

# ***Traditional Worldviews, Strategic Culture and Revolutionary Mentality: The Case of People's Republic of China***

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*This article explores China's ambitions to become a global hegemon in the 21st century. The research traces the origins of these ambitions in China's strategic culture and system of ideas and representations. Forming a geopolitical study in this way, this article zooms in the concepts of 'middle', 'Middle Kingdom' and Tianxia. 'Middle' symbolises China's centrality and moral authority; 'Middle Kingdom' embodies the idea of a state where political power is concentrated; and Tianxia represents China's historical visions of the global order. The research results show that China's traditional worldviews suggest ambitions for a leading status in the international chessboard, which is confirmed by China's aspects of revolutionary mentality and development of the military power. While the extent to which China will ascend to a leading role remains uncertain, understanding China's identity—via its strategic culture—is crucial for grasping both China's ambitious policy and its impact on the world.*

**Keywords:** Ambitions, China, great power, identity, revolutionary mentality, strategic culture

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the contemporary international system, the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a global and influential actor has become an undeniable reality, captivating scholars and strategists alike. We argue that at the heart of this rise is neither economic

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nor military power but a profound sense of identity rooted in centuries of history and culture.

This article aims to examine three central notions of the mentioned Chinese *identity reality*, which we operationalise in the framework of ‘psychosocial projection on the territory’ as a geopolitical factor (Morgado 2023). For that, and through the constraints of a geopolitical scientific study, we selected three Chinese ideas and ambitions: ‘All-under-Heaven’ (*Tianxia* 天下), ‘middle’ (*zhong* 中) and the ‘Middle Kingdom’ (*Zhongguo* 中国). We deem these three ideas decisive within that *identity reality* and we crystallised them into working concepts of the ‘system of ideas and representations’ (Chauprade and Thual 1998) and strategic culture (Ripsman et al. 2016).

In the first section, we elaborated on our theoretical and methodological framework, composed of key concepts and geopolitical factors. In the second section, we scrutinised the Chinese worldviews from 1949 until our days. In the third section, we analysed the Chinese strategic culture and perception of space. Finally, in the fourth section, we examined the revolutionary mentality and the military power in PRC.

Building on previous research on China’s strategic culture (Fang 2024, Farwa 2018, Johnson 2009, Scobell 2002) and by observing the mentioned Chinese identity elements, the article aims to shed light on the underlying motivations driving China’s pursuit of power and prestige in the international chessboard. The examination is based on a nuanced understanding of China’s international self-perception and how this self-perception influences its strategic behaviour. By examining China’s aspirations and behaviour, the study endeavours to shed light on the evolving dynamics of international relations in an era characterised by China’s rise. Through content analysis of primary and secondary sources, this article seeks to contribute to broadening the scholarly debate surrounding China’s rise as a great power.

For Chinese terms, the chapter consistently uses Pinyin. Each term also appears in simplified Chinese characters upon their initial mention. Subsequent references use Pinyin exclusively.

## THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

To shed light on China’s impact as a great power in the international system, it is primarily necessary to explore the essence of the international system itself. The present-day international system is predominantly liberal, with its foundations rooted in Western philosophy and theories. Despite this, rising powers with different values and cultures also play a significant role, because some of them have the potential to reshape the values of the international system, thereby shaping the international system as a whole (Mazarr et al. 2016).

In this context, when observing relevant international actors with different values from the West, such as China, a comprehensive examination of its identity becomes essential. Thus, through three layers, this article seeks to unpack the complexities of China’s identity with respect to foreign policy. Two of those layers are geopolitical

and the third is philosophical. The first layer is strategic culture. A country's 'strategic culture' comprises the system of beliefs, norms and assumptions of the geopolitical agents, as well as societal élites and the rest of the nation, establishing what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of strategic choices (Ripsman et al. 2016). The second layer lies in the 'system of ideas and representations' (Chauprade and Thual 1998), which consists of the operational system that gathers, within the geopolitical approach, the central identity aspects that shape a state's foreign policy. Both strategic culture and the system of ideas and representations provide information to explain and evaluate the 'psychosocial projection on the territory', which is the geopolitical factor no. 5 of the model of neoclassical geopolitics (Morgado 2023). The third layer is the philosophical one, which, in light of Confucianism, tailored the analysis to the particularities of the Chinese identity reality and avoided common mistakes of trying to explain China exclusively from a Western lens.

