

The London School of Economics and Political Science

Chinese Exceptionalism: An Interpretive Framework to Understanding
China's Rise and Relations with the World

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Abstract

The rise of China as a major player global politics over the past few decades has generated substantial debate among scholars and practitioners of international relations. Many have raised questions and concerns as to what China's long term intentions are, whether it would cooperate or challenge the existing global order, and how countries should respond, react and relate to it.

Given the limitations posed by mainstream international relations theories in explaining China's behavior, this dissertation seeks to delve into the study of China's international politics and foreign policy actions by examining the Chinese political worldview concerning its preferred world order and the norms and rules that it seeks to promote. To do so, this thesis introduces the notion of "Chinese exceptionalism" as a framework or lens through which to better account for China's international politics and foreign policy. In this thesis, I will argue that the Chinese political worldview (i.e. how it sees itself and how it sees the world) perceives China itself as being exceptional, that is, it is good and different, and that this has influenced Beijing's approach to the practice of international politics. Such an exceptionalism *mindset*, I argue, provides us with a better understanding and a more comprehensive interpretation to China's international relations as compared to mainstream IR theories. As this dissertation will highlight, China perceives the existing international order as ripe for change and that it ought to play a more influential role whilst having its interests acknowledged by others. Hence the central question in this dissertation is *what is the Chinese worldview concerning global order and what are the norms and principles that China seeks to promote seeing itself as an exceptional power?* Furthermore, how does Chinese exceptionalism influence Chinese international relations debates concerning its role in the global system and its preferred world order?

The following study provides a systematic analysis to flesh out China's political worldview and how its conceptions of exceptionalism are being reflected in its international practices and global politics. Drawing upon interviews conducted with international relations scholars (particularly those based in East Asia), senior policymakers both from and outside China, Chinese primary sources, and participatory insights gleaned from extended fieldwork working together with Chinese IR specialists

based at a Singapore-based defense think-tank, this dissertation explores China's worldview and its exceptionalism thinking in five different areas. They are, namely, (I) Chinese theories of international relations, (II) Chinese national identity, (III) China's national image, (IV) China's global outreach as shown by the Belt and Road Initiative, and finally, (V) in China's relations with its neighbors. Through locating Chinese exceptionalism discourse within these five areas, this dissertation seeks to unravel what Chinese exceptionalism entails, and how it frames Beijing's worldview towards international politics.

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Choosing to embark on a PhD is a life-changing decision, and reflecting on the past four years, I have no regrets. By the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the PhD course allowed me not only to grow intellectually, but also emotionally and spiritually. Nevertheless I would not have completed this dissertation without the love and support of my wife Pei Xuan. With fear and trembling, we left Singapore for London in the fall of 2015 together with my two young sons, Kairos and Kyrian. Four years on, our family has grown as God has blessed us with two more sons, Kaleo and Krystian, and another in Heaven. Throughout this time, Pei Xuan has been with me

and we had experienced the ups and downs of family life, traveling together in the course of my research. This dissertation is as much her work as it is mine.

List of Acronyms Used

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CNKI	China National Knowledge Infrastructure
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
CSIS	Centre of Strategic and International Studies
DAV	Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam
JCBC	Joint Council of Bilateral Cooperation
OBOR	One Belt One Road
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
SASAC	State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission
SCS	South China Sea
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

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Chapter 1

Chinese Political Worldview and International Global Order

Introduction

The rise of China as a major player global politics over the past few decades has generated substantial debate among scholars and practitioners of international relations. Indeed, Beijing's economic footprints, growing military presence and political influence are being felt all over the world, thus raising questions and concerns as to what its long term intentions are, whether it would cooperate or challenge the existing global order, and consequently how countries should respond, react and relate to it.

Following Xi Jinping's assumption of China's top leadership office in November 2012, China's international prominence has been even more conspicuous, with many suggesting that it was now moving away from a strategy of lying low (taoguang yanghui 韬光养晦) to a more active, even assertive, stance in its international relations.¹ Linked to this is the frequent emphasis among Chinese leaders over the

¹ The term "tao guang yang hui" is sometimes also translated as "hide brightness, nourish obscurity." The scholarly literature on this is vast and will not be exhaustively enumerated here as it will be alluded to throughout the course of the dissertation. Some selected articles that I have consulted include, Zheng, Yongnian, and Gore, Lance. *China Entering the Xi Jinping Era*. London: Routledge, 2015; Poh, Angela, and Mingjiang Li. "A China in Transition: The Rhetoric and Substance of Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping." *Asian Security* 13, no. 2 (2017): 84-97; Chen,

last decade that China's rise would be a peaceful one, and that it would not be a hegemonic power.² According to Buzan, this rhetoric of 'peaceful rise' represents an articulation of Chinese grand strategy, an "indigenous and original idea deeply embedded in China's reform and opening up, and effectively constituting the core concept for a grand strategy. While not without its ambiguities and contradictions, 'peaceful rise' represents a potentially workable program, and a distinctive way of marking China's return to great power standing in international society."³ The key question, as Buzan puts it, is whether China "seeks a stable and harmonious regional and global environment as a desirable end in itself, or merely as an instrumental goal to underpin its own development and rise...was peaceful rise just a transitional strategy, to be abandoned now that China is strong, or is it a long-term strategy?"⁴ Buzan suggests the likelihood that China's ascension would be characterized by "cold

Dingding., and Jianwei Wang. "Lying Low No More?: China's New Thinking on the Tao Guang Yang Hui Strategy." *China: An International Journal* 9, no. 2 (2011): 195-216.

² Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, 'China's peaceful development', Beijing, September 2011, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-09/06/c_131102329.htm (retrieved December 7, 2015).

³ Buzan, Barry. "The logic and contradictions of 'peaceful rise/development' as China's grand strategy." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no.4 (2014): 381- 420, see 384.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 401.

peaceful rise”, one which would be “high in confrontations, alienating neighbours, and reinforcing the US position in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean.”⁵ In other words, China is unlikely to conform to the present international system but seek to find ways to refashion it to its advantage while also ensuring that it does not end up getting embroiled in costly conflict that would affect its internal development and slowing down its economic growth.

How do all these discussions about China relate to the broader conversation on international order and global politics? According to Robert Gilpin, any change in the international system would inevitably also reflect the “new distribution of power and the interests of its new dominant members.”⁶ While this by itself does not necessarily lead to war and hot conflict, yet there is a sufficient body of evidence⁷ to suggest that China’s rise would nonetheless pose a credible challenge to the present

⁵ *Ibid.*, 419.

⁶ Gilpin, Robert G. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p.9.

⁷ See Ikenberry, G. John, Wang, Jisi, Zhu, Feng, eds. *America, China, and the Struggle for World Order : Ideas, Traditions, Historical Legacies, and Global Visions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Sutter, Robert G. *China's Rise in Asia : Promises and Perils*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

international system, not least as a result of Chinese ideas concerning how the international order ought to be structured to reflect Chinese interests.⁸

What changes then would we expect to see in the existing international order to account for China's interests and preference, and more specifically, how would China intend to go about pursuing its objectives, and what are its ultimate goals? This is a topic of deeply divisive debate among international relations (IR) scholars. Realist scholars argue that given the structure of the international system, China would not rise peacefully but that it will "attempt to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere."⁹ Such a line of thinking assumes the international system as universal, whereby all countries perceive the world alike, and

⁸ Kupchan, Charles A. Unpacking hegemony: the social foundations of hierarchical order, in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *Power, Order and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 19-61.

⁹ Mearsheimer, John. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated edition. NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014, esp pp.360-413 (Can China Rise Peacefully?).

that China's interests are fundamentally at odds with Western interests,¹⁰ particularly in the Asia-Pacific region where they are being contested.¹¹

Constructivist scholars who take seriously Chinese culture and ideas (particularly Confucianism) also question the extent to which whether Chinese culture is inherently peaceful and is able to constrain Chinese actions. Those who are wary of Chinese intentions argue that Confucian culture (which is frequently touted as being antimilitary) acts to mask the Chinese practice of realpolitik and expansive grand strategy, which is ultimately power-seeking.¹² Others perceive China's history – shaded by Confucian culture - as largely peaceful (before Western interference) and that the rise of China will herald an international order that is not Western dominated, but instead one that sees China at the apex of the system.¹³ Such an interpretation is also favorably disposed towards the tributary system in which China “stood at the top

¹⁰ For purposes of this thesis, I will define the West in its broadest sense, one which places a strong commitment to liberal institutions, the rule of law and the adherence to high standards of individual human rights. For a scholarly discussion, see Kurth, James. “Western Civilization, Our Tradition”, *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall 2003/Spring 2004, 5-13.

¹¹ Friedberg, Aaron L. *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, And The Struggle For Mastery in Asia*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2011.

¹² Wang, Yuan-Kang. *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

¹³ Kang, David C. *East Asia before the West : Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

of the hierarchy” and other neighboring countries seek to develop stable relations with it through assiduously copying “Chinese institutional and discursive practices.”¹⁴ Western IR scholarship is seen as arising from the European experience during the seventeenth century following the peace of Westphalia, and thus should not be applied to non-European/Western states or entities which do not share the same worldviews that order the Western experience.¹⁵

Liberal institutionalism sees China as taking advantage of the existing global institutions and argue that its rise, is in part due to the present Western-led international order, one that is “open, integrated, and rule-based, with wide and deep political foundations.”¹⁶ Unlike previous hegemonic powers, the present international system has been liberal thus encouraging the entrance of other major powers and accommodating their presence. It is further observed that while the U.S. “unipolar moment” would eventually end, the international order would likely to continue. Such an arrangement is premised upon the role of international institutions as being able to, “in various ways bind states together, constrain state actions and create complicated and demanding political processes that participating states can overcome worries

¹⁴ Kang, David C. *East Asia before the West : Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute*, p.2.

¹⁵ Acharya, Amitav, and Buzan, Barry. *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and beyond Asia*. London: Routledge, 2010.

¹⁶ Ikenberry, G. John. “The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008.

about the arbitrary and untoward exercise of power.”¹⁷ Under these arrangements, China’s rise would not necessarily lead to an unraveling of the international system, and there exist a number of available measures – bilateral and multilateral - that could help to ameliorate some of the worst case conflict scenarios that are feared.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, all three groups are able to muster empirical support for their positions. For instance, China’s seeming intransigence on its territorial claims in the South China Sea with ASEAN and the East Sea with Japan respectively lend support to Mearsheimer’s claim that a rising China would necessarily want to dominate Asia; Martin Jacques assertion that China would “rule the world” is founded upon the strength of the Chinese economy, which is predicted to become the world’s largest within the next few decades.¹⁹ Similarly, the idea that international institutions could possibly constrain, even shape states’ behavior view is premised upon the fact that China views the international system in the same manner that other Western nations

¹⁷ Ikenberry, G. John. *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Building of Order after Major Wars*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001, p.35.

¹⁸ Liff, Adam, P. and G. John Ikenberry, “Racing toward Tragedy?: China’s Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma.” *International Security*, 2014, Vol.39(2), pp.52-91.

¹⁹ Jacques, Martin. *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, London: Penguin Books, 2012, pp.1-6. Given the slowdown of the Chinese economy in 2015 and signs that the American economy may be on the upturn, it remains to be seen if China would overtake the West within the stipulated timeframe (by 2050).

do, and more importantly, share the same goals and objectives as the others. This may not be the case, as a number of Chinese scholars have noted in recent years.²⁰

Clearly, none of the above schools of thought are adequate, in and of themselves, to account for the complex dimensions of interactions between China and the rest of the world. While realist logic predicts the certainty of conflict and war between the current hegemon and a rising power, Chinese leaders have frequently vowed to avoid that outcome and the increased frequency of Sino-American interactions the past few years have gone some way to ameliorate the inevitability of that outcome.²¹ Likewise liberalism, with its emphasis on the construction of global norms (that could limit China's ambitions) assumes that Chinese elites have thoroughly "bought in" to the established global order and are willing to concede what they perceive to be national interests to the broader "good" of international society. Yet, domestic interests and in the case of China, the paramount goal of maintaining Communist rule, constraint Chinese leaders in their decision-making, particularly in

²⁰ Yan, Xuetong. "International Leadership and Norm Evolution." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4, no. 3 (2011): 233-64; Qin, Yaqing. "Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China's International Strategy." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 3 (2014): 285-314.

²¹ The recent trade war between China and the United States may yet sway the pendulum back to the realist logic of the certainty of conflict. As of writing however, the trade war has not led to actual hot conflict.

areas where its international status are being challenged.²² While constructivist arguments provide useful insights into how ideas and norms have contributed to Chinese thinking about international politics, the polarized conclusions they hold about China's behavior (benign or aggressive) suggest considerable ambiguity as to whether ideational elements are sufficient in and of themselves to account for China's political behavior.

The Argument

Chinese political worldview and Chinese exceptionalism

Given the limitations posed by mainstream international relations theories in explaining China's behavior, this dissertation seeks to examine China's political worldview and its vision concerning international order and Chinese preferences on the rules and norms underlining international relations.²³ To do so, this thesis introduces the notion of "Chinese exceptionalism" as a framework or lens through which to better account for China's international politics and foreign policy. In this thesis, I will argue that the Chinese political worldview (i.e. how it sees itself and how

²² Deng, Yong. *China's Struggle for Status : The Realignment of International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

²³ In this dissertation, I define the term "worldview" (or "weltanschauung") as the fundamental cognitive orientation of an individual or society encompassing the whole of the individual's or society's knowledge and point of view. It involves both the perception of (self-identity or self-view) and also that of seeing the outside world.

it sees the world) is that it perceives itself as being *exceptional*, that is, it is *good* and *different*, and that such a *perception has influenced its approach to the practice of international politics*. Such an exceptionalism *mindset* – I argue – provides us with a better understanding and a more comprehensive interpretation to China’s international relations as compared to mainstream IR theories.²⁴

In studying the Chinese worldview and its claims to exceptionalism, I am not suggesting that there exists only one worldview, Chinese identity or voice. Far from it. Nevertheless, given strict state (party) controls about what the “official” narrative of China might be, it seems appropriate to examine what such narratives might be and more importantly, to uncover from these narratives about the way China’s top leaders and key opinion makers attempt to tell the story of China to themselves and to the world. By taking seriously material, ideational and structural factors, this thesis seeks to locate the key driver behind China’s international politics as the sense of exceptionalism within the Chinese Communist Party. By looking at the views of its top leaders and key opinion makers in their speeches and writings, I argue that highly pervasive within the Chinese worldview is a deep sense of exceptionalism and that such exceptionalism dynamics have shaped the manner in which China seeks to relate with the world. To be sure, Chinese exceptionalism is not only the factor contributing

²⁴ To be sure, Chinese exceptionalism is not the only way China seeks to distinguish itself from other major powers. For instance, the adjective “Chinese characteristics” is often used by Chinese leaders and policy makers differentiate the Chinese worldview from others. However, this dissertation will emphasize the importance of Chinese exceptionalism to China’s political worldview.

to the Chinese worldview concerning global order nor does it provide an exhaustive explanation to accounting for China's political behavior. Indeed, other factors such as political ideology, threat perception and historical experiences have also deeply shaded Chinese thinking on international relations. However I argue none of these factors have had a more profound effect on China's political worldview than Chinese exceptionalism. This is especially so in the 21st century whereby China seeks not only parity with other major powers, but also to surpass them (particularly the United States). By seeing itself as good and different, China not only seeks to emphasize its own brand of distinctive practices towards international politics, but also to differentiate its practices as being superior to those of the West which they challenge. To this end, China perceives the existing international order as ripe for change and that it ought to play a more influential role whilst having its interests acknowledged by others.

To clarify, I am not suggesting in my thesis that I believe China is indeed exceptional in the manner of which it conducts its international relations and foreign policy. On the contrary, as I will argue in the course of my dissertation, China has acted in a very un-exceptional way in various affairs of international politics. But if that is the case, is claiming exceptionalism merely a strategy for Chinese leaders and policy makers to utilize in order to promote Beijing's own interests? Such an argument in my view is also overly simplistic for it assumes that the pursuit of national interests is devoid of any ideational basis. Instead my view is that Chinese exceptionalism constitutes an important element in China's worldview (although it is not the only factor as I have highlighted earlier) in framing the manner Chinese leaders and opinion-makers think about the world. This does not mean everything that China does can be explained by Chinese exceptionalism. Indeed my objective in this thesis is not to build

a new IR theory to explain China's international relations, but rather to use Chinese exceptionalism as a theme to comprehend China's political worldview and the extent to which these views concerning China's global ambitions are indicative of the thought-forms and ideas permeating Chinese society at large. Indeed as observed by Deng Yong, China's international relations are best considered in terms of "interaction between domestic and international politics, between China and other great powers, and between China's rise and evolution of the world order at large."²⁵ In other words China's view of itself and its view of the world are closely intertwined. Instead of isolating one aspect of China's great-power ascent (for instance, its military growth or economic might) and use it to explain China's international relations, the study of the Chinese worldview hopes to incorporate a more *holistic explanation* whereby Chinese interests are seen to be interwoven with other political, social and cultural factors which are subsequently played out in Chinese domestic politics and China's international relations.

As a branch of Chinese political thought, Chinese exceptionalism (zhongguo liwai lun, 中国例外论) has also been the subject of Chinese scholarly analysis.²⁶

²⁵ Deng, Yong. *China's Struggle for Status : The Realignment of International Relations*, p.15.

