the ruler. Also, the conventional (but mistaken) interpretation which dates to the famous "neo-Confucian" Zhu Xi (1130–1200), is different from Tang's and Li's. According to Zhu Xi, *zhong* means "fully realizing oneself", or in the translation by D. C. Lau, "doing one's best".<sup>43</sup> This exemplifies how problematic it often is to assign explanatory powers to classical concepts.

### ***Aiming for the top***

A cynical person might, from the very same examples that were used by the Chinese authors quoted above, draw the conclusion that the real heritage of imperial China's foreign relations is simply a sharp division between "us" and "the other" and a blind faith in the moral and cultural superiority of the Central Kingdom. In addition, one could write off China's support for the third world and, by extension, for a more just global order, as a remnant of Communist ideals and as an echo of the competition over international influence against the Soviet Union. The occasional defensive nature of China's foreign relations, in turn, could in the light of Johnston's study be explained by periods of inability and weakness.

Nevertheless, it would be unwise to overlook the deep-rooted perceptions of history that are still immensely influential in Chinese politics. C. A. Ford begins his book with the presumption that China's strategic culture and history do have an effect on Chinese views on international order and legitimacy. The most prevalent trend is labelled "Sinic monism" by the writer. By that, he refers to "the need of political unity, the natural order of all politics as a pyramidal hierarchy, and the fundamental *illegitimacy* of truly separate and independent state sovereigns".<sup>44</sup> These aspects are all present in the discussions quoted above.

However, monism is apparently contradicted by non-interventionism, which goes hand in hand with China's affection for state sovereignty. Ford suggests, not altogether convincingly, that China's insistence on non-interference is defined in opposition to international human rights law

---

<sup>42</sup> See *Analects* XV.24.

<sup>43</sup> B. W. Van Norden, "The Dao of Kongzi", *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2002, pp. 157–172.

<sup>44</sup> Ford, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

and the idea of humanitarian intervention, and is thus a sign of pragmatism instead of principled adherence to the Westphalian system.<sup>45</sup>

In relation to seeking historical precedence in the Warring States era, Ford points out that the commitment by all states to the idea that someone must rule was conducive to zero-sum warfare.<sup>46</sup> To the Chinese, writes Ford, this means the belief in just two possible choices for China: “being on top or being in subjugation”.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, it is of significance that the ancient masters were all in favour of returning to the unity of All-Under-Heaven that had (at least ideally) existed before their time, although Yan Xuetong may not sufficiently stress the fact.<sup>48</sup>

In conclusion, Ford is very concerned about China's unpredictability. According to him, the longstanding faith in clever stratagems and the tendency to see “comprehensive national power” in terms of *shi* (勢), a traditional concept which combines the meanings of not only power, but also status and opportunity, may lead China to use force when nobody would expect her to do so from a rationalistic viewpoint.<sup>49</sup> The position of Taiwan, being related to perceptions about China's unity, is one case where rationality may cease to prevail, as I have previously argued.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Ford, op.cit., p. 266.

<sup>46</sup> Ford, op.cit., p. 63.

<sup>47</sup> Ford, op.cit., p. 156.

<sup>48</sup> See Yang Qianru in Yan, *Ancient Chinese ...*, op.cit., p. 157.

<sup>49</sup> Ford, op.cit., pp. 272–273.

<sup>50</sup> Kallio, op.cit., pp. 29–31.