Given its significance in Chinese *grand* strategy, we extensively examine the *Tianxia* concept. *Tianxia* is an ancient term generally translated to 'All-under-Heaven' in English. It has historically shaped both Chinese society and strategic thinking. True to its essence, the concept envisions a world without borders, interconnected and operating in harmony. The concept is also connected to other traditional elements of Chinese philosophical thought, such as the 'middle' (*zhong*) and the Middle Kingdom (*Zhongguo*), which indicate China's central position. This significance extends beyond geography, including the political dimension. All these dimensions demonstrate the Chinese's unique consciousness, deeply ingrained in their culture and shaping their identity. Chinese philosophical approaches and certain modern international relations theories also reflect this. In this sense, when examining Chinese ambitions and foreign policy, it is essential to consider identity, especially the sense of uniqueness.

Accordingly, the mentioned terms define concepts in Chinese philosophical approaches and history, thus defining Chinese identity. Without them, modern China is impossible to comprehend. This is because Chinese philosophical approaches, such as Confucianism, have greatly shaped Chinese identity throughout history (Chen 1991, Xu and Wang 2018), thereby also making their way to politics.

This article addresses the aforementioned terms in the context of Confucianism, given its powerful influence on politics throughout Chinese history. When using Confucianism, it is essential to clarify that it is often referred to as a philosophy and less frequently as a religion (Paramore 2015). For the purposes of this chapter, Confucianism is not treated as a religion (Chen 1991). Regardless, we cannot fully equate these Western categories with the philosophical-theoretical currents that have developed in Chinese civilisation. Although defining the role of Confucianism is not the purpose of this study, it suffices to emphasise that this chapter conceptualises Confucianism not so much as a proper philosophy but rather as a theoretical system that defines social and political values. Accordingly, while in some cases the importance of other approaches might also be emphasised for the sake of understanding, the examination is ultimately conducted through the Confucianist perspective.

### CHINESE WORLDVIEWS FROM 1949 UNTIL OUR DAYS

In the 19th and 20th centuries, China's political system and economy faced significant challenges, including the impact of the Opium Wars and the Sino–Japanese Wars. A pivotal turning point emerged in 1949 with the establishment of the PRC. This marked a transformative moment, setting the stage for China's efforts to overcome historical adversities and clearing the way for its subsequent economic and political development. The truly significant milestone began under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, who is associated with 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (*Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi* 中国特色社会主义) and the opening up to the West within the framework of 'reform and opening up' (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放). Therefore, with Deng Xiaoping at the helm of a new China, now opened to the West, the country found the opportunity for its economic development. Moreover, by gaining insights into Western international relations, there was a further development of theories of foreign policy and strategic planning.

In addition to these aspects, it is crucial to note that although the emphasis in the political practice of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) may shift depending on its leaders, China's ultimate goal remains constant—a common place in great powers' foreign policy conduct, which Chauprade and Thual (1998) designated as geopolitical continuities. In fact, most of the Chinese people consider the times before the 'Century of Humiliation' (a period marked by significant challenges) as an era of rise and prosperity and, therefore, aspire to a return to that prosperity. When examining Chinese philosophical theories, one can observe that the Chinese people, even during the time of Confucius, aspired to the 'way of the former kings' (*xian wang zhi dao* 先王之道), which for them represented China's true golden age. In this sense, the national aspiration to rise and achieve a golden age became one of the foundations of the CCP's identity as well. Emphasising this part of the Chinese identity and promising that China will no longer suffer the 'century of humiliation' is an integral part of CCP policy (Bogusz and Jakóbcowski 2020). This CCP feature also includes several other concepts. In this light, it is essential to mention the concepts of Hu Jintao, the 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会), which focuses on domestic stability and development, and the 'harmonious world' (*hexie shijie* 和谐世界), which aims to provide these with international collaborations and peaceful relations. These terms, furthermore, focus on scientific and research progress and China's peaceful development and rise (Zheng and Tok 2007).

These political ideas under study became an important part of Xi Jinping's thought, as can be seen in, for instance, the idea of 'Chinese Dream' (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦). A related concept of the Chinese dream is the 'moderately prosperous society' (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社会), which is essentially deriving from the Confucian concept of the nearly ideal state (*xiaokang* 小康). 'Moderately prosperous society' refers to the aim of China's internal development and the creation of prosperity.

