

MODERN CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHINA'S EXCEPTIONALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS¹

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This research attempts to identify manifestations self-perception of exceptionalism in China's long history and explain why and how different types of exceptionalism have arisen in modern periods. Analyses are historical as well as theoretical. It explores how international structure has interacted with perceptions of history and culture to produce three distinctive, yet related, types of exceptionalism in contemporary China. While not determinative, constructs of exceptionalism can suggest policy dispositions, and by being an essential part of China's worldview, they can become an important source for policy ideas and offer the aspects for the ostensible construction of Chinese theories of international relations.

INTRODUCTION

This research identifies the main elements of its emerging version in contemporary China that started from China's enormous economic transformation in the new era of globalization in the seventeen. Modern Chinese exceptionalism is part of this transformation. In order to understand Chinese exceptionalism, the author finds two important questions and tries to provide the answers. How different Chinese scholars interpret Chinese exceptionalism in the modern world and is modern Chinese exceptionalism an adjustment process for globalization or it is a new swing of nationalism? Research examines the relations of historical and cultural aspects relevant to the rise of a certain type of exceptionalism in various historical times. China's exceptionalism has a strong objective foundation, which was constructed by combination of facts with myths throughout history.

Every nation can contribute to some form of exceptionalism since each nation has its individual history, culture, defined geography, and particularly political, social and economic factors. A special attribute or a composition of attributes in a given state may lead this state to function in an exceptional way. Especially, great powers' exceptionalism can have a larger impact on world affairs. For example, American exceptionalism refers to the view that the United States, for a variety of reasons - its absence of feudalism historically, Puritan roots, endowment of a large continent with abundant natural resources, melting pot, ethnic composition, democratic ideology combining republicanism, egalitarianism, individualism, and populism, and its great sense of confidence and responsibility - differs profoundly from other nations, including Great Britain

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and other European states (Koh, 2002; Tyrell, 1991; Ruggie, 2004). While proponents of American exceptionalism differ in important ways, a common argument of this school of thought is that the United States is a lasting “shining city on a hill,” which can be unbound from the rotation of power shunt in world affairs and historical forces that have affected many other great powers (Calabresi, 2006: 20).

Chinese exceptionalism is rather a recent term frequently used in China's international affairs, even if many Western scholars wrangle that China is more conscious of its long and often exquisite history and precious and unique culture. Most of the recent writings on Chinese exceptionalism are related to discussions of the China model, the perceived unique experience of China's economic miracle (Wu, 2003; Ritchie, 1996). As Henry Kissinger insightfully observes, the United States and China each “assume its national values to be both unique and such a kind, which other people naturally aspire. Reconciling the two versions of exceptionalism (American and Chinese) is the deepest challenge of the Sino-American relationship” (Kissinger, 2011: 44). In 2004 Kang Xiaoguang, a professor at People's University, wrote a long, scholarly article on this topic and was among the first group of Chinese scholars who used the concept. More recently, Chinese scholars have begun to link the concept to the argument of “China's peaceful rise” (Zheng, 2005; Qin, 2010).

These exceptionalist characteristics rooted in historical times, from imperial China, through the revolutionary People's Republic of China (PRC) nowadays. China is often identified as “free-riding” on the international order without clear visions and positions (Marshall, 2011). Although until nowadays China's foreign policy was driven by a defensive attitude country's objective of international relations in the official, semi-official, and intellectual environment developed at a faster stroke and with raising originality. The ten years between 2005 and 2015 have been marked by the appearance of three distinctive sets of literature whose academic and policy influences are likely to grow: firstly, neo-Tianxiaism (Tianxia is a Chinese term usually translated as “all under heaven” (Zhao, 2005)); secondly, the project on China's pre-Qin thoughts of international relations led by Yan Xuetong (2010) at Tsinghua University; thirdly, the “China Model” literature with inputs from Pan Wei (2008) at Peking University.

The methodology used associates discourse analysis and fuzzy set analysis (Treadwell, 1995). The current literature on the exceptionalism in China is often centered on the analysis of whether China is a status quo power or a revisionist power (Johnston 2003; Combes 2011). The dichotomy of status quo and revisionist is not an accurate portrayal of China's relationship with international order. This is so since Randall Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu argue that in multipolar and bipolar systems balancing is the maiden tool to sustain the status quo. Under unipolarity, in contrast, balancing becomes the very definition of revisionism (Schweller and Pu, 2011). In this sense, given that the US is now the only superpower in the world and the current international order is dominated by it, China's any balancing behaviour, no matter whether it is good or bad, is “revisionist” regardless of its intention.