## The Sword Scabbard Declaration of China's foreign relations

The father of the policies of opening up and reform, Deng Xiaoping, once used a particular phrase to describe China's foreign policy ambitions. In Chinese, it reads *taoguang yanghui, yousuo zuowei* (韬光養晦, 有所作為). This phrase has since been seen as the epitome of China's foreign relations.<sup>51</sup>

The first part of the phrase translates literally as “to hide one's shining (sword blade) and foster furtiveness”. The second part, read in the same context, means “then there will be accomplishments”. Although the earliest origin of the saying seems to be unknown, there is a tendency to link the saying with the stories about the shrewd strategist Liu Bei, who was one of the warlords contesting for supremacy after the Han dynasty, or King Goujian from the Warring States era, who is known for the methodical way in which he avenged the humiliations that he had been subjected to. In consequence, some Western pundits have taken the saying as proof of China's secret military ambitions, which threaten world peace.<sup>52</sup> C. A. Ford echoes a similar sentiment: “The centerpiece of modern Chinese strategy in the period of post-Cold War U.S. dominance... has been to persuade the rest of the world, in effect, to smile and relax while China quietly and steadily moves to restore itself to the global centrality and status that it feels has always been its birthright.”<sup>53</sup>

The official view in China, however, vehemently denies this literal interpretation.<sup>54</sup> Instead, Deng Xiaoping is said to have referred to modesty: one should hide one's shining talents and (thus give time for) one's abilities (to ripen). In this context, the saying is usually translated as: “Bide our time and build up our capabilities”. In other words, China should stay neutral and not stick its neck out, avoid trouble and concentrate on economic development. In 2009, the phrase was updated by adding the word *jianchi* (堅持, ‘to uphold’) to the beginning of the first part and the word *jiji* (積極, ‘actively’) to the beginning of the second part.<sup>55</sup> In this way the phrase becomes even more obscure, but that was perhaps the intention.

This rather reminds the Finns of the “Sword Scabbard Declaration” by Marshal Mannerheim in July, 1941. It signified the start of an offensive in the Finno-Soviet war which thereto had been defensive in nature on the part of Finland. For the Finnish Government, eager to retain the

<sup>51</sup> There seems to be uncertainty about when exactly Deng coined this phrase and precisely what formulation he used. See Xing Yue & Zhang Jibing, “‘Taoguang yanhui’ zhanlüe de sikao—Jian lun ruhe shuli Zhongguo de guoji xingxiang”, *Guoji Guancha*, No. 6, 2006, pp. 13–19.

<sup>52</sup> See Xing & Zhang, op.cit., pp. 13–19.

<sup>53</sup> Ford, op.cit., p. 233.

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. Wang Y., “Guanyu ‘taoguang yanhui’ de zaisikao”, reprinted from *Huanqiu Shibao* at Xinhuanet.com, 13 July 2004, accessed on 13 March 2012, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/comments/2004-07/13/content\\_1594440.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/comments/2004-07/13/content_1594440.htm).

<sup>55</sup> M. T. Fravel, “Revising Deng's Foreign Policy”, *The Diplomat*, January 17, 2012, accessed on 17 January 2012, <http://the-diplomat.com/china-power/2012/01/17/revising-deng's-foreign-policy/>.

sympathies of the other allied nations, the declaration by the Marshal that he “would not place his sword in the scabbard before Finland and East Karelia were free” came as an embarrassment, although the military necessities were understood to call for such a move. Similarly, it seems that Deng’s original choice of words has become an embarrassment for China.

Then again, perhaps too much has been read into this interpretational conundrum. The point is perhaps not what Deng actually said. Nevertheless, the Chinese government is unable to break free from the omnipotence of its last “paramount leader”, and as a consequence, the government is forced to interpret Deng’s (alleged) sayings in a way that maintains the modern and soft image of China it desires the world to see. This illustrates how traditional ideas, mixed with ideology and empowered by a high-ranking proponent, can become actors in their own right in Chinese foreign policy today, at least at the level of rhetoric.

## Concluding remarks

China is rising. In its wake, Confucius is entering the arena of international relations. The Communist Party of China seems to believe that nobody can give a human face to China better than Confucius. Confucius is used to promote a positive image of the nation, for example through the growing network of Confucius Institutes, already established in almost 90 countries, and the propagandists in Beijing are explaining how the foreign relations of imperial China were based on such Confucian values as harmony and mutual benefit. According to the propagandists' narrative, China did not occupy foreign lands because Confucius taught that an enlightened ruler with high moral standards would win the world over without wars. This tradition will continue, and it is the highest hope of contemporary China's leaders that the whole world becomes one community. Nobody needs to fear China's rise, the narrative assures.