However, Xi's 'Chinese Dream' is more than that. It also encompasses China's rise and rejuvenation. As previously stated, the rise of China means the creation of a state that will not only reach prosperity and development but also return to a golden age. This is certainly part of what rejuvenation refers to as well. Still, it is important to recall the idea of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', which links Western and Chinese ideas, highlighting the necessity of China's cooperation with other states. In this context, while China drew inspiration from its cultural heritage and fundamental concepts, it actively engages in continuous development, through both international collaboration and confrontation, reinforcing its position within the international system.

### CHINESE STRATEGIC CULTURE AND PERCEPTION OF SPACE

Cultural differences between China and Western countries, according to some Chinese scholars, can significantly contribute to the current situation, where people often perceive China as a challenge (Qin 2010). Others point out that China, due to its different cultural background, has struggled to assert itself in an international system dominated by Western theoretical frameworks, and this has also led to the emergence of the Chinese dream (Zhao 2013). Although some may argue that these views may seem one sided, it is crucial to consider them to understand China's role as a great power. The reason for this is that China possesses a distinct value system from the Western one, which has been significantly shaping globalisation. Consequently, China has encountered the necessity of incorporating certain Western values into its social and political structure. The blending of Western structures and traditional Chinese elements in modern Chinese political functioning is evident (Farwa 2018, Scobell 2002). Acknowledging these facts is critical because while it is possible to analyse Chinese strategy and foreign policy using Western frameworks alone, a comprehensive understanding of Chinese identity is required to avoid potential misunderstandings. This is due to the fact that the foundational principles of the Chinese theoretical framework, which have shaped social and political spheres, significantly diverge from Western ones, as previously stated. As a result, geopolitical designs, foreign policy outcomes and strategic goals in China have evolved differently. This fact is highlighted by other researchers on China's strategic culture as well (e.g. Farwa 2018, Johnson 2009, Scobell 2002).

As China has increasingly become an influential actor on the international stage today, both due to its economic weight and its military advancements, it is worthwhile examining its great power aspirations based on its own views and strategies it has employed throughout its history.

In terms of tracing the cultural and political origins of Chinese ambitions, a noteworthy aspect was the changing of ambitions among the geopolitical agents. While in the Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) era, the 'keep it low' (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦) mindset prevailed (Farwa 2018); in Xi Jinping's era, the emphasis goes

on ‘striving for achievement’ (*fenfa youwei* 奋发有为). Nevertheless, both of these approaches can only be understood within the historical and cultural contexts that the article will continue to analyse.

China’s grand strategy continues to attract more attention, as well as an increasing number of researchers. Already in 2002, Scobell noted that China combines specific traditional elements with Western ideas, suggesting that China’s strategic culture may require a unique framework for examination. Johnson (2009) and Farwa (2018) also emphasised the significance of this fact. Moreover, Scobell (2002) pointed out that, due to its cultural characteristics, China perceives itself primarily in a peaceful and defensive role, viewing its possible actions as an ‘active defence’ rather than an offensive strategy. Farwa (2018) reached similar conclusions, highlighting that both Western and Chinese values are reflected in China’s strategy. Farwa (2018) acknowledges China’s engagement in ‘active defence’ but emphasises that Deng Xiaoping’s reforms have intertwined economic development with national security for China. Ashraf (2017) also emphasises the defensive nature of Chinese strategic culture. For now, the research will go to the roots, to *Zhongguo* and *Tianxia*, as key notions in the Chinese strategic culture.

#### ZHONGGUO AND THE CHINESE TRADITIONAL TRIBUTARY SYSTEM

Among the concepts that have influenced the Chinese strategic culture, *Tianxia* stands out. *Tianxia* encompasses numerous aspects; therefore, examining its manifestation in the international system is quite difficult. To observe the credible presence of *Tianxia* in the Chinese strategic culture, with the final goal of better understanding the perceptions of modern Chinese geopolitical agents, it is of paramount importance to examine the concepts connected to *Tianxia*.