²⁶ See Cheng, Li. "Zhongguo qianjing lekuanlun he zhongguo jueqi liwailun" [China future optimism and Chinese rise and exceptionalism]. Meiguobulujinsixuehui yuehan sangdun zhongguo zhongxin [Brookings Institute, John Thornton Centre], http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2011/7/china-li/05_china_li_chinese.PDF (retrieved 25 April 2016); Kang, Xiaoguang. "Zhongguo

According to Chinese sociologist Kang Xiaoguang, Chinese exceptionalism is manifested in two ways: one, in China's success of large scale institutional change, and its growing international status, and two, in successfully preserving the power of the Communist Party, and greater stability in its political situation.²⁷ Kang further observes that in China's case, the government (or the Party) wields a position of absolute dominance (juedui zhudao diwei 绝对主导地位) over society.²⁸ While Kang is careful to clarify that social behavior is not insignificant, nonetheless for one to "understand the motives and behavior of China's performance", there is a need to "understand the Chinese government's way of motivation and behavior."²⁹ Similarly in a study of China's foreign policy, Feng Zhang noted that Chinese exceptionalism represents an "essential part of the worldview of the Chinese government and many

teshulun – dui Zhongguo dalu 25 nian gaige jingyan de fansi" [Chinese exceptionalism: Reflections on 25 years of reform in mainland China], April 4, 2004, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/2860.html> (retrieved 16 December 2015). Kang uses the terms "zhongguo teshulun" to describe Chinese exceptionalism. Defining "teshu" (特殊) as "special" can be problematic given the negative connotations in Chinese language over the term (i.e. special means mentally challenged), hence the preferred term, "zhongguo liwai lun."

²⁷ Kang, Xiaoguang. "Zhongguo teshulun – dui Zhongguo dalu 25 nian gaige jingyan de fansi", 2004.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

intellectuals [and] it can become an important source for policy ideas.”³⁰ Chris Alden and Daniel Large espouse Chinese exceptionalism as a theoretical framework in their discussion of China-Africa relations, terming it as a “normative modality of engagement that seeks to structure relations” that is geared towards ensuring ‘mutual benefit’ and ‘win-win’ outcomes at continental and bilateral levels.³¹ This is seen to be on fairer terms as opposed to presumably Western-African relations which is perceived as being conducted on terms favorable to the former.

This notion of Chinese exceptionalism (how China sees itself and the wider world) has historical antecedents, going as far back to the era of late imperial China, as one study shows, where it was used as a “cultural strategy to confront and appropriate the hegemonic representation of modern democratic power and Occidental civilization that was articulated on the basis of Tocqueville’s exceptionalist image of America and imposed by Western imperialism.”³² What is different today is that China, unlike its imperial past, is far better connected to the outside world than before, its global reach going structurally much deeper than in the past, with wide-

³⁰ Zhang, Feng. "The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations." *European Journal of International Relations*, 19, no. 2 (2013): 305-28, see 307.

³¹ Alden, Chris, and Daniel Large. "China's Exceptionalism and the Challenges of Delivering Difference in Africa." *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 68 (2011): 21-38.

³² Chen, Hon-Fai. "Reflexive Exceptionalism." *Journal of Classical Sociology* 9, no. 1 (2009): 79-95.

ranging implications.³³ As such, Chinese exceptionalism represents not just a cultural strategy to cope with external hegemonic imposition of foreign ideas, but also, I argue, a means for Chinese elites to actively espouse their worldviews and to promote China on the international stage. Chinese exceptionalism discourse possesses both defensive and offensive elements. As a defensive strategy, it allows Chinese leaders to defend Chinese actions on its own terms rather than being compelled to respond to universal rules which it sees as being Western-centric; as an offensive strategy, it legitimizes Chinese actions by emphasizing the positive aspects of China's worldview. Indeed, the use of "Sino-speak" discourse whereby the past – and China's history - is frequently alluded to in order to express how Chinese elites see China's future.³⁴ As observed, "[While] the discourse of Chinese exceptionalism is hardly unique; as articulations of American exceptionalism show, part of being a great power is celebrating the moral value of your new world order."³⁵ Upon what basis then, are we able to evaluate the moral value of China's purported world order? To what extent does a Chinese world order offer an alternative that is in some ways unique, in that there is something about China – be it its history or its current positions in the global

³³ McNally, Christopher A. "Sino-Capitalism: China's Reemergence and the International Political Economy." *World Politics* 64, no. 4 (2012): 741-76; Ajami, Riad A. "China's Economic Arrival and Global Reach." *Journal of Asia-Pacific Business* 15, no. 3 (2014): 193-96.

³⁴ Callahan, William A. "Sino-speak: Chinese Exceptionalism and the Politics of History." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 1 (2012): 33-55.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

order (or both) - that mark it out as utterly different from others? Or is such a world order simply synonymous with a Sino-centric worldview, whereby China's growing power enables it to coerce other nations to accept its view of the international system? These questions will be discussed in the course of the dissertation.

Exceptionalism and the Chinese World Order

From the above, we see that Chinese exceptionalism discourse has gradually gained traction in scholarly circles both within and outside China as a mode of political inquiry into Chinese international relations behavior. Skeptics of such an approach may pose the question: do not all countries – with few exceptions – consider themselves exceptional in some sense? If that is the case, how would the concept of *Chinese* exceptionalism proffer us with new insights into Chinese political behavior? To answer this question, we need to first revisit the literature of exceptionalism as applied in the domain of international relations. Given the prominence of the United States in global affairs, much of *existing* scholarly literature on exceptionalism allude to the American experience.³⁶ Notwithstanding the challenges to the United States in the 21st century, one might view American exceptionalism as an “interwoven bundle

³⁶ Madsen, Deborah. *American Exceptionalism*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998. Tomes, Robert R. "American Exceptionalism in the Twenty-First Century." *Survival* 56, no. 1 (2014): 27-50. Brooks, Stephen. *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Obama*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

of ideas that together represent an American creed or ideology” that continue to wield substantial traction among the American public and within political culture, shaping how Americans think about US power and influence.³⁷ American exceptionalism, as one study puts it, was not due to “wealth, military force, or the capacity to influence events far from its shores” but instead was due to the “features of the human condition that arose...that became associated with the *idea of America* (emphasis mine).”³⁸ What were these features? According to Stephanson, these features had their roots in religious sources, and in America’s case, in biblical notions of what it means to be God’s people in a promised land whereby Providential destiny was being manifested.³⁹ As pointed out, “visions of the United States as a sacred place providentially selected for divine purposes found a counterpart in the secular idea of the new nation of liberty as a privileged ‘stage’ for the exhibition of a new world order, a great ‘experiment’ for the benefit of humankind as a whole.”⁴⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, in his *Democracy in America* suggests that Christianity has exerted a deep and profound impact among Americans, particularly in how the notion of freedom is being understood.⁴¹ To be certain, exceptionalism, as applied to the American experience, is frequently used as

³⁷ Tomes, Robert R. "American Exceptionalism in the Twenty-First Century", 46.

³⁸ Brooks, Stephen. *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Obama*, p.3.

³⁹ Stephanson, Anders. *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1996.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁴¹ Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America* (translated by Harvey Mansfield).

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, see p.43.

a point of critique, as Stephen Walt sharply puts it, “by focusing on their supposedly exceptional qualities, Americans blind themselves to the ways that they are a lot like everyone else.”⁴² Be that as it may, there exist important differences between political regimes, their respective systems of governance and the outcomes (or consequences) of these systems. As Brooks put it, “unless we are prepared to argue that all belief systems and institutional arrangements are equally likely to produce desirable outcomes in terms of affluence, population health, human dignity, and life satisfaction, then we must acknowledge that some are better than others.”⁴³

What then, can be said for Chinese exceptionalism? Following from the earlier discussion of exceptionalism literature, I argue that Chinese exceptionalism – in the broadest sense – is associated with the *idea of China*. To paraphrase Tomes, Chinese exceptionalism can be defined as an interwoven bundle of ideas that together represent a Chinese creed or ideology that continue to wield substantial traction among the Chinese public and within political culture, shaping how Chinese think about China’s power and influence. In one sense, Chinese exceptionalism rhetoric is frequently espoused to emphasize that China is different from others and that it is destined to be the center of the world (*zhongguo*). For instance, the idea of ‘*tianxia*’ (or ‘all-under-heaven’) promulgated by Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang (whose thought we will consider in the next chapter) features prominently in how Chinese scholars understand the China’s place in the world. More crucially, this difference is

⁴² Walt, Stephen. “The Myth of American Exceptionalism.” *Foreign Policy*, no. 189 (2011): 72-75.

⁴³ Brooks, Stephen. *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Obama*, p.3.

often emphasized as a unique Chinese contribution to global politics and seeks to call into question the normative rules which govern present day international politics. According to Callahan, Zhao's attempt – as an instance - to present the Under-Heaven system as “the solution to the world's problems [renders a] new interpretation of Confucianism's hierarchical system that values order over freedom, ethics over law, and elite governance over democracy and human rights.”⁴⁴ Thus Zhao's desire to transcend the historical limits of Chinese tradition is done with the goal, as Callahan puts it, of “rethink[ing] China” in order to “rethink the world.”⁴⁵

This rethinking of China, I argue, takes place today through attempts of presenting China as an exceptional power, one which would not emulate the West but instead utilize the cultural and ideological repository of its own tradition and history in order to distinguish itself from the West.⁴⁶ But more so, Chinese exceptionalism serves to justify Communist party rule in a country that despite its global reach and presence, remains a “partial power” insofar its influence is concerned.⁴⁷ In other words, the promotion of a Chinese world order (whether Tianxia or not) and the preservation of

⁴⁴ Callahan, William A. *China Dreams : 20 Visions of the Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p.56.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ See Callahan, William A. "History, Tradition and the China Dream: Socialist Modernization in the World of Great Harmony." *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol.24, no.96 (2015): 983-1001, for a critique of modern Chinese political ideology.

⁴⁷ Shambaugh, David. *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

China's domestic order are intertwined vis-à-vis a single institution - the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP would be unable to articulate what an international order would be like if it could not achieve its domestic objectives; likewise, in order to achieve its domestic objectives, it would have to ensure that the international order is favorably disposed to itself. One way to do so is for Beijing to present itself as an exceptional power, that it is both different and good; different from the West (by being "inherently peaceful"), and that its goodness is derived from claiming some form of moral superiority from being the most virtuous, including being the number one in what it does.⁴⁸ Given China's pursuit of national rejuvenation and international status, a moral (or ethical) basis is needed so as to avoid criticism that China is pursuing growth at all costs. Hence, Chinese exceptionalism provides a conduit of discourse for the Chinese government to achieve its objectives of casting itself as a morally upright nation. This is done in two ways: one, by promoting a positive image of China which is peace-seeking, non-hegemonic, and hence, different, and two, to preserve the identity of "Chinese-ness" which is desirable or good against what it sees as subversive values (such as rule of law, liberal democracy and civil society) that could possibly undermine the Communist Party hold on power.

The Chinese worldview and global political order

Hence, the central question of my study is *what is the Chinese worldview concerning global order and what are the norms and principles that China seeks to promote seeing itself as an exceptional power?* Furthermore, how does Chinese

⁴⁸ Callahan, *China Dreams*, p.156.

exceptionalism influence Chinese international relations debates concerning its role in the global system? To what extent can China lay claim to be different and good (i.e. exceptional) in its international relations, and if so, how successful has China been in utilizing such a strategy to boost its international image as well as preserving Chinese identity in the 21st century?

To answer this question, I will argue the following: one, ideas have consequences; two, interests influence choices; and three, relations (not necessary defined by power) affect conduct.⁴⁹ While this places the study in the constructivist camp as far as taking Chinese ideas and culture seriously is concerned, it does not mean that one should take lightly the importance of the international system in both framing and possibly limiting China's choices of actions. Nor does it minimize the importance that power dynamics (informed by a realist worldview) plays in Chinese international relations. Indeed, the importance of political power features prominently within Chinese elite politics, and frequently manifests itself in China's foreign policy.⁵⁰ Yet on the other hand, it can be argued that China's international politics also entails

⁴⁹ Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999, see 92-135 and 313-366.

⁵⁰ Lampton, David M. *Following the Leader : Ruling China, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014; Zhang, Jian. "The Domestic Sources of China's More Assertive Foreign Policy." *International Politics* 51, no. 3 (2014): 390-397.

much more than the pursuit of wealth and power; symbolic issues such of Beijing's search for respect, status and national pride also drive its foreign policy.⁵¹

Hence, what I try to do in my study is to locate the "recombination of processes", as Katzenstein puts it, as a result of China's increased engagement with the world and how these interactions have subsequently influenced China's international relations.

⁵² Chinese exceptionalism involves, then, an interplay of forces (ideational and material) that is aimed not just to legitimize Communist Party governance within China, but also to celebrate China (and the Party's) standing in the world, and with that, the possibility of changing the global order. Furthermore, there is a deep and ambivalent tension between the structure of the international system (which is largely Western-dominated) and Chinese thinking about what the international system ought to be like (less Western-dominated, with the introduction of more Chinese indigenous ideas). In addition, China wants to be like the West (in terms of scientific knowledge and technological know-how), without emulating the values of the West. Is this possible? Is China able to achieve the former and not – to some extent – appropriating the values of the latter? As highlighted earlier, many Chinese scholars seem to draw a distinction between China and the West in their articulation of Chinese identity, are such

⁵¹ Deng, Yong. *China's Struggle for Status : The Realignment of International Relations*, 2008; Gries, Peter Hays. *China's New Nationalism : Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

⁵² Katzenstein, Peter J. 'China's rise: rupture, return, or recombination?' in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Sinicization and the Rise of China: Civilizational processes beyond East and West*. New York: Routledge, 2012, 1-39.

differences “real” or imagined? Likewise, ideas and material structure are not inherently opposed, but interact with each other in a creative/dialectical manner in which one influence, and in turn, is being influenced by the other.

In analyzing what a Chinese worldview might mean, and whether Chinese exceptionalism has been successful (or not) in helping the Chinese government to achieving its objectives, one needs to first examine the climate of ideas pervading Chinese society and how these ideas are consequently incarnated in Chinese politics. In this respect, Chinese society – not least because of its opening up – is far more ideologically diverse and multi-faceted than what a straight-forward rendering of Confucian values or Marxist ideas might suggest. As Richard Madsen reminds in his study of a Chinese village, the Chinese Communists’ official obsession with Confucius ideas could only provide “vague hints about how that official obsession might affect the beliefs of ordinary Chinese citizens.”⁵³ Likewise Callahan, in his study of Chinese public intellectuals, surmised that China’s civil society contains a “broad spectrum of activity that ranges from promoting the fundamentalism of the China model to more cosmopolitan views of China and the world.”⁵⁴ While Chinese elites may work to project a particular Chinese worldview, how such a worldview is interpreted, internalized and acted upon, both within and outside China, remains open to debate.

⁵³ Madsen, Richard. *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p.ix.

⁵⁴ Callahan, *China Dreams*, p.39.

Research Design

My research will focus on analyzing how popular notions of the Chinese worldview concerning global order influence China's international relations, in particular those informed by Chinese exceptionalism influence China's international relations. In examining the discourse of various key actors and opinion leaders in China and consequently the worldview they bring into their works (speeches, writings), the dissertation seeks to narrate how Chinese exceptionalism is being understood and fleshed out in Chinese political practices and international relations. Instead of trying to get at the bottom of what the "real China" is or debating whether China's rise would be a peaceful or non-peaceful, I ask the more basic question, that is, "what is going on here" and what does it tell us about how the Chinese worldview, that is, how it views itself and the outside world.

In my research, I contend that China's assertiveness on its interests is due to its seeing itself as exceptional and more importantly, that it is "different" and "good" as compared to other major powers, particularly the United States. I also expect to find a certain sense of pride and "Chinese entitlement" concerning Chinese interests and the manner in which it relates with other states, especially those within its periphery. In relating to world order, China – as an exceptional power – would want to challenge and modify the present Western-led international order to suit its preferences and prescriptions concerning the rules and norms of the global system.⁵⁵ This may be through the establishment of initiatives such as the security-related Xiangshan Forum,

⁵⁵ Christensen, Thomas J. *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power*. New York: Norton, 2015.

the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. To what extent are these initiatives able to provide China with the opportunity, not just to express its preferences concerning global norms, but more crucially also to promote what it sees the global system, and its norms, as they ought to be?

Critics of exceptionalism would argue that “exceptionalism” is mostly rhetoric, and most nation states tend to think that way about themselves. The question “how exceptional is China” would be also asked, especially among realist scholars, who generally view the pursuit of power as applicable to all nation-states without exception. Given this, it would be necessary to demonstrate empirically that Chinese state behavior is due not only to material interests, but is also due to a deeper commitment to certain ideational factors that is part of the Chinese exceptionalism mindset. In other words, as the argument go, does Chinese thinking of international relations and global order contain a sense of exceptionalism within them, and if so, to what extent do these ideas influence the manner in which China pursues its international relations?

I use in-depth interviews and discourse analysis of both primary and secondary sources to accomplish my empirical research and test my claims. Areas of convergence in these sources are useful for illustrating exceptionalism ideas and how they relate to Chinese actions. Using in-depth interviews is most appropriate in order to provide depth and a nuanced understanding of my subjects’ perspective. In-depth interviews allow the following advantages: (I) to pursue questions that are difficult to locate in documentary sources or everyday interactions, and to explore such questions in intricate detail; (II) they permit an exceptional degree of flexibility, control, and detail in the pursuit of participants’ understandings; (III) to recover and analyze the agency of individuals; and (IV) to map the conceptual world of participants in ways that

illuminate both coherence and inconsistency.⁵⁶ These sources are mostly members of the Chinese academic community. As recounted to me, Chinese government officials frequently toe the official line in their interviews, whereas the Chinese academics are more inclined to speak their mind, and hence represent a richer source of information and ideas.⁵⁷

Discourse analysis will be used to uncover other themes of Chinese worldview, global order and exceptionalism prevalent in Chinese sources. These sources will include speeches made by top Chinese government leaders, Chinese scholars and citizen intellectuals whose voices illuminate China's socio-political landscape. To take their comments at face-value would be naïve, but to be overly cynical and to dismiss these voices as either government propaganda or the voice of a minority anti-government movement would be jumping to an equally simplistic conclusion. As observed, a discourse maintains a degree of regularity in social relations and produces preconditions for action as well as constraints and frames how actors think about the

⁵⁶ Soss, Joe, "Talking Our Way to Meaningful Explanations: A Practice-Centered View of Interviewing for Interpretive Research" in Yanow, Dvora., and Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine. *Interpretation and Method : Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2006, pp.127-150.