Indeed, trust is a much better basis for international relations than fear. Trust, however, is built only by deeds, not words. China's position with regard to the atrocities in Syria, for instance, does not make the country look like a responsible world actor. In China's defence, it can perhaps be said that China's hands are bound by its insistence on the principle of mutual non-interference, one of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Withholding that principle is of vital importance for China, which does not want foreign powers to intervene in matters such as human rights abuses in Tibet.

At the same time, it is easy to see that in the future, China will be faced with dilemmas when its own growing overseas interests, such as mining and farming in Africa, become threatened. Then China's consistency will be tested, and the contradiction between the preferred narrative, centring on "monism", and the harsh realities related to state sovereignty, will surface. Looking at the Chinese government's actions aimed at increasing harmony within China – tellingly, Chinese netizens have dubbed censorship 'harmonization' – it is probably not overly cynical to assume that China will endeavour to explain its own projections of power outside its borders as being conducive to world harmony, and any attempts to interfere with its internal affairs as just the opposite.

China's leadership adamantly denies that their country has any aspirations to become hegemonic. It is certainly possible that they are being earnest. Nevertheless, it seems clear that China will not allow any other nation to become hegemonic either, if it can help it. Furthermore, China will not settle for a position as a second-class major power but will want to take part in the reformulation of the rules and criteria of a possible new international order. This is clearly manifested by the existence of the discussion aimed at the creation of a Chinese international relations theory.

"Soft power" and "peaceful rise" are good slogans for explaining China's desire to harmonize the world, and Confucius is a good ambassador for peace. However, in Confucius's own time, the

upbringing of a gentleman included not only peaceful, cultural pursuits, such as music and poetry but, just as importantly, the ability to shoot with a bow and arrow, and to ride a horse-driven war chariot. Confucius was no pacifist. Similarly, there is no denying that there is a sword in China's scabbard. Such vigilance is naturally the right and, one could argue, even the responsibility of every sovereign nation. With China, the main concern has to do with unpredictability: When and why might China bare the blade remains an enigma for many outside observers. Indeed, there is widespread suspicion that China's soft power is going to give way to hard power when the country has the potential for it.

In view of this perceived unpredictability, a Chinese international relations theory would certainly be helpful. Judging by what we can deduce from the related discussion so far, there is no theory to speak of. We may, nevertheless, detect an outline of a skeletal model. Putting traditional concepts aside, a world constructed in accordance with the Chinese international relations model would basically mean a rules-based community or commonwealth, global in scope and international or even supranational in character. The authority to define the rules would lie within the state which manifests responsible and moral leadership. In essence, there would be a mental tributary system where the other states revolve around the moral leader. The question naturally arises, does the model imply that the position of the Polestar may only belong to China?

## Sources

“China’s Billionaire People’s Congress Makes Capitol Hill Look Like Pauper”, Bloomberg News, 27 February 2012. Accessed on 28 February 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-02-26/china-s-billionaire-lawmakers-make-u-s-peers-look-like-paupers.html>.

“China’s Peaceful Development”. Chinese Government’s Official Web Portal, September 2011. Accessed on 21 November 2011, [http://english.gov.cn/official/2011-09/06/content\\_1941354.htm](http://english.gov.cn/official/2011-09/06/content_1941354.htm).

Chong, Ja Ian, “Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power” (book review). *The China Quarterly*, 208, December 2011, pp. 1033–1034.

Cohen, Paul A., *Speaking of History – The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth Century China*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2009.

Crane, Sam, “Confucianism as Soft Power”, March 2010. Accessed on 21 November 2011, <http://uselesstree.typepad.com/files/confucianism-as-soft-power.doc>.