As mentioned, *Tianxia* incorporates the idea of China (*Zhongguo*, in Chinese, usually translated as ‘Middle Kingdom’) being at the centre. China’s central position refers to its geographical and political centrality, but it is not the only one. The origin and meaning of ‘*Zhongguo*’ remain a topic under examination, in which scholarly debates have confronted different interpretations (Yang 2022). For example, some scholars, like Chen (2016) and Standaert (2016), highlight that there is a difference between ‘China’ and ‘*Zhongguo*’. Accordingly, ‘China’ refers to the modern, Western-influenced country, and the real meaning of ‘*Zhongguo*’ is very nuanced. The degree to which either formulation represents a nation-state is contingent upon factors such as ethnicity, language, culture and historical context (Chen 2016, Standaert 2016).

Assumedly, ‘*Zhongguo*’ has emerged around the period of the Western Zhou dynasty (Zhao and Chi 2022); however, it remains an open question. Some scholars, such as Kwong (2015), underscore that throughout the eras of the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou), designations such as ‘*Zhongguo*’ emerged to place emphasis on unity and bonding. However, this is not the only interpretation. As Chen (2016) wrote, during the Western Zhou dynasty, *Zhongguo* assuredly had several meanings,

such as (a) centre of the universe; (b) people living in the centre of the universe, surrounded by four barbarians; (c) the country (China); (d) the place where the Son of the Heaven (tianzi 天子; the emperor) deals with affairs, especially with the regard to the tributary system and (e) openness to foreigners (Chen 2016, 76).

Notably, the fourth interpretation highlights the concentration of political power within 'Zhongguo', referring to other areas as barbarian territories. As political power is centralised here, the importance of the emperor is prevailing.

To understand the role and significance of the emperor in this issue, it is first crucial to consider Chinese beliefs. Fundamentally, in the period of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, there were some kind of state rituals to *Di* 帝 or *Shangdi* 上帝 (Lord on High) deity. Presumably in the Zhou dynasty, *Tian* 天 ('sky' or 'heaven') appeared, gathering similar popularity or even replacing Shangdi in some areas of China. Despite the lack of explicit details and focus of this article, it is undeniable that the sky (tian) plays a prominent role in this belief system. Therefore, the concept of 'All-under-Heaven' (*Tianxia*) has become crucial too, inherently carrying spiritual connotations as well. These terminologies later played significant roles in Taoist and Confucian traditions, too. While some interpretations of heaven may include a transcendent aspect in certain schools of thought, these concepts primarily occur in a geographical–philosophical sense in Confucian literature, for example. According to this interpretation, heaven is not so much transcendent as it is a phenomenon that encompasses individual, societal, governance-related rules, and destiny.

Since the heavens encompass rules and principles related to governance, it is no wonder that the emperor, who held the title of 'Son of Heaven' (tianzi), also received the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming* 天命). Therefore, the ruler receives his mandate from the heavens and governs according to the rules and value system dictated by the heavens. In this context, the concentration of political power on a given territory takes on new significance. In conclusion, it might be correct to state that although 'Zhongguo' has several meanings and interpretations, it can refer to the area where people feel a sense of cultural, political and ethnic cohesion and where significant political power is concentrated in the ruler. In this sense, *Tianxia* is primarily a geographical concept (Yang 2022), encompassing territories *in* and *beyond* 'Zhongguo'. However, given the concentration of political power, it might also influence other regions, transcending the geographical dimension to encompass the political realm, involving moral and political influence (Nylan 2007), which could justify Chinese plans for expansion in the future.

A similar perspective can be observed in the Chinese tributary system (*chaogong tixi* 朝贡体系). Scholarly discussion in this area began in the 1940s with the purpose of making Chinese strategic goals more understandable to the West (Hevia 2009). This is why the subject remains highly controversial today. Although the issue of the tributary system got well known in the context of the Ming and Qing dynasties, it might have existed earlier in Chinese history, albeit with potential structural variations. Moreover, even in modern, extensively studied accounts, a wide array of



perspectives have emerged, reflecting a diverse range of viewpoints. A foundational aspect of the tributary system involved states engaging in diplomatic and trade relations with imperial China, wherein they regularly conducted ceremonial visits to the Chinese court under the auspices of a gift-giving protocol. This exchange of gifts was reciprocal; the Chinese court often responded to the gifts from visiting nations with even more substantial offerings (Eszterhai 2019). Therefore, these relations were unlikely to be beneficial for China from an economic point of view. Within this framework, Fairbank (1942) emphasised, among various factors, the defensive role of the tributary system, which he also linked to a form of 'culturalism'. Under this lens, the aim was likely not solely to extract economic benefits for China but rather to protect its interests and maintain its superior political position. Receiving valuable gifts during ceremonial visits may have incentivised countries to engage in this manner with China. Conversely, the ceremonial aspects of these visits tended to leave a profound impression of Chinese culture on the visiting representatives. Moreover, through their participation in the tributary system, these nations implicitly recognised the supreme authority of the Chinese ruler (*tianzi*), who, as discussed, was believed to be mandated by Heaven (*tian*). This reinforces the Chinese ruler's power within China.