⁵⁷ Interview with Singaporean diplomat formerly based in Beijing, March 31, 2016, London.

world.⁵⁸ Furthermore as identity and policy are constituted through a process of narrative adjustment and stand in a constitutive, rather than a casual relationship, hence the need to examine how individuals in China relate to their external environment and consequently, how they think and act about issues in specific ways.

⁵⁹ Given that Chinese society is far from monolithic, there may be varying levels of beliefs (some stronger, some weaker) about Chinese views of global order and exceptionalism among my research subjects and hence, to uncover the extent to which these different levels of Chinese global order, identity and exceptionalism interrelate with each other in China's international relations. In this aspect, my fluency in Chinese culture and language will provide me with some measure of cultural competence to make sense of the differences in meanings and representations embedded within the Chinese worldview concerning its brand of exceptionalism.

The lack of a quantitative aspect to my methodology may raise questions concerning the replicability and whether such an approach is sufficiently scientifically rigorous. Yet, as observed, recent work on the nature of the self has generally destabilized the concept of the individual as having a "fixed, immutable, identity", but

⁵⁸ See Neumann, Iver B. "Discourse Analysis" in Audie Klotz & Deepa Prakash, *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp.62-63.

⁵⁹ Hansen, Lene. *Security as Practice Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*. London: Routledge, 2006, see pp.xvii – xx.

instead the individual might be thought of as having a “narrative identity.”⁶⁰ These stories then become the basis of truth-claims made by the individual and vividly shape the manner the individual comprehends the world. This is not to suggest that scientific precision – using quantifiable indicators – do not matter; where possible, I will use quantitative analysis (surveys), but at the same time, analyze these findings in reference to narratives, a “person-centered strategy”, so as to better make sense of what these findings mean to the situated individual.⁶¹ In their study of the leadership patterns of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, He and Feng highlight the importance of leaders’ belief systems in understanding the nature and policy of states in the international system. As noted, “leaders’ beliefs moreover dictate the policy behaviours of states, as the different policy choices of states are the means whereby leaders achieve their strategic goals within the international system.”⁶² Given this, it would be necessary to understand the moral environment in which Chinese leaders inhabit and whereby they receive their cues concerning how they should act. As the Cambridge philosopher Simon Blackburn puts it:

[Our moral environment] determines what we find acceptable or unacceptable, admirable or contemptible. It determines our conception of when things are

⁶⁰ Elliott, Jane. *Using Narrative in Social Research Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. London: SAGE Publications, 2005, p.1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.91.

⁶² He, Kai, and Huiyun Feng. "Xi Jinping's Operational Code Beliefs and China's Foreign Policy." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 6, no. 3 (2013): 209-231, see 217.

going well and when they are going badly. It determines our conception of what is due to us, and what is due from us, as we relate to others. It shapes our emotional responses, determining what is a cause of pride or shame, or anger or gratitude, or what can be forgiven and what cannot.⁶³

Seen this way, one might argue that Chinese views of global order and Chinese exceptionalism are both closely linked to the Chinese moral environment. How then do Chinese scholars understand their moral environment (both within and out of China) and consequently, what are the key operating ideas and belief systems that shape the way Chinese scholars think about the world? How are these ideas then being fleshed out and translated in the field of Chinese international relations? Indeed as will be seen in my dissertation (especially in Chapters 2,3 and 4), this issue of morality is an important element to how China's international relations is being conducted. Chinese leaders and scholars seek to project China as a "good" power and that its international relations practices are also justified as being morally acceptable. This is being contrasted with the practices of the West which are frequently touted to be morally questionable thus allowing China to legitimately claim it being superior to the West.

Finally in my research, there is a need to be sensitive in the application of methodology towards Chinese sources and to take into account the different context and conditions that Chinese politics are enmeshed within, including a developing

⁶³ Blackburn, Simon. *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p.1.

economy, an authoritarian polity, and an Asian culture.⁶⁴ Furthermore, given the political sensitivity of some aspects of my research (particularly those that touch upon the Communist Party), I would have to be careful to ensure that personal safety, both of myself and my subjects is not compromised. As noted, “researchers who strive to gain access to data that are considered to be “internal” (neibu 内部), or related to state secrets, may put themselves at odds with the Chinese state...carrying out interviews, conducting surveys, and working with officials to gain access to archival sources may also put one’s subjects and colleagues in harm’s way.”⁶⁵ One way is to speak to Chinese scholars outside of China, either via institutional affiliation (i.e. a visiting Chinese scholar) or through academic events (i.e. conferences) where they are likely to be more candid and forthcoming in their views. Another way is to use a “site-based method”, such as ethnography and participant observation, which is especially valuable given the need to probe thoughts and motivations of these scholars. As pointed out, a site-intensive approach allows to examine aspects of human behavior that are subtle (i.e. relationships, networks, identities, styles, beliefs, or modes of action), and hidden, sensitive, or otherwise kept behind barriers that require building trust, waiting to observe unguarded moments, or otherwise unlocking access.⁶⁶ To do

⁶⁴ Carlson, Allen. Gallagher, Mary, E. Lieberthal, K. and Manion, M. *Contemporary Chinese Politics : New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p.4.

⁶⁵ Carlson et al. *Contemporary Chinese Politics : New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies*, p.8.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.150.

so, I spent extended time in Chinese institutions so as to locate myself within a community of Chinese scholars, so as to interact with them in more informal settings whereby they feel less compelled by the need to “defend China” against external criticism.

Dissertation Overview

The rest of this dissertation is divided into seven chapters, outlined as follows. Chapter 2 looks at the study of the discipline of international relations in China and how Chinese international relations scholars purport to explain China’s political worldview in the conduct of international politics within an exceptionalist framework. I will examine the ideas promulgated by four Chinese scholars, whose engagement of international relations through the use of so-called Chinese indigenous ideas underscore the bulk of present debates over Chinese IR theory. These ideas are being underscored by a powerful conviction that existing international relations paradigms are mostly derived from Western culture and history and thus ought not to be applied to the analysis of Chinese international relations. Instead, there is a need to take into account elements of Chinese traditional culture and experiences of China’s history. By privileging a Sino-centric perspective towards international relations, while at the same time rejecting the tenets proffered by mainstream international relations theory (which are criticized as Western), these scholars demonstrate the existence of Chinese exceptionalism thinking as applied to the conceptualization of Chinese political thought and the Chinese worldview.

In Chapter 3, I explore how the Chinese worldview, and particularly Chinese exceptionalism, shape understandings of Chinese national identity. To do so, I use a

sociological structure that builds on the concept of “liquid modernity” and seek to explicate how this is being played out in Chinese society. More importantly, the chapter seeks to understand how the issue concerning Chinese national identity is intertwined with the practice of China’s international relations. How is this national identity being constructed to present China as a virtuous or “better” nation than the West? I also look at the relationship between the individual and the state and how the negotiation of national identity and individual identity is being played out in practice. To what extent are they co-constitutive or in conflict with each other, and how does this in turn affect the amount of “social capital” that is necessary for the proper function of Chinese society? I will also probe the extent to which Chinese nationalism is able to proffer the Party leadership with the required social capital with which to create a shared sense of meaning and cohesiveness (ningjuli 凝聚力) within Chinese society. Through a discussion of the above, I raise the question as to whether the Chinese government and the political system it establishes is able to contend with the forces of modernity and the dilemmas it would face in the coming years.

Chapter 4 focuses the study on China’s view of itself (i.e. its national image) and how such a view is being presented to the outside world. More specifically I will attempt to relate how the projection of China’s national image is done with the goal of telling China’s story of itself as being an exceptional power. Through an examination of the speeches made by President Xi Jinping, I will examine which political narratives and which national images Chinese leaders seek to project to the outside world. I will study the extent to which such images have been successful in presenting China as an exceptional power, to its domestic constituents and to the wider world.

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

Chapters 6 and 7 shift the focus of the Chinese worldview of itself to its relations with its neighbors and the extent to which Beijing's international behavior is being accepted, or obtained buy-in from countries in Southeast Asia. In other words, how do China's neighbors interpret and understand the Chinese worldview and China's

political actions? In chapter 6, I will focus on two key countries: Vietnam and Indonesia. Given Vietnam's geographical proximity, historical ties and ideological links with China, it is highly sensitive to Chinese actions within its periphery and will thus provide highly contextualized insights into China's regional diplomacy. Indonesia, being one of the region's major players, is influential in ASEAN's decision-making process and its views of China would be taken seriously, especially by Chinese leaders. Through a series of in-depth interviews with policy-makers from these countries, many of whom are well acquainted with political-security matters, I explain the complexities of how China is being perceived by its neighbors and the degree to which China's political worldview and ideas concerning global order are being accepted by others.

In chapter 7, I focus on Singapore, a city-state with a sizeable ethnic Chinese population, and the scholarly discourse emanating from its elite regarding China. This is important to our study of China's political worldview, and its claims to be an exceptional power. If a Chinese global order is said to be good and different (from the West), then one would expect this to be reflected in Singapore's perspective towards China, particularly if Beijing is being associated with a benevolent form of global leadership. Furthermore, given Singapore's ethnic majority Chinese population, Singapore would represent a good platform from which to test and validate Chinese exceptionalism claims. To what extent are Singapore ethnic Chinese able to identify with China's political worldview and its claims to exceptionalism? In this chapter, I will examine the ideas promulgated by three Singaporean public intellectuals, whose reading and appraisal of China's international relations represent existing school of views in Singapore towards Beijing. I will argue that at the crux of Singapore's perspective(s) towards China is a contestation over ideational, material

and structural factors that are linked with China's international relations, and the extent to which China is perceived as being exceptional, that is, being different and good.

In Chapter 8, I sum up my findings and highlight the implications of my study to understanding the future of China's international relations and its view of the global political order. From my study, I show that three key themes are highly pervasive in the Chinese worldview: (I) the Chinese Communist Party continues to wield significant authorship over the master narrative to China's political worldview; (II) much of China's international politics and its claims to exceptionalism is defined in opposition to an imagined West (and the United States) that is seen to be attempting to contain China's rise; and (III) China perceives the international system and its associated rules as being outdated and thus it wants to seek a greater voice in rewriting these rules to promote its interests. From the above, I argue that for China's worldview to be accepted by others, it would have to demonstrate in its international relations affinity with the West and appreciation of ideological differences without having to constantly present itself as non-Western and to actualize the positive expression of what it stands for (not just what it is against). Notwithstanding its claims to exceptionalism and being good and different from the West, I argue the Chinese worldview at present remains highly particularistic (or Sino-centric) and that it presents limited claims to universality, thus rendering its view of political order questionable and potentially difficult to actualize in practice.

Chapter 2

Chinese political worldview and a 'different' kind of international relations theory

In my introduction, I suggested the need to examine China's political worldview and how it views its place in the existing global order as a crucial starting point with which to understand its international relations. I also proposed the notion of Chinese exceptionalism – the idea that China sees itself as being good and different – as being fundamental to how it sees itself and also influencing its relations with the international community. In this chapter, I will examine how China's worldview, and its claims to exceptionalism, are being reflected in the practice of international relations (IR) in China, and how IR – as an academic discipline – is being understood among Chinese scholars within an exceptionalist framework. Why is this important? For one, the study of international relations in China is not a neutral activity that is pursued for purely academic endeavor and for the generation of new forms of inquiry.⁶⁷ It is however, highly politicized and subjected to broader political objectives, in particular the preservation of Communist party rule (discussed below). As such, we might surmise that the study of IR in China reflects not only the thinking of Chinese IR scholars about international affairs, but also to some extent incorporates features of Chinese political

⁶⁷ This is also being confirmed by the author's interviews with Chinese IR scholars, both inside and outside of China, many of whom highlighted the emphasis given by the Chinese government in their domestic priorities.

culture and its political life, insofar as these are being embedded within scholarly perception and practice of international politics.

Given this, I argue that China's prominence in international relations has emboldened Chinese IR scholars in recent years in suggesting a "Chinese way" of thinking about international relations, and to take into account traditional Chinese ideas and incorporating them into mainstream IR scholarship, which is seen to be privileging a Western-centric reading of international affairs. Indeed, as I will show in this chapter, within the Chinese political worldview, there is a deep sense of superiority and difference vis-à-vis the West and that the discipline of international relations ought to reflect these attributes. In a study of the development of Chinese IR theory, Qin Yaqing, also the president of the China Foreign Affairs University, observes that efforts to develop Chinese IR theory have gathered momentum since the start of the twenty-first century given China's economic strength and international influence.⁶⁸ While these concepts have yet to obtain universal traction and are still largely in an embryonic stage, the ability to theorize, as Qin puts it, "is a sign of intellectual maturity,"⁶⁹ and Chinese scholars are increasingly using Chinese indigenous resources in attempting to articulate what they view as a unique Chinese contribution to the wider IR discipline.

In the following, I will examine the ideas promulgated by four Chinese scholars, whose engagement of international relations theory through the use of so-called

⁶⁸Qin, Yaqing. "Development of International Relations Theory in China." *International Studies* 46, no. 1-2 (2009): 185-201.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

Chinese indigenous ideas provide a useful vantage point of comparison with existing mainstream IR theories: Yan Xuetong, Qin Yaqing, Zhao Tingyang and Zhang Feng. Three of them, Yan, Qin and Zhao are well known for their theorizing work on Chinese international politics as we shall see. In the case of Zhang, notwithstanding being much younger, he represents a new generation of Chinese IR scholars⁷⁰ who have undergone substantial IR training in the West and are thus seen as scholarly interlocutors who are able to explain China to Western audiences using a combination of Chinese and Western thought forms.⁷¹ In the case of Zhao – in spite of his academic background in philosophy – his ideas concerning “Tianxia” (all-under-heaven) have received substantial attention both within and outside China for its relevance to Chinese IR thinking.⁷² To clarify, these four scholars – and their ideas – do not exhaust

⁷⁰ By the term ‘Chinese’, I refer to those who are born in the PRC, and thus exclude scholars who are ethnically Chinese but are of non PRC-descent. Whether they are based inside or outside of China is less relevant to my selection.

⁷¹ Being the youngest of all three, Zhang’s views can be said to possibly represent an evolution of Chinese IR theories over the years. I will analyze in this chapter the ideas in his published book. See, Zhang, Feng. *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015. The fact that Zhang also talks about Chinese exceptionalism in his writings also made him and his scholarly ideas a natural point of reference and choice of selection in my analysis of Chinese international relations thought.

⁷² Zhao, Tingyang. *Tianxia Tixi – Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun* [Tianxia System – An Introduction to the Philosophy of World Institutions]. Nanjing: Jiangsu Education

the permutations of scholarly debates that characterize the study of international relations thinking in China. To analyse in great detail the expansive variety of international relations thinking in China is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Instead what I hope to do in this chapter is to examine the theoretical paradigms offered by these four scholars in their study of international relations and consequently what they tell us about the Chinese worldview and claims to exceptionalism. As I will later show, what these four have in common is a strong belief that existing IR paradigms derived from Western experiences are insufficient to account for Chinese international relations and the Chinese political worldview. More than that, these ideas also seek to challenge the universal insights claimed by Western IR paradigms while attempting to emphasize even universalizing the insights proffered by Chinese IR thought. To understand Chinese thinking about international relations, they argue for the need to take into account traditional Chinese culture and experiences gathered from Chinese history. In addition, they also contest the universal validity of Western

Press, 2005; Callahan, William A., and Barabantseva, Elena. *China Orders the World : Normative Soft Power and Foreign Policy*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011.

IR theories in explaining state behaviour, in particular the importance of power, and attempt to conceptualize China's approach to international relations with reference to other considerations, such as patterns of relationality, emotional affectivity and moral conduct. While these scholars do not aim to entirely supplant Western IR theories with Chinese alternatives, their arguments – to a large extent – call into question the relevance of Western thinking and worldview, and consequently, seek to relativize the conclusions arrived at.

This chapter will proceed as follows. I will first provide a brief overview of the development of international relations theory in China, and in particular on scholarly discussions emerging from China in the 2000s, a period which China's global rise become more pronounced, and where debate over Chinese IR insights became more prevalent. I will then go on to analyse in turn the ideas put forth by the four named scholars, whose ideas represent different conceptualizations of Chinese IR thought. In the process, I will attempt to draw similarities and differences between these ideas and existing IR schools of thought (realism, liberalism and constructivism) and to examine the extent to which Chinese traditional ideas can be said to be unique or distinct. I argue that while it is possible to incorporate Chinese traditional ideas into our understanding of Chinese state behaviour, China's political system and political culture imposes limits to the degree these ideas can be properly termed as an IR theory, and that it lacks generalizability.

IR theory with Chinese characteristics

The importance of articulating a Chinese approach to international relations theory can be said to be motivated in part by the need to establish and present Chinese national interests to the international community. In a study of the relationship between China's global ascendancy and its international relations, Hung-jen Wang identifies three main features of Chinese IR scholarship as "identity, appropriation, and adaptation."⁷³ In the first phase of scholarship, the identities of Chinese IR scholars are being shaped by their China's political systems, cultural values and historical experiences. Such work began in the late 80s and early 90s following China's re-integration into the international system. Following that, Chinese scholars began to appropriate Western IR theories and applied them with the Chinese principle of ti-yong ("substance-function") – that is, combining Chinese concerns with the learning of foreign knowledge. The third feature saw Chinese scholars adapt concepts of Western IR scholarship (such as "balance of power" and "nation-state) to analyse events in China. To this end, Wang observed that "repeated cycles of learning and appropriation may ultimately relativize the universal values of those and other concepts found in Western IR theories so as to transform their original Western meanings."⁷⁴

Similarly, Qin Yaqing in his survey of the development of international relations theory in China argued that the development of IR as an academic discipline in China

⁷³ Wang, Hung-Jen. *The Rise of China and Chinese International Relations Scholarship*. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2013, p.2.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4.

has moved from pre-theory to a theory-learning (or theory-deepening) stage. The “theory-innovation phase”, whereby “scholars will seek to explain reality and understand social phenomena from a distinctly Chinese perspective” has yet to materialize, although Chinese scholars have increasingly emphasized the need to incorporate Chinese traditional thinking in responding to global issues. One central feature of this theory-deepening stage is a fascination with constructivism (following Alexander Wendt) and the saliency of constructivist ideas towards Chinese IR. In addition, given the debate on China’s peaceful rise, the issue of Chinese identity became a central concern among Chinese scholars. Hence, constructivist ideas dovetailed well with the Chinese philosophy of *I Ching* (Change) which advocated that identity and behaviour are changeable.⁷⁵ This constructivist turn in Chinese IR theory, I argue, reflects a broader debate about what it means to be Chinese in the twenty-first century, and the role and contribution of China to the rest of the world.