Dotson, John, “The Confucian Revival in the Propaganda Narratives of the Chinese Government”. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Research Report. July 20, 2011. Accessed on 21 November 2011, [http://www.uscc.gov/researchpapers/2011/Confucian\\_Revival\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.uscc.gov/researchpapers/2011/Confucian_Revival_Paper.pdf).

Ford, Christopher A., *The Mind of Empire – China’s history and Modern Foreign Relations*. The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2010.

Fravel, M. Taylor, “Revising Deng’s Foreign Policy”. *The Diplomat*, January 17, 2012. Accessed on 17 January 2012, <http://the-diplomat.com/china-power/2012/01/17/revising-deng’s-foreign-policy/>.

Gai Yannan, “Zhongguo waijiao sixiang chuantong lilu de diandi kaoding”. *Shehui Kexuejia*, No. 6, 2010, pp. 72–73.

Johnston, Alistair Iain, *Cultural Realism – Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998.

Kallio, Jyrki, *Tradition in Chinese Politics – The Party-state’s reinvention of the past and the critical response from public intellectuals*. FIIA Report 27. The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki, 2010

Kim, S. S., “Chinese Foreign Policy in Theory and Practise”. *China and the World—Chinese Foreign Policy Faces the New Millennium*. Edited. by S.S. Kim. Westview Press, Boulder, 1998.

Li Fawei, “Rujia xinxing lilun dui chuantong Zhongguo duiwai guanxi de yingxiang”. *Ningxia Shehui Kexue*, No.3, 2011, pp. 120–123.

Tang Li & Hu Biyu, "Qianxi Rujia sixiang dui dangdai Zhongguo wajiao de yingxiang". *Suihua Xueyuan Bao*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2010, pp. 44–45.

Tanner, Harold M., *China, A History, Volume I – From Neolithic Cultures through the Great Qing Empire*. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., Indianapolis, 2010.

Van Norden, Bryan W., "The Dao of Kongzi". *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2002, pp. 157–172.

Wang Jisi, "International Relations Theory and the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy: A Chinese Perspective". *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*. Edited by T. W. Robinson & D. Shambaugh. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997

Wang Yusheng, "Guanyu 'taoguang yanghui' de zaisikao". *Huanqiu Shibao*, reprinted at Xinhuanet.com, 13 July 2004. Accessed on 13 March 2012, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/comments/2004-07/13/content\\_1594440.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/comments/2004-07/13/content_1594440.htm).

Xing Yue & Zhang Jibing, "'Taoguang yanghui' zhanlüe de sikao—Jian lun ruhe shuli Zhongguo de guoji xingxiang". *Guoji GuanCha*, No. 6, 2006, pp. 13–19.

Xu Jin, "The Two Poles of Confucianism: A Comparison of the Interstate Political Philosophies of Mencius and Xunzi". In Yan X., *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2011, pp. 161–180.

Yan Xuetong, "How China Can Defeat America". *New York Times*, 20 Nov. 2011. Accessed on 21 November 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/21/opinion/how-china-can-defeat-america.html>.

Yan Xuetong, "The Rise of China and its Power Status". *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, No. 1, 2006, pp. 5–33.

Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*. Edited by Daniel A. Bell and Sun Zhe. Translated by Edmund Ryden. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2011.

Yang Qianru, "An Examination of the Research Theory of Pre-Qin Interstate Political Philosophy". In Yan X., *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2011, pp. 147–160.

Zhao Tingyang, "Wei shenme tichu 'Tianxia tixi' lilun". *Zhong Ping*, Vol. 62, 2005. Accessed on 13 March 2012, <http://www.china-review.com/gao.asp?id=16575>.

The translations of the quotations from the *Analects*, *Hanshu*, *Shiji* and *Shijing* are based on the Chinese editions available at the *Chinese Text Project* website, <http://ctext.org/>.