Several studies address the essential components of the tributary system, which stands out in Hungarian, Eszterhai (2017, 2019). This author used the Imperially Endorsed Regulations of the Great Qing (*Qinding Daqing Huidian* 钦定大清会典) document in his investigation, which encompasses the roles of the Qing's administrative offices, including those related to foreign relations. A critical finding from the research is that, during this period, China had a variety of foreign relations, not exclusively those that belonged to the tributary system. Crucially, the so-called Ministry of Rites (*Libu* 礼部) managed the tributary system's relations. This division shows that the tributary system may indeed have had cultural significance, and that the hierarchy of tribute states depended more on political or cultural connections than economic weight. From this, Eszterhai deduced the following: (a) the tributary system prioritised cultural links; (b) China shaped the nature of the relationships; (c) China acted as a role model, conducting relationships based on the Chinese value system; (d) a hierarchy existed among the tribute states; (e) both parties were interested in the relationship; the other side generally expected and received economic development; (f) China expected the relationship to be primarily about recognition of its leadership role and (g) the trade within the tribute system also helped China gain access to rare products (Eszterhai 2019, 38–39).

#### **TIANXIA'S ROLE IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM**

While the ideas of *Zhongguo* and the centuries-long flourishing of the Chinese tributary system may significantly shape contemporary Chinese identity, it matters to recognise that beneath these phenomena lies another idea that has not only shaped



Chinese political and strategic cultures across history but continues to do so until our days. It is the idea of *Tianxia*.

Although an ancient concept, *Tianxia* has gained significant popularity since 2005 with a reinterpretation by Zhao Tingyang, a contemporary Chinese philosopher. Confucianism and the traditional *Tianxia* concept serve as the system's fundamental roots. However, to better grasp the theoretical framework of *Tianxia* and its relevance in the international system, one should first examine the significance of the concept of 'middle' (*zhong*).

As Xu (2012) pointed out, *zhong* may have multiple meanings and interpretations. And their translations into English, as well as Western interpretations and attempts to understand them in the light of Western philosophy, complicate things even more. Xu (2012) highlighted four interpretations for *zhong*: 'inside/interior', 'to achieve an intended aim', 'centrality' and 'the middle contrast of the two extreme ends' (Xu 2012, 428–429). These meanings are the start of the interpretive process. In Confucianism, the concept has a central role that is interwoven, among others, with the ideal of the nobleman (*junzi* 君子; man of noble character or virtue). The nobleman is an ideal representing someone who has attained central virtues in Confucianism, such as virtue (*de* 德), trustworthiness (*xin* 信), righteousness (*yi* 义), benevolence (*ren* 仁) and wisdom (*zhi* 智). To attain these virtues, one must recognise the qualities of goodness and evil and harmonise them in balance. Achieving all these is important not only for one's own moral development but also for one's role in society. Thus, in Confucianism, one of the appearances of *zhong* signifies moderation and balancing among various attributes and values to achieve the actual ideal of the nobleman.

Another example of it appears, for instance, in the Doctrine of the Mean VI (*Zhongyong* 中庸), where the observation (*cha* 察) of things and the distinction between virtuous (*shan* 善) and evil (*e* 恶) are central. The result is that the observer comes to possess both ends (*liangduan* 两端; the two extremes) and can highlight the good. The essence of these should be found in the 'golden mean' (*zhongdao* 中道; midway) and its harmony-creating nature (Zhao 2021). These are also important (and expected) qualities of the emperor, as is their transmission in governance. In this context, *zhong*'s nature has significant implications for political power. In sum, in Confucianism, the meaning of *zhong* primarily lies in balancing values, in one's own development (finding the characteristics of the nobleman), as well as in the social and government realms, for the sake of achieving harmony (*hexie* 和谐) in all dimensions. Here lies the connection between *zhong* and the mentioned values: the pursuit of moderation and balance among virtues to attain moral character and ultimately harmony.