Beyond the quest for scholarly enquiry, the emergence of Chinese perspectives to the study of international relations can also be said to be a reaction to the 2008-09 U.S. financial crisis, which had consequently called into question the ongoing legitimacy of a Western-led international system. As such, the possibility for non-Western alternatives, and in China’s case, for Chinese thinking to take root and permeate the structure of the international order became more pronounced.⁷⁶ Indeed,

⁷⁵ Qin, Yaqing. "Development of International Relations Theory in China", 191.

⁷⁶ This was a central point made by many Chinese scholars whom I interviewed during my fieldwork in Beijing between 18 May and 15 June 2017; see also, Zhong,

China has in the past decade elected to embark on its own high level initiatives that highlight Chinese leadership and the spread of Chinese global influence. For instance, the Xiangshan Forum, a security dialogue held every fall in Beijing since 2014 (and held once every two years from 2006-2012) is being widely seen as a move to rival the annual Asia Security Forum (or Shangri-La Dialogue held in Singapore) and to allow China to voice and frame discussions over global security matters. Indeed, it is observed that China has downgraded its participation at the Asia Security Forum due to unhappiness over how maritime disputes are being discussed at a multilateral platform (as opposed to its preference for bilateral approaches).⁷⁷ Economic initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road

Feiteng. *Fazhanxing anquan: zhongguo jueqi yu zhixu chonggou* [Developmental security: China's rise and the reconstruction of order]. Beijing: China Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2017; Zheng, Yongnian and Lim, Wen Xin. "The Changing Geopolitical Landscape, China and the World Order in the 21st Century." *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 15, no.1 (2017): 4-23; Sun, Jianguo. "Sunjianguo: Wei yinlingshijie hepingfazhan hezuogongying gongxian zhongguo zhihui" [Sunjianguo: To lead the peaceful development of the world and win-win cooperation and the contribution of China's wisdom], <http://www.71.cn/2016/0418/884939.shtml> (retrieved March 26, 2019).

⁷⁷ Tiezzi, Shannon. "Why is China downgrading participation in the Shangri-La Dialogue?" *The Diplomat*, June 2, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/06/why-is-china-downgrading-participation-in-the-shangri-la-dialogue/> (retrieved January 13, 2019).

Initiative (BRI) - which we will discuss in greater detail in chapter 7 - have also been touted as Chinese responses to Western-led economic systems.⁷⁸

From the above, we see that the study of Chinese IR should be viewed within a larger framework of perceived Chinese self-identity, and in this case, seen to be in tension, if not in opposition, to Western conception of self, society and statehood (this issue of identity will be further discussed in the next chapter). Why is this so? One reason, according to Robert Cox, lies in the difference in how the past and future is being understood by the Chinese, as opposed to Western thinking. While Western thinkers are wont to read change as a “movement towards an ultimate preordained unity of thought and organized life” (i.e. the inevitable triumph of liberal democracy), in the Chinese mentality, the meaning of change has been a “movement to and fro, rise and fall, alternation in a cyclical pattern with a continuing moral injunction to

⁷⁸ Zhang, Jingwei. “AIIB: Integrating New and Old Orders.” *Beijing Review*, no.28, July 14, 2016.

http://www.bjreview.com/Business/201607/t20160711_800061996.html (retrieved February 13, 2019); Huang, Yiping. "Understanding China's Belt & Road Initiative: Motivation, Framework and Assessment." *China Economic Review* 40 (2016): 314-21; Hu, Richard W. "China's 'One Belt One Road' Strategy." *China Report* 53, no. 2 (2017): 107-24; Ferdinand, Peter. "Westward Ho—the China Dream and ‘one Belt, One Road’: Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping." *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016): 941-57.

achieve some degree of harmony among conflicting forces.”⁷⁹ Likewise Fei Xiaotong has also explicated on organizational patterns that are deeply entrenched in Chinese society that stand in contrast with those derived in the West.⁸⁰ While the merits and limitations of these arguments are beyond the scope of my thesis to discuss, any analysis of Chinese IR must necessarily include some aspects of Chinese self-identity and its relevance to the study of international relations.

In my subsequent discussion, I will examine the thinking of four Chinese IR scholars and to uncover aspects of Chinese self-identity within their theoretical framework. I will attempt to critically assess these elements of self-identity with respect to the three mainstream schools of IR (realism, liberalism and constructivism) and to highlight differences and similarities between these existing schools and those

⁷⁹ Cox, Robert, W. “Historicity and international relations”, in Yongnian Zheng, ed., *China and International Relations: The Chinese view and the contribution of Wang Gungwu*. New York: Routledge, 2010, pp.3-17, see 6-7. Interestingly under CCP rule and influenced by Marxist thinking, the mindset has been to adopt a almost teleological view of history as one of continuous progress and forward movement accompanied by “scientific development”. This suggests a break from traditional Chinese thinking as described by Cox in the worldview of Chinese political elites. Whether the vast majority of Chinese citizens subscribe to such a view of history remains to be seen.

⁸⁰ Fei, Xiaotong. *From the Soil: the Foundations of Chinese*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

conceptualized by Chinese IR scholars. This is not to say that other factors, such as the structure of international system, material capabilities or ideology are not relevant. However, I argue that these factors matter less insofar as the study of Chinese self-identity is concerned as much of this is a matter of perception. According to Deng Yong, China's objective during the late 90s and early 2000s was to "join the club (of powerful nations)", today, China's intentions are to "form a club of its own" and consequently to author its own terms of reference, instead of acquiescing to the status quo.⁸¹ To this end, the arguments made below reflect an attempt by Chinese IR scholars to distinguish Chinese ideas concerning international relations from existing paradigms.

Yan Xuetong: A Chinese realist confronts realism

Due to Yan's scholarly prominence both within and outside China, a number of critical assessments of his political ideas have been undertaken, following the publication of his 2011 book, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, which provided an account of Chinese political thought and its implications for contemporary Chinese international relations.⁸² Yan identifies himself outright as a realist scholar, noting that

⁸¹ Personal interview, 14 July 2017, Singapore.

⁸² Yan, Xuetong. *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011; for a critical appraisal of Yan's thinking, see Cunningham-Cross, Linsay, and William A. Callahan. "Ancient Chinese Power, Modern Chinese Thought" *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4, no. 4 (2011): 349-74.

“realist logic is clear, simple, and easy to understand...[unlike] dialectic method...by which any form of explanation is possible.”⁸³ A central theme in Yan’s overall analysis is the need to incorporate morality into the practice of international politics. In his 2016 book *The Transition of World Power: Political Leadership and Strategic Competition*, Yan proposes a framework of moral realism (daoyi xianshizhuyi 道义现实主义) as a foundational premise for the conduct of international politics.⁸⁴ Yan prefaces his study by rejecting the claim made by John Mearsheimer that countries with a moralistic approach are more dangerous in international affairs, instead he argues that a proper understanding of morality is necessary: states ought not to confuse their own moral concepts with universal moral standards. Yan adds that the concepts of moral realism that he puts forth are not restricted to China only, but universally applicable. Yan also tells us that the Confucian concept of “welcoming without exception, but not to teach” (laierbuju buwangjiaozhi 来而不拒,不往教之) is sharply contrasted with the Christian tradition of “asking others to convert” (curen guiyi 促人皈依), and that China adopts a non-confrontational foreign policy. This is in contrast to the U.S in which Yan argues,

⁸³ For further explication on Yan’s realist approach, see Yan, Xuetong. *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, pp.240-241.

⁸⁴ Yan, Xuetong. *Shijie quanli de zhuanyi: Zhengzhi lingdao yu zhanlue jingzhen [The Transition of World Power: Political Leadership and Strategic Competition]*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2015. As this chapter is not meant to be a full analysis of the book, I limit my observations to chapters one (pp. 3-23), five (pp.103-123), and nine (pp.214-238) in which Yan expounds on his study of moral realism, and its relevance to the practice of international relations.

that in the process of implementing its own moral standards have resulted in countless conflicts.⁸⁵ In addition, Yan contends that in Western thinking, power and “elements of power” are often used interchangeably and thus confused whereas the Chinese language distinguishes clearly between might/power (quanli 权力) and capability/strength (shili 实力).⁸⁶ Yan also emphasizes that the ability of a country to sustain its leading role in the international system is premised upon its preservation of its moral foundations, in addition to having a strategic reputation (zhanlue xinyu 战略信誉).

Yan also seeks to distinguish moral realism from Chinese theories of international relations, arguing that a universal theory of international relations is not confined to national boundaries. Yan proposes that the goal of moral realism is to achieve a universal theory and that moral realism best explains the transition of world power between a leading power and a rising power.⁸⁷ Yan also argues that moral realism is a scientific method of inquiry and thus ought to be viewed as logical, verifiable and having predictive properties.⁸⁸ In this respect, moral realism – as an IR theory – in accounting for patterns of behavior in Chinese history, can also be applied to contemporary international relations given its foundations in human nature which is unchanging.⁸⁹ Yan further contends that moral realism – due to its emphasis on moral

⁸⁵ *Shijie quanli de zhuanqi: Zhengzhi lingdao yu zhanlue jingzhen*, p.7.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.8

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.105.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.113.

leadership - coheres well with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tenets and is thus being accepted. Yan also notes that moral realism does not mean that leading countries ought to practice self-constraint (ziwo yueshu 自我约束) on purely moral considerations, but include other factors such as their own strategic interests (zhanlue liyi 战略利益).⁹⁰

Yan concludes his analysis by proposing for the need to establish China's credentials as a "humane authority" (wangquan 王权) as opposed to a hegemonic power (baquan 霸权). Yan criticizes the present U.S.- led international system as a hegemonic one and argues that a humane authority would be superior to the existing arrangement.⁹¹ Furthermore, the litmus test of whether China is able to fulfil its role of a humane authority is whether other countries view China as a model for emulation. In this respect, Yan perceives the intensification of anti-corruption efforts since 2013 by the Chinese government as a positive force for attracting others to follow.⁹² On the relationship between China and the U.S., Yan argues that the strategic competition between both countries was not just about material capabilities but also involve the values that both countries hold. Hence for China to achieve national rejuvenation, it would not only have to provide the world with a set of values, but these values would have to be of a higher standard than those promoted by the U.S. To this end, Yan contends that values like fairness (gongping 公平), righteousness (zhengyi 正义) and civilization(wenming 文明) were more important than equality (pingdeng 平等),

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.126-127.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.216.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.217

democracy (minzu 民主) and freedom (ziyou 自由). Yan adds that it was natural for countries to emulate those who are more powerful, richer and prosperous and in the process of doing so, also subconsciously absorb the values upon which these successes were built upon. This will consequently result in new international norms and global order.⁹³

Given the above brief summary of Yan's arguments, how should we approach the ideas of moral realism, and to what extent does Yan's exposition reflect a unique Chinese way of perceiving and ordering the international system. To be certain, the issue of morality is not solely particular to Chinese IR thinking, many Western IR thinkers - realist scholars or otherwise – have long debated the relationship between morality and power politics.⁹⁴ The difference however, lies in how IR theory relates to practical realities. In the case of Western IR scholarship, theory is seen viewed as descriptive (what is), whereas Chinese IR theory purports also to be propagative (what ought to be).⁹⁵ While the saying that "theory is always for someone and for some purpose" can be applied equally to both Western and Chinese IR theories, Chinese IR

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp.217-218.

⁹⁴ Williams, Michael C. "Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical Realism, and the Moral Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 58, no. 4 (2004): 633-65; Lebow, Richard Ned. *The Tragic Vision of Politics : Ethics, Interests, and Orders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁹⁵ It should be said that critical IR scholarship also seeks to differentiate between what is normative from what is materialist.

scholars operate under a domestic environment that is far more restrictive and inhibitive of academic freedom than is the case in the West.⁹⁶ Hence scholarly writing are not purely academic exercises for the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, but also reflect individual and institutional positions vis-à-vis the Chinese government, and in some cases, function as political gambles to be “on the right side of those in power.”⁹⁷ In the case of Yan, he makes clear that he sees his role as both a scholar and a policy advisor, and consequently to be able to contribute to China’s success on the global stage.⁹⁸ By mixing together both his scholarly and patriotic positions, it is difficult to take Yan’s arguments on moral realism as having sufficiently universal reach. Rather it can be said that Yan’s prescriptions are largely framed with *only* China’s national interests at heart, and are not framed with the interests of other states in mind, notwithstanding the rhetoric of China’s inclusive diplomacy.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ See, Cox, Robert. “Social Forces, States, and World Order: Beyond International Relations Theory”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 10, No.2 (1981): 126-155, see 128. In China, academic think-tanks are usually required to provide policy positions that support political objectives and have less autonomy to conduct purely academic research.

⁹⁷ This was being recounted to me by a Chinese IR scholar during a personal interview in Beijing, June 13, 2017.

⁹⁸ See Yan, Xuetong. *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Appendix 2, pp.229-251.

⁹⁹ For a scholarly analysis of how Chinese diplomatic talk and Chinese diplomacy actions are frequently incompatible, see Lai, Christina. "Acting one way and talking

Relating to Chinese exceptionalism, Yan's moral realism position becomes more problematic. This is because for Yan to remain faithful to his moral realism, he would have to criticize the Chinese government at some point. However nowhere in his writings does Yan express explicit criticism of the Chinese Communist Party, it is as if the CCP faithfully and perfectly lives up to Yan's standards of what morality should entail. This is clearly not possible. By claiming a privileged position (via moral realism) with which to criticize the West, Yan does not acknowledge his own starting position and political biasedness. This calls into question the extent to which Yan's views can be said to be unique from others, or is this simply a rehash of realist tenets taken from existing international relations paradigms.

Finally, Yan's formulation of moral realism is also highly contentious: by conceiving moral realism in a law-like manner, Yan does not leave room for any debate as to the role of morality in international politics. Indeed, Yan writes of moral realism as if it is an established scientific law (like the law of gravity) that states and statesmen ought to follow. In the *Transition of World Power*, Yan frequently prefaces his arguments by the phrase "moral realism contends" (daode xianshizhuyi renwei 道义现实主义认为), thus essentially taking moral realism as unproblematic and as a given fact (or law). To this end, one might pose the question: can one be always moral in the pursuit of one's interests? As it were, a true realist (in a Machiavellian manner) would privilege interests over morality, the latter acting as a support only where it is

another: China's coercive economic diplomacy in East Asia and beyond." *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 2 (2018): 169-87.

expedient to do so. Yan is thus unclear as to where he stands on this matter. Does he perceive morality as necessary to the exercise of power politics and consistent with realist principles, or does he treat morality as being ultimately subjected to political objectives, therein seen as useful but not necessary. Indeed, the possibility that morality is used as an instrumental veil for political goals is not factored into Yan's analysis. Given Yan's reputation as a realist scholar, the absence of a critical perspective towards the issue of morality somewhat undermines the strength of Yan's arguments and challenging the validity of his conclusions.

Qin Yaqing and Feng Zhang: From constructivism to relationality

Unlike Yan who identifies himself with a realist approach to international relations, Qin and Zhang refrain from identifying themselves outrightly as constructivist scholars, notwithstanding the emphasis on ideational elements in their line of thought. Instead, both scholars propose that in order to understand contemporary Chinese international politics, a relational paradigm is needed.¹⁰⁰ To be certain, this relational paradigm is neither new nor a unique Chinese contribution, rather it is located within a wider epistemological and methodological debate in IR that seeks to problematize the notion of how states ought to be understood. Instead of perceiving states as a "substance"

¹⁰⁰ While Qin's arguments are largely limited to the formulation of theoretical concepts, Feng's writing – which is closely based on his doctorate thesis – includes historical illustrations and empirical evidence to back his theoretical paradigm. For the purpose of this chapter I will combine both Qin's and Feng's insights under the broader theme of relationality scholarship.

or an autonomous entity, this line of scholarship seeks to advance the position that states are best conceived as processes and that relations possess ontological significance.¹⁰¹ Not surprisingly, both Qin and Zhang also attempt to build upon the insights made by Western scholars such as Alexander Wendt as well as Jackson and Nexon in their respective analysis, whereby social identities and social relations are being privileged in the analysis of state behavior.¹⁰²

In his 2009 article "Relationality and processual construction: bringing Chinese ideas into international relations theory" which was published by the *Social Sciences in China* journal, Qin makes the central claim that relations possess ontological quality, and are not merely peripheral to the conduct of international politics.¹⁰³ In Qin's

¹⁰¹ Ashley, Richard. "Untying the Sovereign State: A Double Reading of the Anarchy Problematique." *Millennium* 17 (1988): 227-62; Campbell, David. *Writing Security : United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.

¹⁰² Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus, and Daniel H Nexon. "Relations Before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics." *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 3 (1999): 291-332.