Another problem with this dichotomy is that in practice it is very difficult to label a country as a status quo power or a revisionist power. Let us assume that one country tries to challenge one aspect of the current international order but embrace another part of it, a practical question emerges: do we label this country as a revisionist power or not? It may be logical in case we characterize it as a revisionist state since it truly impeaches international order. However, the

contrast also makes sense because in most areas this country is compliant with the international order. To conquer these problems, we will use the fuzzy-set analysis method.

The logic of the fuzzy-set method indulges to reflect uncertainty within a reasoning system, in a way that a fuzzy logic conclusion is not declared as true or false, but as being possibly true to a particular degree. The degree of certainty is called the "truth value." Since then, more and more scholars are using the fuzzy set analysis to manage and measure political enquiry. In 2005, Gary Goertz and James Mahoney developed a new framework to conduct political research by combining two-level theories and fuzzy-set analysis (Goertz and Mahoney, 2005).

Based on the above mentioned, author argues that China is gradually shifting its exceptional attitude towards the international order from universal delegitimization to selective integration. This argument will be further tested and supported by fuzzy set analysis and discourse analysis. China's exceptional attitude towards the international economic order may reflect its perception, attitude, and degree of acceptance of the international economic principle, norm, principles and regime. It includes China's exceptional attitude to international trade, international finance, international investment, the economic gap between the South and the North, energy, economic globalization and non-traditional security (information security, lack of resources, food safety, technology security, illegal immigration and money laundering). China's exceptionalism may reflect China's perception, attitude, and degree of acceptance of international political rule, norm, principles and regime.

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE ON CHINA'S EXCEPTIONALISM ZHAO'S NEO-TIANXIA SYSTEM

In general, the contributors search for Tianxia's intellectual resources, track its historical evolution, explore its limitations, critique its misuse, rearticulate its worldviews, explore its manifestations, and reconsider its secret links to China's exceptionalism (Wang, 2017). Each of those angles provides a reference point for considering as an alternative vision of world order. Rather than simply provide suitably Chinese parallels to security, geopolitics or other mainstream concepts in international relations, many researchers in China advertise the ancient idea of Tianxia to better see Chinese visions of world order. This concept of Tianxia brings interest to many scholars as it plays the main role to the governance and self-understanding of over two thousand years of the Chinese empire, and it becomes famous again in the 21st century and is including in China's official policy of peacefully rising.

In April 2005 Zhao Tingyang, published his paper "Tianxia tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun" ("The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of a World Institution") to describe a universally valid Chinese model of world order. The Tianxia System becomes popular in China because it shows an interest in Chinese-style solutions to world problems, especially an in how the traditional concept of Tianxia merges with the obviously opposed discourses of nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

While Chinese scholars have been establishing traditional concepts (including Tianxia) with the aim to interpret current domestic and foreign policies for more than a decade (see Dan 2005; Li 2007; Sheng, 1995), Zhao's plan for a Chinese-inspired world utopia provides a model case of the workings of normative policymaking since it dramatically moves these disputes from the periphery to the centre of debate. Zhao's work on neo-Tianxia has been recently redeployed in

ways that blur the conceptual boundaries between empire and globalism, hierarchy and cosmopolitanism. Rather than a guide towards the post-hegemonic world order, Tianxia presents a new hegemony that recreates China's hierarchical empire for the twenty-first century. The popularity of Zhao's very individual understanding of Tianxia thus strongly demonstrates a broader trend that outlives the significant impact of Zhao's book. The Chinese style in International Relations has become a topic of debates, not only between public intellectuals and scholars of political sciences but also in the much wider arenas of popular culture and state policy as a form of national cosmopolitanism. In this way, the Tianxia system is the current answer to the Chinese intellectuals and elites' recurring question: What is China's proper role in the world? Hence, if the predictions about China overtaking the United States to be the exceptional superpower in the next few decades are true, it is important to observe how China would order the world.