Confucianism's concept of *zhong* has evolved over time, influenced by various interpretations. Neo-Confucianism, because of its connections with Taoism and Buddhism, delves into a more metaphysical perspective. One of the most important elements is the resolution of some form of duality. Chinese dualism differs significantly from its Western counterpart, particularly in its approach to understanding the relationship between opposing forces. While Western dualism often presents opposing

elements as contrary dichotomies, Chinese dualism emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of these forces. Its roots are to be found in the Chinese theories about the universe, where the concepts of *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳 also appear. According to this perspective, *yin* and *yang* have an opposing yet complementary nature, and although they have differences, ultimately, they complete each other. This illustrates the dynamic interplay between opposing yet complementary forces in the Chinese mentality. Thus, one can recognise that the essential point in the difference between Chinese and Western dualism is the approach of unity and ultimately harmony. While Western ideas tend to focus on the dominance of one element to eliminate a conflict, the Chinese mentality is rather balancing between opposites. This also means that the Chinese philosophical approach is more inclusive, and it does not exclude opposites (Qin 2014).

Zhong has a nuanced meaning. Confucianism initially refers to balancing values in the individual, social and governance dimensions to achieve harmony. In Neo-Confucianism, there is a special approach to dualism that is different from that of the Western one. Altogether, considering what was previously discussed, the nature of zhong appears in Zhongguo as well. In this sense, it entails the emperor's centrality and political power in all-under-heaven.

These ideas strongly influenced Chinese international relations theories as well as the reinterpretation of *Tianxia*, which is strongly connected to them. Although the mindset behind the 'zhong' is accentuated in the theory of the *Tianxia* system, it extends beyond this focus. *Tianxia* involves three dimensions: geographical, psychological and moral-political. The geographical aspect of 'Zhongguo and other ethnicities' (Ren 2022), or 'Zhongguo and other territories', was introduced in the previous sub-section. The psychological dimension refers to a special attribute of *Tianxia*, the *minxin* 民心. The meaning of *minxin* is the 'heart of people' or, more precisely, the 'will of people' and suggests that the essence of *Tianxia* is achieving that people are voluntarily adhering to it (Zhao 2006). Finally, the moral-political dimension refers to an even more complex aspect. First, Zhao underscores the significance of harmony within the prevailing chaotic world order. Accordingly, the remedy for the chaotic world order lies in the materialisation of *Tianxia* as an ideal empire governed by a world institution (Zhao 2006). Zhao attributes the disorderly nature of the world order to the inherent uncertainty within the international system, which the Western world has shaped. Zhao identifies the root of the problem in the diverse moral and political values across nations. Consequently, he envisions a resolution of the problem through the establishment of cooperation based on shared values, aiming to mitigate mutual insecurities among countries (Zhao 2009). In this approach, Zhong's aspects triumph again. Mutual hostility between states, rooted in different values and political structures, fuels the chaos. The 'world institution' mentioned by Zhao would serve as a central power, similar to Zhongguo and the Chinese tributary system.

The *Tianxia* system theoretically rejects hard power tools, and both the ancient and the reinterpreted ones emphasise the importance of shared values and harmony, which could be achieved by 'relations' and 'political and moral leading' (Zhao 2006). Despite Zhao's lack of clarity about the meaning of those 'relations' and 'moral-political

leadership' within *Tianxia*, the study of Chinese philosophical approaches and international relations theories provides insights into the essence of this matter.

The 'relations' refer to the traditional Chinese relations and their specific system, which is formulated in *guanxi* 关系. We can observe these relations and their strong hierarchy not only between individuals but also between states, as exemplified by the operation of the Chinese tributary system. As other scholars dealing with this issue drew attention to, *Tianxia* is clearly the theory behind these 'relations' (Eszterhai 2013, Qin 2007). When examining *Tianxia* within the context of the international system, it is important to consider the theory of the Chinese School of International Relations. Political scientist Qin Yaqing's theory posits that the international system comprises networks of relations. Within these networks, states can cooperate along common principles and shape their 'faces' (*mianzi* 面子) by forming and operating relations. In this case, 'face' characterises a certain state in the context of its web of relationships (Qin 2019). In other words, it is its reputation, in the light of which a broader network of connections may imply greater cooperation, and consequently, the state's 'face' will also be bigger.