¹⁰³ Qin, Yaqing. "Relationality and Processual Construction: Bringing Chinese Ideas into International Relations Theory." *Social Sciences in China* 30, no. 4 (2009): 5-20. Qin's work is further elaborated in the most recent book, Qin, Yaqing. *A Relational Theory of World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. For

view, the biggest weakness of mainstream Western IR theory is the focus on the systemic (state) level but fails to sufficiently account for social interactive processes as well as social relations that are involved. To be fair, such a line of critique is not unwarranted as constructivist IR scholars over the years have attempted to articulate a variety of ways to bring into sharper focus and to emphasize the social aspect of human existence. In this view, structures are not a given, but are “constantly produced, reproduced, and altered by discursive practices of agents.”¹⁰⁴ Where Qin attempts to distinguish his ideas from mainstream constructivist scholars are his assumptions concerning relationality, and which – in his view – are uniquely borne out within Chinese socio-cultural experience. They are: (I) relationality has ontological significance, (II) relations define identity, and (III) relations generate power.¹⁰⁵

In arguing for the ontological significance of relationality, Qin maintains that one of the basic features of Chinese society is its relational orientation, and that relations are the most significant content of social life and social activity. According to Qin, “the political philosophy of Confucianism starts with relations and defines social classes

purposes of this dissertation, I will engage with his 2009 work which sketches most of his major ideas which his latter work is based upon.

¹⁰⁴ See for instance, Guzzini, Stefano. and Leander, Anna. *Constructivism and International Relations Alexander Wendt and His Critics*. New York: Routledge, 2006, p.3.

¹⁰⁵ Qin, Yaqing. “Relationality and Processual Construction: Bringing Chinese Ideas into International Relations Theory”, p.14.

and political order in terms of relationships. Social and political stability first and foremost relies on the management of relations.”¹⁰⁶ In addition, Qin also posits a sharp cleavage between Western and Chinese ways of thinking, the former is inclined to thinking in a “logic of causation” (i.e. If A>B, and B>C, then A>C) while in the Chinese way of thinking, “relationality is to be found in the relational web as a whole...things or variables change along with the change of their relations; individuals in the web are subject to change in the relational web as a whole; and similarly the interaction among individuals can have an impact on the web.”¹⁰⁷

The idea of “relational identity” is also posited by Qin as a way of thinking about individual human beings. Qin argues that social actors “exist only in social relations [r]ather than being independent and discrete natural units” and that “individuals per se have no identities.”¹⁰⁸ Qin also postulates that within Chinese thought, one’s identity can be “multifold, interactive, and changeable along with practice” hence “truth” and “falsehood” are not mutually exclusive categories, that is, something is either true or false and cannot be both true or false. In Qin’s words, “there is truth in falsehood and falsehood in truth, and true can become false and vice versa.” Qin would go on to suggest that relationship processes would ultimately influence the behavior of

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

individual actors and that changes in one's relational web would also lead to "identity-reshaping" and "behavior-transforming of an actor in relations."¹⁰⁹

Qin's last assumption concerns the use of power, and which the study of IR is most intimately concerned with. According to Qin, "relations generate power", in that for power to be exercised, a relational platform would be required. For instance, Qin argues that the China possesses greater influential power than the United States in determining the outcome of the North Korean nuclear issue, as it springs from the "relational web it is in, and from the operation and coordination of the web involving all the parties involved in the crisis."¹¹⁰ Also, relations can enlarge power or constrain the exercise of power. To illustrate this, Qin contends that in China's patriarchal society, "a father's power over his son was absolute and supreme" by virtue of the power that a patriarchal society accords towards father-son relations. Paralleling this, according to Qin, is China's relations with ASEAN states (where China wields considerably more power than each of the respective states). Nevertheless, Qin argues that China has constrained itself in its exercise of coercive powers and in some cases, was restrained in maintaining and development these relations. Consequently, Qin argues that relations in and of themselves are power and that these relational webs ought to be viewed as important power resources.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

Likewise, Zhang Feng in his book *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* proposes relationalism as a structural theory of grand strategy between China and its neighbours, namely, Korea, Japan and Mongolia.¹¹² According to Zhang, three relational structural components are to be found in historical East Asian states' system: the ordering principles of expressive and instrumental rationalities, differentiation of roles in a sovereign-subordinate and father-son hierarchy, and the distribution of ties measured in terms of actor degree centrality.¹¹³

Borrowing from Confucian ideas, Zhang postulates the concepts of both an expressive principle (qingganxing yuanze 情感性原则) and instrumental principle (gongjuxing yuanze 工具性原则), both of which he argues contribute to how relational networks function. While the expressive principle embodies humanized affection (renqing 人情) between two actors, the instrumental principle reflects a relational interaction to obtain resources for the purpose of utility.¹¹⁴ In Zhang's mind, the instrumental principle is a dominant paradigm framing states' relations and that the ultimate goal is to maximize utility. As such, the relationship between states becomes

¹¹² Zhang, Feng. *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.21-22.

¹¹⁴ For further discussion, see Hwang, Kwang-Kuo. "Chinese Relationalism: Theoretical Construction and Methodological Considerations." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 30, no. 2 (2000): 155-78.

a means to an end, a way to attain other goals. As Zhang puts it, “the relationship itself is not valued. It does not involve the affection or obligation that actors may attach to each other, and it may not last beyond the moment of mutual expediency.”¹¹⁵ On the other hand, expressive rationality places emphasis on the self-other relationship, whereby social actions can involve “commitment, empathy, affection, mutual support, and human obligation among actors and are thus more than instrumental calculation.” In Zhang’s view, “expressive rationality is the psychological, emotional, and ethical foundations of the Confucian paradigm of relational social life based on reciprocal respect, affection, and obligation.”¹¹⁶ Unlike the instrumental principle, an expressive principle takes the relationship as the end of social social interaction, not a means to an end.

Zhang also puts forth the argument that role and status relationships factor heavily in social life, and that role ethics is central to Confucian thought.¹¹⁷ From this principle, Zhang argues that different role relationships would necessarily lead to different ethical principles of action. In China’s case, the Chinese emperor is viewed as the “sovereign and father of the known world”, thus implying a “distinct set of reciprocal obligations and implicit rights...between China and other polities.”¹¹⁸ Zhang

¹¹⁵ Zhang, Feng. *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History*, p.27.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.28.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.29

argues that under such an arrangement, a “logic of hierarchy” and a “logic of differentiation” frames the manner of China’s relations with other states whereby the intimate is being favored. As put, “simultaneously integrating and differentiating, the intimacy-distance principle assigns foreign entities differential places in China’s international network according to their cultural affinity.”¹¹⁹

Similarly, the distribution of ties, as Zhang elucidates, allows actors with greater centrality to possess greater social power, easily accessing resources and information from other actors and to also shape the flow of information among relevant actors, including altering common understandings of relative capabilities, interests, and norms.¹²⁰ In this respect, Zhang suggests that unlike substantialist theories of international relations, which focuses on the categorical attributes of actors as variables (e.g. material capabilities), relationalism trains its focus on “relational patterns as structure, and thus sees the distribution of ties as a central structural component.” Zhang further fine grains his analysis by distinguishing relationality from constructivism by claiming that constructivism is not fully relational. In his view, identity is being composed “as a series of identifications developed and changed through relational actions” instead of being a “cohesive, prosocial self” that constructivist scholars like Alexander Wendt make out to be.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.29-30.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.30.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p.32.

Relationalism meets power politics

If we take the above arguments by Qin and Zhang as reflective of the thinking among Chinese IR scholars who subscribe to relationalism, then what kind of behavior are we to expect from China in its international relations? Based on relational scholarship, the conclusion is that other states will accept China's hierarchy over them over them and will willingly submit themselves as vassal states to China. But that begs the more fundamental question: upon what basis will these states do so? Is it on the basis of China's superior conduct and thus being held as a model for emulation, or is it due to China's coercive behavior? Zhang's contention is that China's practice of humane authority will necessarily lead other states to reciprocate naturally. As put, "if the Confucian role differentiation of a sovereign-subordinate and father-son hierarchy is a potent structural force, and if other actors genuinely follow Confucian expressive rationality, one may posit that they will accept their subordinate roles vis-à-vis China, identify themselves as China's hierarchically differentiated outer vassals and fulfill their obligations of loyalty and integrity towards China."¹²² This is evidently not the case in reality as China's problematic relations with its neighbors in the past decade (2008-2018) have demonstrated.¹²³ According to Zhang, one reason why tensions have been exacerbated was due to China not sufficiently playing its role as a humane

¹²² Zhang, Feng. *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History*, p.36.

¹²³ This will be further discussed in Chapters Five and Six.

authority (as expected by Chinese relationalism) but instead acting in a *realpolitik* manner in its international conduct.¹²⁴

But this line of argument poses several problems: one, it assumes Chinese moral standards as being normative and universally applicable; two, it fails to sufficiently take into account the structural constraints of the existing international system; and three, it is premised on a highly optimistic view of human nature which runs contrary to many of the core assumptions behind IR scholarship. Given that the first two points have been previously discussed at length by other scholars,¹²⁵ I will focus my attention on the third point, which I argue also represents the biggest flaw in relational scholarship.

In a classical study into the relationship between individuals and society, the American political theorist Reinhold Niebuhr posits a sharp cleavage between the ideals of the individual (“moral man”) and society (“immoral society”).¹²⁶ While a

¹²⁴ *Email interview*, February 29, 2016.

¹²⁵ For further discussion into Chinese norms and practices in international relations, see Wang, Hung-Jen. "Being Uniquely Universal: Building Chinese International Relations Theory." *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 81 (2013): 518-34; Clark, Ian. "International Society and China: The Power of Norms and the Norms of Power." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 3 (2014): 315-40.

¹²⁶ Niebuhr, R. *Moral man and immoral society : A study in ethics and politics*. London: Continuum, 2005.

number of critical responses towards Niebuhr's work have been undertaken,¹²⁷ nevertheless the core of Niebuhr's observations - I argue - remain eminently valid to the study of relational scholarship, particularly his pessimistic assumptions concerning human nature and the extent to which self-interest pervades political life. For instance, Niebuhr perceives conflict, not cooperation as the natural consequences of human egoism. As he puts it, "[T]here are definite limits in the capacity of ordinary mortals which makes it impossible for them to grant to others what they claim for themselves." Hence, politics become an arena where "conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises."¹²⁸ In addition, by attributing the root source of conflict to human nature (given his belief in the Judeo-Christian doctrine of original sin), Niebuhr is highly skeptical of collective efforts, particularly if they are undertaken by political actors, in resolving these same conflicts. Indeed, he expresses wariness towards group behavior. As observed, the "hypocrisy of man's group behavior" expresses itself in the fact that human beings are unable "to conform its collective life to its individual ideals."¹²⁹ In Niebuhr's view, group solidarity – far from being a benign force for good – in fact accentuates the egoism inherent in individuals, resulting in far more devastating and dangerous outcomes as opposed to actions taken individually.

¹²⁷ Holder, R. Ward., and Josephson, Peter. *The Irony of Barack Obama : Barack Obama, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the Problem of Christian Statecraft*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012.

¹²⁸ Niebuhr, R. *Moral man and immoral society : A study in ethics and politics*, p.3, 5.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.8

Seen from this vantage point, one might argue that the blind spot of relational scholarship lies in its optimistic view of human nature and that it ignores the coercive character of social life as played out in international politics. For instance, a core strand of Qin's relational scholarship lies in the assumption that Chinese leaders are wont to use power resources in a proper manner, and that abuses of power are best checked, not through an external system of checks and balance, but by arrogation of power to a centralized authority (be it in the form of a strongman leader or a collective group of top decision-makers). For instance, the establishment of the National Security Commission of the Communist Party of China is said to be not only for more effective coordination of China's security policies, but also as a means of centralizing party control and strengthening President Xi Jinping's grip on the Chinese state apparatus.¹³⁰ Hence, relational scholarship provides a strong theoretical justification for political control. As Qin puts it, "the political philosophy of Confucianism starts with relations and defines social classes and political order in terms of relationships. Social and political stability first and foremost relies on the management of relations. Social norms are mostly the norms of relation-management and social harmony is characterized by the domination of morality and mediation of disagreements."¹³¹ To this end, we might argue that relationality scholarship is ultimately premised upon a

¹³⁰ See You, Ji. "China's National Security Commission: Theory, Evolution and Operations." *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, issue 98 (2015): 178-196.

¹³¹ Qin, Yaqing. "Relationality and Processual Construction: Bringing Chinese Ideas into International Relations Theory", 14.

socially conservative approach to politics whereby the maintenance of relations is primary and social disruption is frowned upon, regardless of the consequences that are resulted. Furthermore, one might also locate the seeds of corruption within such a system of rule: in the absence of external checks or scrutiny (which may require disrupting familial relationships), there exists the propensity for internal decay which if unchecked can result in devastating consequences. Indeed, a glance at China's history suggests that this insistence on social and political stability at *all costs* can result in catastrophic consequences if individuals are not given sufficient rein to express their own personal misgivings. A case in point can be seen in Yang Jisheng's work *Tombstone: the great Chinese famine*, a study of the ill-fated Great Leap Forward policies enacted by Chairman Mao between 1958-1962 in which more 36 million Chinese died.¹³² Notwithstanding Chairman Mao's erroneous judgments in the matter, it was evident that the Chinese political structure was equally culpable. As Yang wrote:

In the face of a rigid political system, individual power was all but nonexistent. The system was like a casting mold; no matter how hard the metal, once it was melted and poured into that mold, it came out the same shape as everything else. Regardless of what kind of person went into the totalitarian system, all came out as conjoined twins facing in opposite directions: either despot or slave, depending on their position in respect of those above or below them. Mao Zedong was a creator of this mold...and he himself was to some extent a

¹³² Yang, Jisheng. *Tombstone : The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.

creature of this same mold. Within the framework of this system, Mao's own actions were conscious but to a certain extent also beyond his control. No one had the power to resist such a system, not even Mao... In accordance with the logic of that time and under the prevailing framework, things that now appear patently absurd at that time seemed reasonable and a matter of course.¹³³

In sum, Qin's relational scholarship – I argue – remains largely limited to accounting for China's domestic situation (which is to maintain the CCP's monopoly of power and to manage intra-China relations). It is also overly optimistic towards the CCP in making the right decisions for China (without taking into account the fallibility of even its highest leaders) while largely dismissive of individual ability to make meaningful change or contribution to social life.

Zhao Tingyang: Tianxia (All-under-heaven) and world order

The notion of All-under-Heaven (tianxia 天下) and its relevance to international politics was given voice by Zhao Tingyang, a Chinese philosopher and a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. In 2006, Zhao published an article "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-under-Heaven' (Tianxia)" which argued for the Tianxia model as the best philosophy for world governance.¹³⁴ In it, Zhao challenges the configuration of the present international order as being overly state-centric and

¹³³ Yang, Jisheng. "The Fatal Politics of the PRC's Great Leap Famine: The Preface to Tombstone." *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 66 (2010): 755-76, see 775,

¹³⁴ Zhao, Tingyang. "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-under-Heaven' (Tian-xia,)." *Social Identities* 12, no. 1 (2006): 29-41.

that it fails to transcend the perspective of the nation state to view issues and problems from a “world-ness” perspective. According to Zhao, Chinese political philosophy differ from Western philosophy as the former defines a political order in which the world is primary unlike the latter which takes the nation state as a central unit of analysis.¹³⁵ Linked to the idea of Tianxia is also the concept of the ‘Son of Heaven’ (tianzi 天子) whose legitimacy to rule must be confirmed by the people. However, Zhao criticizes the Western system of democratic elections as a means of selecting the leader as such a system is being “spoilt by money, misled by media and distorted by strategic votes.”¹³⁶ Instead, the “Chinese way” as Zhao puts it, is by means “of observation of social trends or preferences and especially by the obvious fact that people autonomously choose to follow and pledge their allegiance, instead of voting for one of several dubious politicians.”¹³⁷ According to Zhao, “sincerity of concern for the people”, not public preference, was the most important criteria for being a ruler. Furthermore, Zhao contends that “most people do not really know what is best for them”, hence the need for elite rule as they are most sharply attuned to what is best for the citizens.¹³⁸

Zhao also espouses the notion of a “family-ship” as an interpretive framework for understanding ethical and political legitimacy as it represents “the naturally given

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

ground and resource for love, harmony and obligations [thus exhausting] the essence of humanity.”¹³⁹ To this end, the Tianxia system ought to be viewed in terms of family-ship and that the “wholeness” and “harmony” of this system ought to be preserved. This is where Chinese political theory – with its emphasis on a world-society – can be most aptly appropriated. According to Zhao, “the world’s effective political order must progress from All-under-Heaven, to state, to families, so as to ensure universal consistency and transitivity in political life, or the uniformity of society, while an ethical order progresses from families, to states, to All-under-Heaven, so as to ensure ethical consistency and transitivity.”¹⁴⁰ More tellingly, Zhao says that Chinese philosophy does not regard an individual “to be a political foundation or starting point” but instead “the political makes sense only when it deals with relations rather than individuals”, thus echoing Qin’s and Zhang’s earlier arguments.¹⁴¹ Zhao also observes that in Chinese thinking, politics aim at a good society of peaceful order which is a precondition to individual happiness and thus avoiding disorder. Hence, the concept of All-under-Heaven is fused together with Chinese concerns towards the legitimacy of its dynasties (when order is being maintained) as opposed to simply territorial conquest.¹⁴² Finally, Zhao also distinguishes Chinese ethics from Western systems by claiming that the West possesses a missionizing impulse a result of the Biblical mandate to “do unto others as you would have them do to you” (己所欲勿于人 jisuoyu

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 34.

huyuren) while Chinese principles are passively presented in that one should “never do to others what one does not want others to do unto you” (己所不欲，勿施于人 jisuobuyu hushiyuren).¹⁴³

Tianxia: A World Liberated or a world enslaved?

In the above, I summarized Zhao’s exposition of Tianxia and its ideational conceptions to our understanding of global order. Notwithstanding some of its contributions to Chinese thought pattern, Zhao’s ideas on All-under-Heaven remain severely limited not least because of its abstracting itself from the reality of the international structure and its problematic view of human agency. Furthermore, much of Zhao’s analysis lacks empirical evidence and cannot be verified in reference to social reality. For instance, Zhao tells us that the present condition of the world as it is, is that of a “failed world, a disordered world of chaos ...[and] a non-world.”¹⁴⁴ What does this actually mean, and more importantly, how true is this? Despite ongoing international conflict, the present international system cannot be said to be a failure, given that many countries, including China, have benefitted from the Western-led liberal order put in place after the second world war.¹⁴⁵ While Zhao is right in noting that political governance needs to be justified with reference to both domestic and international

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

¹⁴⁴ Zhao, Tingyang. "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-under-Heaven' (Tian-xia), 39.