According to Zhao, the problem in international politics today is not failed states but a failed world, a dysfunctional chaotic world. While many would see the world disorder as a political or an economic problem, Zhao argues that the world chaos is a conceptual problem: "To order the world we need to create new world concepts which will lead to new world structures" (Zhao, 2005: 1). Since he argues that Western concepts (the Westphalia system) created the current chaos in the world system, he states that only the Chinese concept of Tianxia can realize the conceptual work that is required for the world order. He plays with the definition of this ancient and often uncertain term, sometimes reading Tianxia as "the World," and other times understanding it as "Empire." Tianxia is introduced as a well-founded world order that is distinct from Western imperialism. However, Tianxia is a utopia that provides the analytical and institutional skeleton required for solving the world's problems.

Since the Tianxia system is defined by order, Zhao argues that this alternative world order needs to be established and respected through a world institution. Tianxia refers to the "greatest order" and its structure, has fundamental legitimacy among the world institutions (Zhao, 2005: 31). Although the European Union and the United Nations seem to be "super states" as regional and world institutions, they are limited by a worldview based on "nation states." While the West organizes political life in three levels, "individual, community and nation state," Zhao argues that Chinese political thought looks to the levels of "Tianxia, state, and family." Therefore, the Western world prioritizes individuals and works in terms of "nation states" when the Tianxia system starts at the highest level, Tianxia and orders political and social life in a top-down manner (Zhao, 2005: 17).

The world has significant political problems that need to be solved first conceptually, and then institutionally. Zhao's arguments grow out of a more general feeling among Chinese intellectuals that China's ethical system of domestic and international order was ruined by the violent tendencies of selfish nation states that operate in the Westphalian world system. Zhao provides the Tianxia system as the answer to the world's problems, arguing that one needs to think through the world to understand it, and thus effectively and legitimately govern it. Tianxia is a ranked system that appreciates order over freedom, ethics over the law, and elite rule over democracy.

Zhao borrows his concept from ancient Chinese philosophy and has referred to several philosophical schools to support his theory. However, criticizing this system because of its contradiction with ancient Chinese philosophies is irrelevant as are not the entire basis of his system. Zhao has never viewed his system as "Confucian Tianxia," because he does not consider Tianxia

as a system build on those philosophies. Rather, he has systematically interacted with various philosophies, both from the West and China, while constructing his own new theory.

YAN XUETONG: PRE-QIN THOUGHT AND CHINA'S GLOBAL RISE

This research project examines a number of scholarly traditions from the so-called “golden” age of Chinese philosophy - the pre-Qin era - and attempts to apply them to contemporary international politics (Yan Xuetong, and Xu Jin, 2008 and 2009). The “pre-Qin era” encompasses the Spring-Autumn period (approx. 771-479 BC) and the Warring States period (approx. 481-221 BC), during which China is generally portrayed as a collection of small competing feudal states. These competing kingdoms were eventually unified into one empire under the Qin Dynasty sometime around 221 BC. This period of instability generated some of China's richest and most enduring philosophical traditions, which have long outlived their creator's context.

The Confucian legacy as a distinctly Chinese philosophical tradition is the most widely recognised and discussed one. However, one of the key strengths of Xuetong's pre-Qin project is that it draws upon the writings and associated traditions of many thinkers and philosophers of ancient China, not just Confucius, or closely associated with that tradition. The pre-Qin era is also often viewed as the apex of Chinese philosophy and its texts are significant because of the sustained influence they have on the politics of the Chinese empire over the two millennia that followed (Kaufman, 2011).

Xuetong began his research into the philosophies of pre-Qin (770-220BC) China in 2005, alongside his colleague and co-author Xu Jin. The project's first publication was a reader of pre-Qin thought for undergraduate students featuring original pre-Qin texts such as: extracts from Laozi's writing, founder of the Daoist tradition; three of Mozi's ten key principles; selected texts from the *Four Books (Sishu)* and *Five Classics (Wujing)* that make up the Confucian canon (Xuetong and Xu, 2008). It also includes extracts from *Strategies of the Warring States (Zhanguoce)*, a collection of historical texts compiled during the 3rd to 1st centuries BC generally regarded as a historical rather than philosophical text. All the extracts were selected because of their relevance to international or inter-state politics. In the book, each extract is accompanied by introductory notes, translation into modern Chinese and questions for class discussion. The book's stated aim is to “allow readers to gain inspiration from pre-Qin thinkers and thereby deepen their understanding of contemporary international politics” (Xuetong and Xu, 2008: 1).