In the light of the multidimensional appearance of *Tianxia*, these relations, as well as the resulting 'face' and 'relational power', which is the manipulation of relations, involve several aspects. On the one hand, a world institution, as formulated by Zhao, which ideally rejects hard power tools, still requires some form of strength to expand its influence. If this strength is not military force, then it would be the possibilities of economic relations. However, these economic relations, akin to the Chinese tributary system, do not solely concentrate on economic growth. Even if economic growth is important for China, some of the economic relations primarily serve as a basis for cultural exchange and soft power. On the other hand, these relations, along with the 'face' built from them (such as gestures or rhetoric), can portray China as a role model, serving the emergence and strengthening of *minxin*.

Political, diplomatic and economic results have the potential to measure the success of all these factors. In this context, to observe China's role according to its own geopolitical and strategic visions, it is worthy examining its network of relations, primarily focused on economic ties. Finally, the current international system, primarily interconnected in terms of economics and values, can also embody political and moral leadership in a comparable manner, potentially positioning China as a future world leader.

### THE REVOLUTIONARY MENTALITY AND THE MILITARY POWER IN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Political psychology can assist further in the understanding of the Chinese geopolitical agents. The Brazilian philosopher de Carvalho (2007) contended that the origins of the Revolutionary Movement can be traced into a certain type of mentality or 'structure of perception' that has been enduring on the path of history. He designated that structure of perception as 'the Revolutionary Mentality'.

The revolutionary mentality, de Carvalho explained, is ‘a spiritual and psychological phenomenon, which, however, shows its most prominent expression in politics’. This revolutionary mentality is characterised by (a) a radical belief that an ideal better world is possible; (b) ‘a mechanism of retroactive justification’, meaning, ‘what I do now in my political actions I will unlikely justify in the uncertain future that no one knows about’; and finally (c) duplicity or multiplicity of justifications and tactics, that is doing something and its opposite at the same time. Both (b) and (c) are then ways to get to (a), the ‘better world’.

The revolutionary mentality, as a distortion of the notions of time and political limited action, created a brutal and irrational field for political action throughout history. Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, Pol Pot and Mao Zedong could easily illustrate the previous characterisation of the revolutionary mentality. In this way, the revolutionary mentality can be identified in the line of time.

What can be designated as a ‘revolutionary movement’ was strengthened from the 16th century onwards, in successive steps gushing from the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution to the October Revolution, Fascist, Anarchist movements, Nazi party, PCR’s Cultural Revolution, May 68, communist *guerilhas* and communist regimes, and the São Paulo Forum. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that the revolutionary movement is constituted by a unitary structure of perception, that is the mentioned revolutionary mentality, a ‘self-conscious continuous phenomenon with a unitary character’ as de Carvalho stated, rather than by any ideological rigid and unique nature. In fact, the ideological flexibility is a key characteristic of the revolutionary movement, flowing from the revolutionary mentality. Knowing this gives a great help in assessing the relations, objectives and modalities of action of the revolutionary movement, from which the CCP can be labelled as a part.

In the same way that the revolutionary movement is independent from any ideological unique guideline, the revolutionary movement is also autonomous, and it is independent from states. Nevertheless, the revolutionary movement is not only able to control states but even to create them. The Soviet Union is an effective example. The Soviet Union has appeared in 1922, fifty-eight years after the creation of the International Workingmen’s Association in 1864 (in which Marx himself collaborated), the precursor of the Communist International Movement, which continued to exist after the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. This premise is compatible with Ripsman, Lobell and Taliaferro’s arguments (2016) that sustain that international institutions (i.e. the revolutionary movement) are able to create an independent dynamic, occasionally, even against the states. Consequently, the revolutionary movement is primarily defined by a specific *Weltanschauung* that produces political results.