¹⁴⁵ See Ikenberry, G. John. *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

norms, it is unclear how this ought to be done. For instance, Zhao posits that the political goal of 'All-under-Heaven' is to create a "trinity of the geographical world, the psychological world and the political world" as a grand narrative, yet he is silent on steps taken in order to achieve this.¹⁴⁶ Also by claiming that "world-ness is a principle higher than internationality"¹⁴⁷ Zhao sets up a further problem which is that of governance: who, and how should such a "world" be governed and what kind of rules ought to be established for such governance to take place? All these raise the key question as to whether a Tianxia system can truly liberate countries to live in harmony with one another, and whether deeper, more fundamental issues concerning global governance and international politics can be resolved simply by recourse to an idealized Tianxia concept.

Furthermore, it is evident that much of Zhao's criticism of the present arrangement of political order is trained at the West, particularly the United States, whose dominance Zhao terms as a "new imperialism, inheriting many characteristics of modern imperialism, but transforming direct control into the hidden, yet totally dominating world control by means of hegemony or the 'American leadership' as

¹⁴⁶ To be certain, one might excuse Zhao for being silent on this matter, after all, he is a philosopher! However, this inability to spell out the specifics of action limits the extent to which his ideas ought to be taken as being politically viable.

¹⁴⁷ Zhao, Tingyang. "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-under-Heaven' (Tian-xia), 39

Americans prefer to call it.”¹⁴⁸ To be certain, such a line of argument is increasingly common among Chinese public intellectuals, many of whom perceive the liberalism, the West and the United States as a common enemy which limit the extent of China’s pursuit of being a great power.¹⁴⁹ Zhao takes this line of thought further, for unlike other Chinese contemporaries who recognize the international structure as a given (and thus attempt to articulate China’s rise from within), Zhao goes as far as to claim that the present system as an utter failure and that the Tianxia system as the sole means of solving global problems. Indeed, Zhao cites globalization as a game changer due to its breaking the present system of the nation states, and that it was time to revisit deeply cherished norms concerning world governance. In place, what is needed – as suggested by Zhao – is an entire overhaul of the state system and a return to traditional Chinese political arrangements. To this end, Zhao presents an idealized Chinese history, arguing that the Tianxia system had brought about long periods of peace and stable society in China, unlike the present United Nations state-centric system. This of course, is highly debatable, but one Zhao is conspicuously silent on. In his Tianxia ideal, perpetual peace is a given and conflict is largely absent (or made irrelevant). By attributing the root causes of international conflict to the state system (instead of other factors such as human nature, ideological differences, or material

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁴⁹ See, Callahan, William A. "History, Tradition and the China Dream: Socialist Modernization in the World of Great Harmony." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 96 (2015): 1-19

competition), Zhao sets up a *straw man* argument which his Tianxia system is conveniently positioned to replace.

Finally, in Zhao's analysis, there is no mention of the internal dynamics of CCP politics, and the pervasiveness of domestic agendas in framing China's international relations. This is by no means insignificant given heavily vested Chinese domestic interests in the conduct of Chinese foreign policy. For instance, recent Chinese global initiatives such as the highly-profiled Belt and Road Initiative (to be further discussed in Chapter 5) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank also involve large numbers of Chinese state-owned actors, many of whom have links with the CCP and whose economic fortunes are deeply intertwined with the fate of the CCP. According to one Renmin University professor, the "monetization" (huobihua 货币化) of Chinese politics means that political decisions also encapsulate the material/financial interests of those which are involved, thus highlighting a close conflation of political and business interests in the overall CCP decision-making process.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, self-interest remains a constant pursuit among Chinese leaders, thus sharply mitigating against the picture of a benevolent-like type leader as envisaged by Zhao.¹⁵¹ Indeed, Zhao's

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Renmin University professor, Beijing, China, June 12, 2017. For further studies into the relationship between Chinese businesses and politics, see Brødsgaard, Kjeld Erik. "Politics and Business Group Formation in China: The Party in Control?" *The China Quarterly* 211 (2012): 624-48.

¹⁵¹ Kerry Brown's in-depth study of the 18th Politburo Standing Committee starkly fleshes this out. See Brown, Kerry. *The New Emperors: Power and the Princes in*

Tianxia system biggest problem lies in its conceptualization of Tianxia in an idealized vacuum with scant regard to the causes of conflict due to other factors such as human nature, domestic makeup of states and the anarchic structure of the international system.¹⁵² Relating to Chinese exceptionalism, it would seem that the more Zhao claims exceptionalism for his Tianxia system (that it is different and better compared to other ways of conceptualizing the world), the less its explanatory power becomes. Furthermore, as Zhao does not offer us any practical solutions to solve these problems except by advocating for the abolishment of the state system in favor of a supranational authority, it raises the issue as to whether such a system would end up not liberating, but rather enslaving countries that subscribe to such a political proposition. Indeed, what kind of authority would that be, and what kind of political arrangements ought to be in place to ensure the consent of those who are being governed? Unfortunately, Zhao's Tianxia arguments remain silent on these salient points.

China. London: I.B. Tauris and Co, 2014. For a deeper analysis of the psychological factors in Chinese politics, see Pye, Lucian W. *The Mandarin and the Cadre : China's Political Cultures*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1988.

¹⁵² See, Waltz, Kenneth N. *Man, the State and War : A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.

Chinese IR theory and a contestation over Chinese identity

As my above discussion of the ideas promulgated by the four Chinese IR scholars has shown, Chinese IR theories possess little universal traction and are mostly used to lend legitimacy to Chinese political actions, both internally and externally. To this end, these theories reflect a common theme salient in China's political worldview, that is, *the importance of identity to China's international politics*. In the case of Yan Xuetong's emphasis on moral realism, it is evident that in Yan's mind, what ought to set China apart from the West is the need to explicate and demonstrate moral leadership and virtue in its international relations. This emphasis on morality dovetails with the broader question over Chinese identity, and more pertinently that of Chinese culture: what aspects of "being a Chinese" can be said to be superior or better compared to Western culture? Relating to Chinese exceptionalism, I argue that what is at stake is not simply a contestation over ideas (in the sphere of international relations), but a competition over influence. In other words, who has more influence in the world, China or the West? At the same time, this influence I argue, is not simply a matter of 'getting others to follow', but also in setting normative standards so that those who do not follow (or disagree) will be seen to be in the wrong. To this end, Chinese identity and its political worldview is thus seen to be the exemplifying (or at least accentuating) 'all that is good' in humanity as opposed to Western values and thinking which are said to be 'bad' or 'subverting that which is good'. However, such an approach begs a more fundamental question, that is, who decides what is good or bad? The fact that Yan seems to assume a priori an idealized view of the CCP as a political institution which remains untainted and unpolluted by the messiness of political practices, and thus in a privileged position to adjudicate between what is right and wrong is highly problematic to begin with.

Indeed, I argue that the biggest flaw to moral realism is that morality itself – in the Chinese system – is being politicized to achieve political goals. From this, I argue that Yan's proposal of moral realism does not square with the political reality of what is happening in China, thus rendering his conclusions tenuous and not sufficiently convincing.

In the case of Qin and Zhang, their emphasis on relationality represents not so much an attempt at moralization (unlike Yan) but rather to emphasize the importance of relations in influencing state relations. While such an approach challenges the tenets of structural realism and emphatically rejects structurally deterministic outcomes in political relations, problems arise if it is suggested that political relations can be exhaustively accounted for in relational terms. Indeed, it is one thing to say that international politics ought to be understood in relational terms it is quite another to say that their significance for us is explicable or ought to be solely reduced to such terms. By positing a relational framework, Qin and Zhang seem to suggest that personal identity is first and foremost, one which is relationally situated. While this may hold true at an individual level, extrapolating to the level of the nation state to account for state behavior is problematic due to its inherent assumptions that states and statesmen approach international politics with no prior idea what their national interests might be and that these interests can be infinitely modified (depending on the relational situation).

Also, relational scholarship is premised on a hierarchical view of international relations in which China is central, and the Chinese emperor (leader) authority is not

in question. Nevertheless, this legitimacy of rule holds so long as the leader is able to maintain order within the borders of the Chinese nation (or empire). In other words, to rule is to ensure that China is stable. In the event China is unstable, the legitimacy of the ruler would be undercut thus signaling the need for either the elimination of those unstable elements or the removal of the ruler entirely. Seen this way, the self-identity of the Chinese leader is of crucial importance as it is tied intrinsically to the nation's identity. Indeed as Lucian Pye puts it in his depiction of Deng Xiaoping, "Deng's quiet approach to leadership conformed to important norms in traditional Chinese political culture, a political culture that was shaped by the role model of mandarin-bureaucrats and semi-divine, superman emperors, leaders who operate out of sight, secretly, behind the scenes."¹⁵³ From this, the Chinese leader is also seen to be a model for universal virtue and is perceived to be untainted by the corrupting influences of the society-at-large.¹⁵⁴

Finally, in the Tianxia system, Chinese self-identity is presented as a central problematic, that is, the extent to which it possesses universal properties thus drawing those who are 'outside China' into its orbit. According to one study by Jing and Wang,

¹⁵³ Pye, Lucian. "The Leader in the Shadows: A View of Deng Xiaoping." *Current History* 95, no. 602 (1996): 246-53, see 247.

¹⁵⁴ This is why Chinese authorities frequently thwart attempts by Western media to conduct investigations into the private lives of its leaders. Even the official verdict on Mao Zedong, whose failed economic policies led to devastating consequences for the Chinese nation, was that Mao was "70 per cent correct and 30 per cent wrong."

Chinese political researchers generally do not accept the ‘value-free’ claim of Western IR theorists, but instead assert that there is a ‘value-involved’ problem in IR theory making thus bringing to bear their subjective interventions (or interpretations) to the knowledge-making process.¹⁵⁵ Hence the Tianxia system represents an attempt to turn the tables on Western liberal system, which is perceived as incomplete and insufficiently inclusive (as it excludes the voices and views of the developing world). For instance, in a closed-door forum with several high-ranking Chinese academics in Singapore, the delegation leader was critical of the present configuration of international power, claiming that the rules and norms that are in place were created to protect Western interests and did not include the majority of the developing world. Instead there was a need to “adjust with the times” and to make changes to the international system that would better reflect the interests of other countries. At the same time the delegation was also quick to highlight the rise of China and its growing national interests and hence the need to preserve and protect these interests where they are seen to be challenged.¹⁵⁶ Such an approach I argue, is an example of the pervasiveness of Tianxia thinking in China’s foreign policy conduct whereby Chinese leaders attempt to project China’s worldview as wide as possible. By aligning China

¹⁵⁵ Jing, Yuejin and Guoqin Wang. “Western Political Research Approaches and the Development of Political Science Methodology in China.” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 14, (2009):299-315.

¹⁵⁶ Closed-door meeting with researchers from the Chinese Institute of International Studies (CIIS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, August 22, 2017.

with the developing world, it allows Beijing to muster support for its policy preferences; at the same time, by claiming major power status, Chinese leaders are wont to expect that China's wishes be respected by other major powers. In short, by claiming both developing and developed nation status, China seeks to deepen its influence within the international system. More crucially, such an approach seeks to present China as being superior to other nations and, as pointed out by Singapore's former top diplomat, ultimately to the "acknowledgement and acceptance of [China's] superiority as a norm."¹⁵⁷ To this end, the Tianxia system proffers a theoretical framework whereby Chinese particularism and claims to exceptionalism can be universalized in a globalized world. Hence, by claiming the Tianxia system as an idealized outcome (however unattainable it might be), the objective is not to provide any solutions to the problems of global governance, but instead as a means of de-legitimizing the Western-led international system, and to articulate its claim to ideological superiority by scapegoating the United States as the culprit to global problems (this will be further discussed in chapter 3).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed recent developments in Chinese international relations thinking and how they provide us with important clues to the Chinese worldview concerning China's international relations thinking and its claims to exceptionalism. As shown, what is strikingly common about the ideas in all three schools is that they seek

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Bilahari Kausikan, Singapore, August 7, 2017.

to present China's approach to international politics as being unique and also superior to Western thinking. Indeed, their proponents seek to differentiate these ideas from existing scholarship and more importantly, attempt to infuse them with concepts and motifs taken from Chinese traditional culture. Part of the reason for doing so, apart from a dissatisfaction with existing IR scholarship in accounting for Chinese political behavior, is the more deeply-seated belief that China's international relations must be interpreted on Chinese terms which include taking its culture and history seriously, which are important elements of the Chinese worldview.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, Chinese IR thinking also harbors a deep mistrust of the existing IR theory frameworks, believing them to be serving the vested interests of the United States and the West. As such, Chinese IR scholarship attempts to include the elements of morality, relationality and the pursuit of global-ness in their theoretical exposition, believing that these added aspects are necessary to remedy Western-centric IR theory, so as to allow a more equitable distribution of international voices to global issues.

That said, Chinese IR scholarship, as shown, presents problems of its own: one, it remains largely Sino-centric in nature; two, it is mostly anti-Western and anti-American; three, it assumes benevolence in Chinese leaders; and lastly, it is premised on an essentialized view of the East and West. Taken together, these four themes provide the basis of Chinese exceptionalism and represent the main themes in discussions of China's international relations as my subsequent chapters will

¹⁵⁸ This was one of the key take away points from my visiting stint at the China

Foreign Affairs University, Beijing in the summer of 2017.

demonstrate. In attempting to distinguish itself from the West, I argue that Chinese international relations theories seek to justify their relevancy in reference to so-called Chinese conditions (or Chinese characteristics) without critically examining whether these conditions are indeed unique to the Chinese experience. To this end, the question “when is a Chinese condition a Chinese condition” needs to be posed. To be certain, I am sympathetic to the view of these scholars in arguing for the need to take into account Chinese history and cultural traditions in understanding the Chinese worldview. Yet at the same time, to speak of Chinese culture and history as something given and unproblematic is to also ignore the highly politicized nature of Chinese social life and to take for granted the legitimacy of these narratives as part of the Chinese worldview. Also, these theories assume a priori the legitimacy and uncontested character of Communist party rule and ultimately can be said to be preserving the status quo as far as Chinese domestic governance is concerned. Furthermore, the issue of power – as a central piece in politics – is largely understated in Chinese IR thinking, unlike Chinese domestic politics where the discussion of power remains primary. All these raises further skepticism as to the ultimate objective(s) of Chinese IR thinking. In my view, Chinese IR thinking lends itself mostly to support the policy decisions and political objectives of the Chinese state and thus presents – at its core – a highly Sino-centric perspective of the world. Issues of academic freedom in China further problematize the work of Chinese IR scholarship. Indeed, the body of ideas of high profile Chinese scholars like Yan Xuetong and Qin Yaqing cannot be divorced from their affiliations with the Chinese government and hence can be said to be broadly sympathetic of the positions and political goals of the CCP, and not for sole purposes of academic inquiry.

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

Chapter 3

Who is China? National Identity and Social Capital in Liquid Times

Sociological and anthropological studies into China of the late 20th and early 21st century China have highlighted a highly vexing trend among Chinese individuals: in a time of unprecedented social change, increasing numbers of Chinese citizens are asking the question, “who am I?”¹⁵⁹ It is argued that the structural changes in Chinese society borne about as a result of political turmoil of the 20th century have led to the substantial severance of ties between the individual and the family as well as the individual and the caste-like structure of socialist hierarchy.¹⁶⁰ Among Chinese citizens, there exists, as Callahan puts it, a “curious mix of positive and negative feelings” intertwined in their understanding of Chinese politics, or a “pessoptimist structure of feeling.”¹⁶¹ How then does this ambivalence play out in China’s

¹⁵⁹ Kleinman, Arthur, Yunxiang Yan, Jing Jun, Sing Lee, Everett Zhang, Tianshu Pan, Wu Fei, Jinhua Guo. *Deep China : The Moral Life of the Person : What Anthropology and Psychiatry Tell Us about China Today*. Berkeley, California, 2011, pp.1-36; Link, E. Perry, Madsen, Richard, and Pickowicz, Paul. *Restless China*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.

¹⁶⁰ Kleinman, Arthur, Yunxiang Yan, Jing Jun et al. *Deep China : The Moral Life of the Person : What Anthropology and Psychiatry Tell Us about China Today*, p.3.

¹⁶¹ Callahan, William A. *China : The Pessoptimist Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p.9, 12.

international relations, in particular towards its perception of the modern (or even postmodern) world? What can we say about Chinese national identity and how is this being played out in China's interaction with the wider world, particularly in the realm of geopolitics?¹⁶² To what extent does Chinese institutional politics matter in the production and preservation of Chinese national identity, and how has this identity changed given China's rise of the past 40 years? More importantly, how is China's political worldview being influenced and shaped by its national identity, and how is Chinese exceptionalism being used as a means of constructing China as being "good" and "different" from the West? As discussed in Chapter 2, Chinese ideas in international relations frequently allude to the need to differentiate China from the West. This is premised on the assumption that China and its citizens are wont to imagine themselves in ways that are distinct from people all over world, thus necessitating the need for scholarly insights that are peculiar to the Chinese lived experience. But how true is this of 21st century China, and to what extent can we speak of a monolithic Chinese identity given the rapid changes within modern Chinese society? In this respect, Qin Yaqing – whose ideas on relationality we have discussed about in Chapter 2 – has suggested that the main question surrounding China's engagement with the world is not institutional politics of how China will fit into international organizations, but the identity politics of answering the question "Who is China?" The

¹⁶² For a recent study, see Hoo, Tiang Boon. *China's Global Identity: Considering the Global Responsibilities of Great Power*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018.

heart of Chinese foreign policy thus is not a security dilemma, but an “identity dilemma”: Who is China and how does it fit into this world?¹⁶³

In this chapter, I will argue that the issue of identity represents a foundational starting point with which to understand the Chinese worldview. Following from this, I will attempt to frame my analysis of the Chinese worldview, including its claims to exceptionalism within this identity framework and to analyze how this consequently affects China’s international relations. This is not to suggest that other issues such as factional politics and economic development do not matter; however, insofar as these issues are being debated, they are understood within a framework of identity politics, which seeks to prescribe the manner as to how Chinese citizens ought to relate with the state. As such, the need to preserve a “unity of identity” is paramount for the Chinese government to continue to legitimize its authority to govern China. To do so, I will use a sociological structure that builds upon the notion of “liquid modernity” (or liquid times) proposed by Zygmunt Bauman and to examine the extent to which Chinese society is experiencing liquid modernity.¹⁶⁴ A key theme of my study is the relationship between the individual and the state and how the negotiation of national identity and individual identity is being played out in practice. To what extent are they

¹⁶³ Qin, Yaqing. “Guoji guanxi lilun Zhongguo pai shengcheng de keneng he biran” [The Chinese School of International Relations Theory: Possibility and Necessity], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], 2006 (no.3): 7-13, see 13.