Xuetong's further research limits the aspects of pre-Qin studied in the project. Xuetong maintains a focus on the elements of pre-Qin thought that repel lasting international “realities” while any element that does not fit with these understandings is dismissed as “a particular understanding applicable to a particular international system” (Xuetong, 2010: 202). In fact, Xuetong judges of the relevancy of the pre-Qin thought from his realist presumptions about the nature of international politics. Yet, he never reflects upon the process by which he makes these selections or the implications.

Xuetong believes that, by bringing insights from pre-Qin thinkers, Chinese scholarship can meaningfully improve existing theories. Xuetong believes bringing insights from pre-Qin thought is something that Chinese scholars are supposed to do. “Chinese scholars have an advantage in reading Chinese ancient writing and they are able to have a more nuanced, and perhaps better understanding than their Western colleagues” (Xuetong, 2010:256). He is once again

playing with the idea of Chinese exceptionalism by arguing that Chinese scholars are necessarily better placed to understand ancient Chinese thoughts. He gives no explanation to support such a claim, believing it simply to be common sense. Nevertheless, it sits uncomfortably with Xuetong's assertions on the universality of knowledge and the possibility of uncovering insights about international politics in pre-Qin thought that would be applicable to the whole world. Xuetong is using the same separation between China and the West in order to present the "Chinese School" project's insights to improve the Western world order. This latter claim is the key driver behind the entire project and, arguably, behind all of Xuetong's academic work. Xuetong is concerned first and foremost with helping to bring about China's rise in the world and a better and a more harmonious (Chinese-led) world order.

PAN WEI'S CONCEPT OF THE "CHINESE MODEL"

Although the expression "China model" (Zhongguo moshi) came up in Chinese discourse some years ago, the debate only grew with the global financial crisis in 2008 and during the 60th anniversary of the PRC in 2009. As more participants became involved in the discussion, it got increasingly heated and emotional. Among those promoting the power of the "China Model", the best known is probably Pan Wei, a professor at Peking University. Prior to his strong defence of the "China Model", Pan Wei was best known for his articles arguing that law and democracy could and should be separated. Although his proposition was alarming at the time, rereading it in the wake of his most recent writings, it seems quite liberal. Although Pan rejected democracy, he argued that China should establish neutral civil service, an autonomous judiciary, an independent commission on corruption and separation of party and government (Pan, 2008: 3).

Pan Wei understands the idea of a "China Model" more as a symbol or a metaphor than as a discrepant and cohesive model that might provide a clear guide for development elsewhere. There is resistance to what the main ingredients of this model might be. Part of the problem in recognizing the components of such model is the huge multiplicity of trajectories of development within China. To talk of a single "Chinese Model" misses the large variety of economic structures within China.

However, while this diversity might seem to pose a problem in homing in on a "model," it actually points towards what is perhaps the most important single feature. This Yao Yang named the "pragmatism" (wushi zhuyi) pursued by a "neutral" or "disinterested" government (zhongxing zhengfu) that is modestly understood with process of doing everything that works in the long-run and is not driven by any schedule, proposal, ideological bond or societal bias (Yang, 2011: 12). For many researchers, it is experimentation and non-ideological (probably even de-ideological) bonds to doing whatever it takes to advertise growth while cultivating political strength that is the characteristic stamp of the Chinese model of governance. It has been best defined by Heilmann: "The key to understanding the adaptability of China's political economy over the last few decades lies in the unusual combination of extensive policy experimentation with long-term policy prioritization" (Heilmann, 2008:26). The regime has located the experiences of other states and selectively decide which aspects show up to work best for China.

Strong government and stability form together the political basis of a number of characteristics of the "China Model". Once more bearing in mind the comparison between what China is and the experiences of others (and what China is not), identifications of the "China model"

often seem to go no further than simply describing high levels of growth and partial economic liberalization achieved without substantial democratisation and political liberalization. As Zhao claims, “the China Model...is often in a shorthand way described as a combination of economic freedom and political oppression.” Within the Chinese literature, the focus on stability is exceptional. Indeed, stability “takes precedence” because the Chinese people’s fear of chaos has become something related to a “collective psychology” (Zhao, 2008). It is the starting point of precondition that there will be no development at all, let alone a “model”, without stability, which creates a “gradualist” virtuous circle of policy-making. Stability is the first priority of government. This allows for development, which requires the reform of the existing system. Such reform becomes institutionalized through laws, institutions and rules, which in turn increase political stability, and then allows for further development. This is all predicated on strong government and state making the right decisions and choices (Qingguo, 2009).