How to identify the revolutionary mentality in PRC? Certainly in the concentration of international power. On the one hand, it concerns a country that seeks to cement its own position through building relationships and manipulation and that network of relationships should be as extensive as possible. It is an open question, however, whether this objective target extends to China’s surrounding region and other particular region(s)

or to the entire world. In light of the preceding discussion on China's unique cultural elements and its interaction with the international system, addressing the question of whether China can assume a leading role in the world order becomes inherently complex. The impact of the international system on China is evident not only in the previously discussed topics but also in the conformity of actors with diverse value systems to the international system's framework. Therefore, examining modern Chinese great power identity solely in the light of traditional elements can be as misleading as examining it solely within the framework of Western perspectives. As mentioned earlier, the Western theoretical system has evidently influenced the Chinese mindset—namely through the revolutionary mentality. The extent to which this has influenced strategy and the extent to which the traditional elements of identity are modified in the light of modern achievements remain open to investigation.

Regarding military power, one cannot underestimate the features of the 'Chinese Dream' associated with the modernisation of the Chinese military within the development of China's strengthening (Sinaga 2020). We can likely attribute this importance to a variety of factors. One of these is ensuring the CCP's complete control over the military—a concentration of power for external and internal threats that could potentially challenge the party (Lim 2022). This may indicate that Xi has emphasised multiple times the paramount importance of the military heeding the party's instructions (Xinhua 2020). In addition, some scholars also point out that the US' increased expansion and its deepening of economic ties in Asia could pose a threat to China, which could be another justification for China's military development (Ratner 2013). Although the reasons are not entirely clear, China's stated objective is to finalise defence and military developments by 2035 (Xinhua 2020). The importance of military development was also evident at the 19th and 20th National Congresses. According to the report of the 19th National Congress, Xi emphasised the significance of military training and readiness for war, as well as the importance of maintaining stability, combating terrorism and upholding maritime rights. In addition, he also underlined that the development of the armed forces is part of the Chinese dream. It is the Chinese dream of building a strong military with Chinese characteristics (Xinhua 2017). Following the 20th National Congress, the published constitution stresses the relevance of the political loyalty of the People's Liberation Army and its ability to fight and win (The State Council 2022a). Accordingly, the text of the report of the 20th National Congress also highlights similar elements, including China's efforts to prepare for the 'new era' through military and strategic developments, as well as the establishment of a strong military (The State Council 2022b).

Indeed, China's military modernisation really has fundamentally increased over the past decades, and in recent years, the figure has been steadily rising (Chen and Allen-Ebrahimian 2022). Over these years, China has significantly developed its military and its technological development is also exceptional. China also possesses the largest active-duty military force. China will likely continue its development and modernisation in the coming years, possibly achieving its goal of having the most advanced military force by 2035.

## CONCLUSION

This article was devoted to an understanding of China's strategic culture and its role as a great power in the 21st century. Through the observation of cultural and historical dimensions, with particular focus on the concepts of *Middle*, the *Middle Kingdom* and *Tianxia*, this research piece has highlighted China's specificity and a nuanced approach to international relations. We conducted the investigation using a geopolitical approach and interpreting Confucianism as a guide. We identified Confucianism as the theoretical framework that shapes the social and political realms in China, complementing the set of geopolitical concepts in neoclassical geopolitics and tailoring the study to the specificity of the country under examination.

The article introduced the concepts of the *Middle Kingdom* (*Zhongguo*), tracing its connections with the Chinese tributary system. It was emphasised that the primary point of the tributary system, in the light of *Zhongguo*, is to stimulate other states to recognise Chinese culture and political power. To explain *Tianxia*, the study used three approaches. First, it introduced the concept of the *middle* (*zhong*), whose Confucian and Neo-Confucian interpretations aim to dissolve duality and achieve harmony. Second, building upon this foundation, it outlined the theory of philosopher Zhao Tingyang about *Tianxia*. Third, it presented the central approach of the Chinese school of international relations, as formulated by Qin Yaqing. Using this framework, further studies can examine the interpretation of *Tianxia*.

As the article disclosed, while the extent to which China will attain superpower status remains uncertain, its strategic culture provides valuable insight into its ambitions on the global stage. China's traditional views, historical aspirations and revolutionary mentality suggest a desire to strengthen itself as a central player, as can be noted in its ongoing efforts to reshape the international system—namely investing and flexing the military muscle. However, the examination of its ambitions is complex, as China navigates between traditional views and Western values.

As China's rise continues, its strategic culture will keep playing an important role in shaping its foreign policy decisions and, consequently, its interactions with other actors in the international system. Therefore, scholars and policymakers must prioritise understanding China's traditional views and the special strategic culture rooted in them if they aim to effectively engage or counter China's ambitions and actions.

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