¹⁶⁴ Bauman Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000; Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

co-constitutive or in conflict with each other, and how does this in turn affect the amount of “social capital” that is necessary for the proper function of Chinese society? I will argue that while there is considerably more freedom for individuals in their private pursuits, public institutions still remain highly politicized and are required to conform to the agendas of the Communist Party. I will also probe the extent to which Chinese nationalism is able to proffer the Party leadership with the required social capital with which to create a shared sense of meaning and cohesiveness (ningjuli 凝聚力) within Chinese society. I will conclude this chapter with a discussion on how this relates with the Chinese worldview and Chinese exceptionalism and highlight several problematic issues that remain salient to the Chinese political system and the limits they pose to building Chinese social capital.

Liquid modernity and Chinese national identity

In describing modernity to be “liquid”, Bauman writes of the “changing relationship between space and time” in which social patterns are no longer given or self-evident, but rather “clashing with one another and contradicting one another’s commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers.”¹⁶⁵ Under such conditions, “social forms” (i.e. political institutions) which tend to limit individual choices are not expected to “keep their shape” for long. Given the “local” character of politics, the modern state is unable to operate effectively at the “planetary” level in terms of its governance, thus ceding the sphere to “global space”, one which is extraterritorial, and thus politically

¹⁶⁵ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, pp.7-8.

uncontrollable (from the vantage point of any one particular state). Hence, social solidarity within the borders of the nation state becomes increasingly stressed, and community bonds become frail and temporal. Under such a milieu, individuals' interests are best preserved, not by conforming to authoritatively-issued rules (however imperfect), but by being flexible, that is, "a readiness to change tactics and style at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret – and to pursue opportunities according to their current availability, rather than following one's own established preference."¹⁶⁶

While various scholars have debated the extent to which Bauman's observations are a true reflection of contemporary times,¹⁶⁷ Bauman's explication of liquid modernity – I argue - remains highly relevant for our understanding of the changing relationship between state and society, between those who govern and those who are being governed. Why is this so? Firstly, Bauman is not alone in highlighting the changing nature of global society and the effects on individual identity and social life. For instance, Manuel Castells writes of the rise of the "network society", one whose social structure is "made up of networks powered by micro-electronics-

¹⁶⁶ Bauman, *Liquid Times*, pp.1-4.

¹⁶⁷ Davis, Mark. *Freedom and Consumerism : A Critique of Zygmunt Bauman's Sociology*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008; Atkinson, Will. "Not All That Was Solid Has Melted into Air (or Liquid): A Critique of Bauman on Individualization and Class in Liquid Modernity." *Sociological Review* 56, no. 1 (2008): 1-17.

based information and communications technologies.”¹⁶⁸ Likewise, Alastair MacIntyre observes a present crisis in moral discourse (or the “language of morality”) whereby “the appearances of morality persist even though the integral substance of morality has to a large degree been fragmented and then in part destroyed.”¹⁶⁹ Consequently, it is surmised that a high degree of uncertainty pervades contemporary global society and modern life, thus further problematizing issues of national identity (are there any shared values?) and what it means to be a good citizen (given changing moral discourse).

Secondly, given the scholarly challenge to the state-centric understanding of international politics,¹⁷⁰ it behooves us to look deeper at how national identity is being socially understood and how this in turn influence and affect state action. If one views the state as a “social actor”, then much of state action (i.e. foreign policy) is being “guided and constrained by domestic expectations that are considered legitimate and by social conventions which both define and delimit these broader social purposes.”¹⁷¹ Hence, the issue of identity is of crucial importance particularly as these identities

¹⁶⁸ Castells, Manuel. *The Network Society : A Cross-cultural Perspective*.

Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2004, p.3.

¹⁶⁹ MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue : A Study in Moral Theory*. 2nd ed. London: Duckworth, 1985, pp.1-5.

¹⁷⁰ Buzan, Barry, Wæver, Ole, and Wilde, Jaap De. *Security : A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

¹⁷¹ Andrews, Bruce. "Social Rules and the State as a Social Actor." *World Politics* 27, no. 4 (1975): 521-40, see 523.

“emerge from their interactions with different social environments, both domestic and international.”¹⁷² This is where Bauman’s scholarly analysis of the interplay between global forces and individual appropriation of these ideas come in. What can we say of individual identity, or even state identity given the “intrinsic volatility and unfixity of all or most identities”, as Bauman puts it.¹⁷³ What are the challenges and consequences to the issue of governance if notions of citizenship and nationhood are made problematic and called to question? If statehood is linked to territorial boundaries and the ability to govern and maintain such territory, then how does governance take place in a world whereby human beings and information interact across huge geographical swaths and in which the idea of place (as circumscribed by territorial space) is now being dominated by what is termed as the “space of flows.”¹⁷⁴ While this does not mean necessarily a “flattening” of all global differences, as popular accounts of globalization have it,¹⁷⁵ it does suggest that substantial changes in global society are

¹⁷² Katzenstein, Peter J. *The Culture of National Security : Norms and Identity in World Politics*. New Directions in World Politics. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p.11.

¹⁷³ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p.83.

¹⁷⁴ The idea of “Space of flows” is conceptualized by Manuel Castells. It is defined as “means that the material arrangements allow for simultaneity of social practices without territorial contiguity.” See Castells, Manuel. "Grassrooting the space of flows." *Urban Geography* 20, no. 4 (1999): 294-302.

¹⁷⁵ Friedman, Thomas L. *The World Is Flat : The Globalized World in the Twenty-first Century*. Updated and Expanded ed. London: Penguin, 2007.

taking place that could possibly accentuate internal fissures and fractures within and across specific societies.¹⁷⁶

Thirdly, the issue of power needs to be reconsidered on the basis of the changing dynamics between the state and its citizens. If one considers state power as defined in terms of the national interest, then it is necessary to probe how the national interest is now being framed and articulated. Is it possible to still speak of the national interest in pure material terms? Given the increased attention to “soft power” in global politics,¹⁷⁷ what can we say about the nature of power in liquid times? To what extent does the state and its institutional representatives continue to wield influence over its citizens, and what are the consequences to social life under such modified conditions? Contrasting solid and liquid modernity, Bauman observes, “if the flipside of the ‘solid modern’ domination-through-order-building was the totalitarian tendency, the flipside of the ‘liquid- modern’ domination-through-uncertainty is the state of ambient insecurity, anxiety and fear.”¹⁷⁸

How then, does liquid modernity feature in Chinese society and national identity, and more importantly for this dissertation, how does it affect China’s

¹⁷⁶ For instance, Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996; Barber, Benjamin R. *Jihad vs. McWorld*. 1st Ballantine Books ed. New York: Ballantine Books, 1996.

¹⁷⁷ Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power : The Means to Success in World Politics*. 1st ed. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

¹⁷⁸ Bauman, Zygmunt, and Mark Haugaard. "Liquid Modernity and Power: A Dialogue with Zygmunt Bauman." *Journal of Power* 1, no. 2 (2008): 111-30.

international relations? One study argues that China, under the stresses of liquid modernity, faces the dual pressures of external globalization and internal social transformation; hence, national identity possesses functional powers that would substantially ensure the “individual’s ontological security, maintaining harmonious national development, and renewing national identity in an era of globalization.”¹⁷⁹ Moreover there remains substantial ambiguity concerning how the relationship between Chinese individuals and the Chinese state ought to be. In his study of the incipient psychological changes within Chinese society, Arthur Kleinman notes that the intensifying of the “sense of division in the self and society...is evidence of a deepening and complexifying of the interiority of the person. Subjectivity in today’s China is expanding. The space of the self is being more richly furnished in emotion, memory and sensibility...At the core of this transmutation is a divided self (or even multiple self) that increasingly can multitask, feel comfortable with contradiction and imagine a new and different China.”¹⁸⁰ This raises an important question on how Chinese national identity should be understood, and how it is being played out in China’s international relations.

¹⁷⁹ Jin, Taijin and Hu, Yao. "National Identity in the Context of Globalization: A Structural Perspective." *Social Sciences in China* 36, no. 2 (2015): 110-26, see 113.

¹⁸⁰ Kleinman, Arthur. *Deep China : The Moral Life of the Person : What Anthropology and Psychiatry Tell Us about China Today*, p.288.

Community and its discontents

According to Bauman, the issue of community looms large in the present whereby individuals are exhorted to be part of a community, so as to remedy the anxiety brought about by the uncertainty of modern society and to procure a sense of security amidst the “accelerating liquefaction of modern life.”¹⁸¹ One way this is done is through the promotion of an “ethnic community”, in which ethnicity is being used as a means of “naturalizing history, of presenting the cultural as ‘a fact of nature’, freedom as ‘understood (and accepted) necessity.’”¹⁸² Furthermore, the principle of ethnic unity is frequently promoted as a success story of the nation-state whereby “ethnicity (and ethnic homogeneity) [becomes] the basis of unity and self-assertion”, hence resulting in the production of a “natural community.”¹⁸³ Consequently this results in a patriotic/nationalist narrative whereby differences between “people like us” and “people who are different from us” are being accentuated without admitting the possibility that “people may belong together while staying attached to their differences.”¹⁸⁴ Individual interests, where they differ, are being relegated to the private sphere (or privatized) and thus are rendered “fragile, temporary...[thus signaling] the end of definition of the human being as a social being” and in which “uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety” abound in daily living.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 170.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, pp.172-173.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ pp.176-177.

¹⁸⁵ p.178, 181.

According to the Chinese economist Mao Yushi, almost 48 per cent more people reported greater levels of anxiety in China in 2013 compared to 2008. In his analysis, Mao attributed the causes of discontent in China to the vast power inequality (between the Chinese authorities and its citizens) and the lack of social justice and opportunities to seek redress. Economic factors alone, it is argued, would not be sufficient to remedy the problems of anxiety faced by the Chinese people.¹⁸⁶ Likewise Callahan, in his analysis of Chinese citizen intellectuals, noted the presence of “grand aspirations and deep anxieties” and that China’s rise presents for the Chinese people “a challenge of ideas and norms, in the drive to build a new world order.”¹⁸⁷ In a study of China’s cultural politics, Christopher Hughes highlights the tension between what is termed as the “Great Tradition, which takes the form of some kind of Communism or ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’ as the official orthodoxy has it and all these other cultural phenomenon that bubble away at the grass-roots level.”¹⁸⁸ Given rising alienation and growing social unrest in China, President Hu Jintao had pushed for a revival of Chinese tradition under his leadership and the advocating of a “Harmonious Society.”¹⁸⁹ This “enigmatic relationship between modernity, tradition and nationalism”, as Hughes puts it, was then most vividly fleshed out during the opening

¹⁸⁶ Mao, Yushi. *Zhongguoren de jiaolu cong nali lai* [Where does Chinese anxiety come from] Beijing: Qunyan Press, 2013.

¹⁸⁷ Callahan, William. *China Dreams: 20 Views of the Future*, pp.5-6.

¹⁸⁸ Hughes, Christopher R. "Current Cultural Politics in China: What Makes the Chinese Tick?" *Asian Affairs* 40, no. 1 (2009): 63-76.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics through the use of digital technology in the show.¹⁹⁰

What the above evidence suggests, I argue, is the highly fragmented character of Chinese society, with little coherence in the ideas propagated by the Chinese state and those that impact upon individual citizens. Consequently one might say that China's national identity is in flux, and under the conditions of liquid modernity, is now vulnerable to further stress, highlighted by the multiple accounts and renditions that individuals bring to bear on their interaction with modern Chinese society.¹⁹¹ As argued, the moral context in Chinese society "is divided against the moral person" and that "the state that has been so successful at creating prosperity (albeit with worsening social inequality) is also repressive and can be dangerously so. The moral context created by the part-state is as much a place of collusion and collaboration with ruthlessly pragmatic power as it is a place of aspiration for an achievement of a better life for many of its citizens."¹⁹² Hence, there exists a deep and ambivalent tension between "what ought to be" (as formally demanded by the state) and "what is" (as practiced by Chinese citizens in everyday life). To be certain, such incongruities take

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁹¹ See Hansen, Mette Halskov and Svarverud, Rune, eds. *ICChina : The Rise of the Individual in Modern Chinese Society*. NIAS Studies in Asian Topics, no. 45. Copenhagen: NIAS, 2010; Link, E. Perry, Madsen, Richard, and Pickowicz, Paul. *Restless China*, 2013.

¹⁹² Kleinman, Arthur. *Deep China : The Moral Life of the Person : What Anthropology and Psychiatry Tell Us about China Today*, pp.287-288.

place in many advanced capitalistic countries and are thus not confined to the Chinese experience.¹⁹³ Yet, as a result of the Chinese's state preoccupation and emphasis on stability and order within its borders, the relationship between the nation-state and individual citizens may be far more problematic than in Western society.

Given these conditions, the imperative to inject a "narrative of unity" is paramount to the survival of the nation-state, particularly one whose leaders are concerned about staying in power. In the following, I will argue that the Chinese government pursued the following ways in order to forge a social contract between the party and the citizens: one, to promote a unified sense of Chinese national identity (or "Chinese-ness"), two, to use nationalism as a means to foster cohesiveness among Chinese citizens, and three, to project the idea of the "goodness" of the Chinese state vis-à-vis the wider world comprising of foreign forces which are deemed to be "evil" (or at least substantially subversive) so as to warrant mistrust and suspicion from the Chinese people. Taken together, these three proffer the Chinese state with the means with which to portray its governance of China as being exceptional, and to consequently generate support for its international relations and legitimize its political ruling.

¹⁹³ See for instance, Bell, Daniel. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. 2nd ed.

London: Heinemann Educational, 1979.

Chinese-ness and Chinese national identity

The idea of “what it means to be a Chinese in the 21st century” has been the subject of renewed scholarly debate.¹⁹⁴ More crucially, how would Chinese national identity affect the way the Chinese leaders think about China’s place in the world, and how would it consequently influence the actions that are being taken, both in China’s internal and external affairs? What are the implications of the interaction between national and global identity? While my study emphatically rejects the idea of a “Chinese essence” or a singular, defining aspect of “Chinese-ness”, it nonetheless recognizes the existence of certain peculiarities that, for better or worse, continue to dominate the manner its national identity is conceived and thought of.

As such, I argue that the idea of Chineseness represents a means of building a “collective identity” among Chinese citizens by the Chinese state, a type of “social capital” which seeks to bind and connect disparate communities of Chinese citizens into a collective unit. In a way, this parallels the type of social capital that is discussed about in American intellectual circles, which according to Robert Putnam, refers to “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and

¹⁹⁴ Callahan, William A. *China : The Pessimist Nation*, pp.191-219; Brown, Kerry. *Struggling Giant : China in the 21st Century*. London: Anthem, 2007; Wang, Gungwu. *Joining the Modern World : Inside and outside China*. Singapore : World Scientific, 2000; Louie, Andrea. *Chineseness across Borders : Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004.

trustworthiness that arise from them.”¹⁹⁵ Why is this important? Drawing a distinction between the bridging (or inclusive) and bonding (exclusive) nature of social capital, Putnam explains that bridging social capital is able to “generate broader identities and reciprocity whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrow selves.”¹⁹⁶ But more than just for ontological purposes, the existence of social capital imbues civic engagement with a certain moral character which is highly consequential to political life. As Putnam explains, “social capital affects not only what goes into politics, but also what comes out of it...our collective interest requires actions that violate our immediate self-interest and that our neighbors will act collectively, too...Social capital, the evidence increasingly suggest, strengthens our better, more expansive selves. The performance of our democratic institutions depends in measurable ways upon social capital.”¹⁹⁷

Seen in this way, the issue of Chineseness presents the Chinese government the means whereby to procure social capital so as to ultimately lend weight to the CCP’s political credentials towards the governing of China. In one sense, this is not unlike the utilization of social capital in countries with democratic institutions where private voluntary groups contribute to larger public life by functioning as “intermediary associations” whereby individuals are able to express their interest and demands on government, protect themselves from abuses of powers by political leaders, instill

¹⁹⁵ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, p.19.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.23.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.344-349.

habits of cooperation and public-spiritedness, as well as the practical skills necessary to partake in public life.¹⁹⁸ One key difference however, lies in the relationship between political life and civic life. Unlike the democratic systems where there is a clearer demarcation and separation of powers between what is political and what is not (hence the existence of civil society to bridge these gaps), Chinese social life is argued to be far more organizational fluid and politically bounded.¹⁹⁹ The political character of Chinese society however can be problematic in practice, especially if Chinese political leaders “over-reference” their political motivations in their course of discharging their duties. As such, there is a need to legitimize their actions with recourse to motivations other than political ones. In this respect, “Chineseness” represents an ideal choice, due to its highly dynamic (and diffusive) nature. According to Wang Gungwu, the notion of Chineseness, above all, is seen in its political utility and dynamic nature:

“It is living and changeable; it is also a product of a shared historical experience whose record has continually affected its growth; it has become an increasingly a self-conscious matter for China; and it should be related to what appears to be, or to have been, Chinese in the eyes of non-Chinese.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.338.