China is doing well in not following others model, but find its own unique way with its own conditions. As Pan Wei explains: “The China model consists of four sub-systems, they are: a unique way of social organization, a unique way of developing its economy, a unique way of government and finally a unique outlook on the world” (Wei, 2007). The China model is not relevant for others because of the specifics of what has happened in China, rather, it is important for establishing what can be done if other countries do what is best for themselves based on their own concrete circumstances and not simply what they are told by others. The key message from the China model is “start from national conditions, and take your own road” (Wang, 2010: 23).

China is also an alternative: as development model, but also as economic partner, happy to deal with other countries with few strings attached (not recognizing Taiwan is a significant string), and definitely with no democratizing agenda linked to economic relations. This generates significant space in which the countries it deals with can develop their own indigenous strategies, with more autonomy than would be the case if they had no option but to deal with the major Western powers. Active Chinese policy helps in advertising the idea of China as alternative strategy, which treats other developing states as partners. China’s attractiveness does not come from a “Chinese model” that lacks projection of any other model. Rather than thinking about what China is, and what China stands for, it is necessary to think about what China is not and what China does not stand for.

CONCLUSION

This research paper has explored the ‘main elements of the modern manifestations of China’s exceptionalism., by applying academic and political discourse analysis and fuzzy-set analysis, it has examined how different Chinese scholars interpret Chinese exceptionalism in the modern world.

I argue that, today’s China each display their own type of exceptionalism, related in some principles but distinctive in terms of form. A fuzzy-set approach has enabled me to explore how international structure has interacted with perceptions of history and culture to produce distinctive forms of exceptionalism in different historical eras.

By identifying China’s exceptionalism, this paper challenges the idea that, China does not have a new ideology to justify its policy and is gradually shifting its attitude towards international order from general delegitimization to selective embeddedness. Contemporary China explicitly distances itself from having a global (missionary) aim toward the outside world and claims

to be essentially different from the West in this regard (Zhang 2011, 319). On the other end of the spectrum, being exemplary may feed into desires of nationalism.

Exceptionalism reveals a prominent aspect of China's foreign policy traditions and provides a first window into the emerging Chinese ideals of international relations. By being an essential part of China's worldview, exceptionalism becomes an important source for policy ideas, offer the ingredients for the supposed construction of Chinese theories of international relations, and provide a lens to view emerging Chinese visions of international relations. In fact, exceptionalism can be seen as one among many competing intellectual schools for the ideational construction of China's foreign policy that may become more influential as a result of the preserving revival of tradition in today's China.

The Chinese exceptionalism broadly conforms with a state-led growth project. This project places the national project at the centre of policy, and which points to the importance of promoting and protecting key economic sectors and actors and using a central financial institution and a form of (at least) soft planning as the means of national construction and economic development. From such a historical viewpoint, focusing on the Chinese example is relevant, but it only gives a partial view of developmental processes that have been at the heart of (initial) industrialisation strategies since at least the 1820s (and arguably even earlier).

Nevertheless, the focus on China is completely understandable as it is the most recent and in terms of GDP growth the most successfully sustained example of such state-led development. As a result, perhaps the most significant role that China plays in the world as the leading alternative modes of governance. What has happened during and after the crisis has reinforced the image of China representing strong state developmentalism that provides perhaps the best for other developing states in a post-global crisis world. That China is prepared to engage other states in a way that is rather different from Western states. This way only serves to enhance the idea of China as "alternative" project, which is ably supported by the concerted efforts of the Chinese government, to promote itself as exceptional.

This research questions and opens more substantive discussion on footprint undeniably left by China in international relations. The claim that China's rise will be different and peaceful because China is exceptional seems to be facing increasing strategic constraints. There is still a long way to fully comprehend the outcomes of this strategic move as well as the next steps of the Chinese leadership. The Fifth Generation led by Xi Jinping is at a crossroads and one can still witness the first steps of a China 3.0, as well as, popular Belt and Road Initiative. In terms of shaping the 21st century, China will face enormous challenges, among which the domestic ones will be paramount. Since they stem from the process of economic growth, they will be extraordinarily difficult to tackle, but they will determine the ability of China to think strategically.

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