¹⁹⁹ See Pye, Lucian W. *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*. New ed. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992, pp.16-28; Fei, Xiaotong. *From the Soil the Foundations of Chinese Society : Translation of Fei Xiaotong's Xiangtu Zhongguo*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp.19-24.

²⁰⁰ Gungwu, Wang. *The Chineseness of China: Selected Essays*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991, p.2.

This sense of “being Chinese” can be most vividly seen in the 2008 Olympic Games, which proffered Chinese leaders the opportunity to showcase the story of China’s global success. Writing on the event, Victor Cha notes that “sport is an unmistakable prism through which nation-states project their image to the world and to their own people...in some instances, sport is critical to the process of independence and nation-building...poor performance in sport can render negative images of national identity and self-worth beyond anything imagined in politics.”²⁰¹ But more than just an opportunity for nation-building and image promotion, the Olympics also allowed Chinese leaders to narrate a political vision of China’s future vis-à-vis the outside world. In the following, I will look at the song “Beijing Welcomes You” (北京欢迎你 Beijing huanying ni),²⁰² a feature song for the 100-day countdown to the Games, and whose composition involved one hundred celebrities from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan and South Korea. Notwithstanding the bright visuals and upbeat melody (which made the piece a standout favourite among many Chinese), there are a number of themes that reflect certain aspects of Chinese self-identity as well as the political narratives that its leaders are attempting to convey to the world.

²⁰¹ Cha, Victor D. *Beyond the Final Score : The Politics of Sport in Asia*.

Contemporary Asia in the World. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, p.2.

²⁰² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYqHmN2Jdzc> (retrieved July 12, 2016).

Beijing Welcomes You

1. China Welcomes the World, but on its terms

At first glance, the words of the song seem to suggest that China is prepared to go all-out to welcome its international guests (“Beijing Welcomes You/we’ve split the heaven and earth for you...The vastness as big as heaven and earth/we are all friends/there is no need to stand on ceremony”), yet the reality of the Olympics suggest that Chinese hospitality is qualified, and only countries who are willing to accept China’s international actions are accorded the right of welcome. For instance, critics of China’s human rights’ records were reportedly being detained by the Chinese authorities, and in a veiled challenge to Western democratic norms, the United States was criticized for not ensuring its citizens to “abide by the law in foreign countries.”²⁰³ Such harsh treatment, it seems, was not directed only at outsiders; millions of ordinary Chinese citizens also had their lives turned upside down as a result of the Chinese

²⁰³ Spencer, Richard. Beijing Olympics; Human rights abuses getting worse. *The Telegraph*. July 29, 2008,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/2469078/Beijing-Olympics-Human-rights-abuses-getting-worse.html> (retrieved July 12, 2016); China dissatisfied with US comment on human rights during Beijing Olympics, *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific*, Aug 26, 2008 [ProQuest].

government's policies to "clean up" the capital for the games.²⁰⁴ These examples highlight the difficulties faced by Chinese leaders in convincing a global audience of its magnanimity, which is conditional upon countries willing to acquiesce to Chinese terms. While the theme song seems to exhort the world to "be at home" in Beijing, the irony is that Chinese leaders are far less comfortable "at home in Beijing" in the presence of outsiders than they are in their absence.

2. To be Chinese, is to be supportive of the PRC

While the hundred celebrities involved in the video are of East Asian descent, countries like Singapore, Japan and South Korea represent distinct nation-states with political constitutions far removed from that of China; in the case of Taiwan and Hong Kong, the relationship with Beijing remain highly problematic till this day. Watching the video however, one gets the impression that these differences do not matter, or at least, ought not to matter in the larger scheme of things, which is the achievement of China's Olympic goals. For instance, Chinese-American singer Wang Lee Hom (who is of Taiwanese origin) sings the words "we promised to get together here, we welcome you"; likewise, Singapore-born singer JJ Lin sings "Beijing welcomes you, people who have dreams all are extraordinary." Commercial reasons aside, the fact that these ethnic Chinese citizens are included in the song, I argue, reflects a broader political-cultural mindset at work here: China's cultural hegemony makes no difference between mainland Chinese citizens and foreign-born Chinese citizens. To be ethnic

²⁰⁴ "Beijing Planning To Evict 1.5 Million People For Olympics, Human Rights Group Says." *National Post*, December 06, 2007.

Chinese, it is frequently assumed, is to be supportive of China. Indeed, China's nationality law operates on the basis of the "right of blood" (*jus sanguinis*) whereby Chinese nationality is obtained when at least one parent is a Chinese national or by naturalization. In practice such an approach is highly problematic given that only Chinese with a *hukou* are considered legitimate citizens and that separate arrangements are enforced for citizens of Hong Kong and Macau despite the PRC's claim to territorial sovereignty of them. This is corroborated by the author's conversations with a number of senior Singaporean diplomats who pointed out they are frequently chastised by Chinese officials for not "defending China's interests" in their conduct of diplomatic work with Western countries. Moreover, Chinese policy-makers make little distinction between military/economic work and cultural affairs. Both are used to promote China on the world stage as the number one country in the world. As observed in one study of Chinese internal publications, Chinese elites involved in policy making are widely convinced that China is locked in a realist competition with the United States and the broader West "not only in military and economic affairs but also for the power to shape the construction of Chinese culture and the mentalities of people in China and other societies."²⁰⁵ Under the conditions of such a competition, ethnic Chinese are seen as supporters of the Chinese state (or at least, they ought to); other national loyalties are permissible so long as they do not run against the grain of what the Chinese government stands for.

²⁰⁵ Lynch, Daniel, C. *China's Future: PRC Elites Debate Economics, Politics, and Foreign Policy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015, p.203.

3. One must first embrace China in order to love (and discover) China

More problematic is the need for outsiders or guests to first embrace China in order to truly “love” and discover China. As Chinese singer Na Ying and Singaporean songbird Stephanie Sun put it, “I (China) always open the doors of my home and my arms to embrace you (the guest or outsider), once embraced there will be a rapport and you (the outsider) will love this place (China).” In other words, the outsider is exhorted to make an a priori commitment to China even before he is allowed to examine for himself the country and its people. To be fair, some kind of “faith commitment” or risk is necessary for every social endeavor, however, it would seem that in this instance, one is asked to “suspend judgment” about China. This, together with the added certainty that one would ultimately come to love China and to have one’s dreams fulfilled in China (“Beijing welcomes you, people who have dreams are all extraordinary, keep your courage than you will have miracles”). How is this possible, and upon what basis are outsiders to be assured that their dreams will be achieved in China? (after all, there are only so many world records that can be broken, and most athletes actually end up with dashed dreams!) Indeed, if we examine the words of the song not so much for their cognitive content (what it means logically) but for their affective content (i.e. the kind of emotions it is supposed to invoke in the viewer or listener), then it is evident that these words are composed with the purpose of persuading the outsider that “China is the future”²⁰⁶ and that the Games represent the precursor event to the ushering of that future.

²⁰⁶ Callahan, William A. *China Dreams: 20 Views of the Future*, pp.7-16.

As the above observations show, implicit in the discourse surrounding the 2008 Olympics and its theme song is the desire to portrait China as exceptional, that is, good and different. While it is necessary for countries which host large-scale events like the Olympics to often invoke elements of theatric and make-belief in the marketing campaigns, in the case of China, such campaigns are not just about the promotion of events for commercial reasons, but also the projection of a type of image that China seeks to proclaim about itself to the wider world. In other words, the Beijing Olympics is not about showcasing sporting excellence per se, but about highlighting China's story; to the extent that sporting events matter, they allow China to showcase and narrate its story of its rise and success to the outside world. Indeed, one might also argue that the Olympics is also a reflection of geopolitical competition as seen by the rivalry between China and the United States. Prior to the 2008 Olympics and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was the top sporting nation globally and had topped the Olympic medal table in the three previous competitions (1996, 2000 and 2004); in 2008 however, China became number one, with 12 more gold medals than the United States. Indeed, events in the same year such as the Lehman Brothers collapse, Beijing's subsequent 4 trillion yuan global stimulus as well as sending its own astronaut to space prompted Chinese leaders to view China's role in the world from a position of strength. China's former ambassador to Japan, Chen Jian, reflecting on the above events said that "the US is beginning to degenerate [while] China will become the world's next superpower, and such recognition has been

floating, fermenting and spreading around the world.”²⁰⁷ Relating this to Chinese national identity, we might argue that a sense of exceptionalism is needed to generate a strong national identity. The events surrounding the Beijing Olympics provided the Chinese government to highlight its credentials as an exceptional power, and thus to perform its role as a custodian of Chinese identity. Furthermore, by suggesting that China is both good and different, Chinese exceptionalism seeks to coopt others into the preferred worldview of the Chinese state, or what we might term as a CCP-centric view of seeing the world. As Rey Chow points out, “the collective habit of supplementing every major world trend with the notion of “Chinese” is the result of an overdetermined series of historical factors, the most crucial of which is the lingering, pervasive hegemony of Western culture.”²⁰⁸ By conflating ethnicity with citizenship, Chinese leaders purport to assume a certain sense of de facto entitlement over other ethnic Chinese, as a result of their ruling positions within China.

Fostering cohesiveness via Chinese nationalism

The notion of social cohesiveness likewise features prominently in Chinese political discourse. This is particularly so, as Minxin Pei argues, given the considerable decline of Communist ideology which had formerly been used as an ideological tool in

²⁰⁷ Cited in Peh, Shing Huei. *When The Party Ends: China’s leaps and stumbles after the Beijing Olympics*. Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2014, p.25.

²⁰⁸ Chow, Rey. “Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem.” *Boundary 2*, Autumn 1998, Vol. 25 (3): 1-24, see 3.

buttressing support for the Chinese government.²⁰⁹ Hence, the concept of national cohesion has been regularly referenced in official CCP statements indicating that Chinese leaders are increasingly concerned and are paying close attention to it.²¹⁰ To address the issue of a trust deficit and to promote social cohesion within broader Chinese society, Chinese culture is used as a means to “unite the people” (ningju renxin 凝聚人心), as described by its propaganda chief Liu Yunshan.²¹¹

Why is this important for China? Much of this is related to the issue of *trust*. In a study of the relationship between self-identity and modernity, Anthony Giddens argues that one central feature of late modernity is the “separation of time from space.” Unlike pre-modern cultures and ways of life, “modern social organizations[s] presumes the precise coordination of the actions of many human beings physically absent from

²⁰⁹ Pei, Minxin. “China’s Precarious Balance: Cohesiveness and Stability in a Fast-Changing Society. *Papers from the Asia-Pacific Symposium*. Washington D.C.: National Defence University Press, 2000, pp. 49-57.

²¹⁰ See, “Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu quanmian shenhua gaige ruogan zhongda wenti de jue ding” [Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of Several Major Issues]. November 15, 2013, http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2013-11/15/content_2528179.htm (retrieved February 27, 2017).

²¹¹ “Liu Yunshan qiangdiao: Yi gao du de wenhua zijue tuidong wenhua fanrong fazhan” [Liu Yunshan emphasizes: With a high level of cultural consciousness push forward cultural expansion and development]. *Xinhua*, July 31, 2010, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/12306036.html> (retrieved April 20, 2017).

one another.”²¹² Hence the need for trust, which “presumes a leap to commitments, a quality of faith [and which] is specifically related to absence in time and space, as well as to ignorance.”²¹³ Relating this to China, one might pose the question: how much trust is there between the government and its citizens? Can the central government trust the citizens to do the right thing in the absence of supervisory mechanisms (given the inherent impossibility of controlling *all* aspects of social life); conversely, to what extent do Chinese citizens trust the central government to act in the right way given the lack of accountability mechanisms (such as elections) that could be utilized to register their feelings towards the authorities. The uncertainty that is brought about as a result of the separation of time from space means that trust is vital to the effective ordering of social and political life. As Giddens puts it, “we have no need to trust someone who is constantly in view and whose activities can be directly monitored.”²¹⁴

Various studies of Chinese cities have posited a relationship between government action and social trust.²¹⁵ A number of Chinese writers have also lamented the lack of social trust within Chinese society. For instance, well-known

²¹² Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self Identity : Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, pp.16-17.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p.19.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ Hazelzet, Arjan, and Bart Wissink. "Neighborhoods, Social Networks, and Trust in Post-Reform China: The Case of Guangzhou." *Urban Geography* 33, no. 2 (2012): 204-20.

Chinese sociologist Li Yinhe laments a crisis of social trust (shehui xinren weiji 社会信任危机) permeating Chinese society as a result of four problems: ideology, legal mechanisms, social customs and religion.²¹⁶ Zheng Yongnian likewise locates the problem of trust in the field of politics, economics and society-at-large. He cites the “irrational investments” (feilixing touzi 非理性投资) of local authorities as causing harm to the social contract (shehui qiyue 社会契约) built up between the central government and the citizens. In addition, “black box operations” (anxiang caozuo 暗箱操作) , or illegal activities, have also damaged the reputation of public officials in the eyes of the ordinary citizens.²¹⁷

In his study of Chinese propaganda, Kingsley Edney argues that the CCP – in order to enhance China’s standing in the world – must first foster domestic cohesion at home. By doing so, the CCP would also increase China’s soft power, and

²¹⁶ Li, Yinhe: Zhongguo weishenme hui chuxian xinren weiji [Lin Yinhe: Why does crisis of trust exists in China]. *Fenghuang guoji zhiku* [Phoenix International database] http://pit.ifeng.com/a/20160801/49696876_0.shtml (retrieved March 2, 2017).

²¹⁷ Zheng, Yongnian: Zhongguo shehui yijing cunzai yanzhong de xinren weiji [Zheng Yongnian: Chinese society already exists a serious crisis of trust], http://www.360doc.com/content/15/1015/12/8873445_505796082.shtml (retrieved March 3, 2017).

consequently, remedy the negative perceptions of China from the outside.²¹⁸ The difficulty however, as Edney points out, lies in the lack of separation in China between government, state and society (which exists in liberal democracies to varying extents), as such, “the Party and state are intertwined in a way that makes it difficult for observers to distinguish persistent political values from fluctuations in CCP policy.”²¹⁹ For instance, it remains to be seen whether Xi Jinping’s concept of the Chinese dream (which we will further touch upon in Chapter 4) is truly representative of a genuine collective national sentiment or whether it is an ideological concept that is designed to unify the CCP with the Chinese people. As Edney observes, “the process of introducing and defining the Chinese dream is top down, rather than bottom up, and is driven by the CCP rather than the public.”²²⁰ In other words, it is unclear whether the promulgation of certain political values in China is congruent with broader societal aspirations (thus leading to greater national cohesion) or are they purely for political (party) goals without addressing the issue of cohesion.

One way the CCP has attempted to foster a stronger sense of national cohesion is through the means of referencing nationalism. By doing so, it is argued that the party seeks to de-problematize what is essentially a contested concept of the Chinese nation and consequently, to seek to legitimize the manner of its rule over the

²¹⁸ Edney, Kingsley. *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda : International Power and Domestic Political Cohesion*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, see pp.101-121.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.118.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.119.

country.²²¹ But more than just for regime stability, Chinese nationalism also has the added effect of also attributing a moral basis by which one's loyalty to the Chinese nation is to be judged upon. According to Bauman's description of nationalism, it is the "[proclamation of] the nation itself, the living legacy of long and tortuous history, to be a good in its own right – and not just one good among many others, but the supreme good, one that dwarfs and subordinates all other goods."²²² Instead of the search of a "common good" (in which would-be citizens engage in by "looking at themselves and calling themselves into question"), the solution offered by nationalism to the problem of communal security is "my country, right or wrong."²²³

To be certain, varieties of nationalism exist, and a number of critical scholars have raised questions concerning the validity of nationalism concepts, given contemporary events which significance is increasingly played out on a global scale.

²²¹ For studies into Chinese nationalism, see: Unger, Jonathan., and Barmé, Geremie. *Chinese Nationalism*. Contemporary China Papers. Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 1996; Hughes, Christopher. "Reclassifying Chinese Nationalism: The Geopolitik Turn." *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 71 (2011): 601-20; Callahan, William A. "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism." *Alternatives* 29, no. 2 (2004): 199-218; Wang, Zheng. "Chinese Discourse on the 'Nine-Dashed Line'. Rights, Interests, and Nationalism." *Asian Survey* 55, no. 3 (2015): 502-2; Gries, Peter Hays. *China's New Nationalism : Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

²²² Bauman, Zygmunt. *In Search of Politics*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1999, p.165.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p.166, 168.

²²⁴ But given the ability of the Chinese government to suppress alternative narratives of how China's nation-building efforts ought to be prescribed, Bauman's observations, in my view, would continue to remain valid. Indeed, Christopher Hughes argues that the CCP has become adept in the use of nationalist ideology and has consequently utilized such an ideology to maintain its stranglehold on power while at the time, ensure that its version of nationalism is compatible with the requirements of attracting foreign investment so as to sustain its economic development. ²²⁵ Nevertheless the conditions of liquid modernity raise a crucial problem: Can such a distinction (assuming it can be drawn) between what is "Chinese/non-Chinese", "local/foreign" be clearly delineated given the highly fluid borders of global flows of ideas, knowledge and expertise, or as Bauman puts, "the political economy of uncertainty."²²⁶ Also, if one sees Chinese nationalism as a call to patriotism (i.e. aiguo zhuyi 爱国主义), then a further question can be raised: upon what basis is one asked to do so, and to what extent does love for one's country is dependent upon one's unqualified support for the ruling Communist party, and the type of foreign relations that it undertakes? All this

²²⁴ Breen, Keith., and O'Neill, Shane. *After the Nation? : Critical Reflections on Nationalism and Post-nationalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; Buttle, Nicholas. "Critical Nationalism: A Liberal Prescription?" *Nations and Nationalism* 6, no. 1 (2000): 111-27; Özkırımlı, Umut. *Theories of Nationalism : A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

²²⁵ Hughes, Christopher R. *Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006.

²²⁶ Bauman, Zygmunt. *In Search of Politics*, p.173.

suggests that Chinese nationalism is not a one-sided exercise. As Callahan observes, the Chinese people are also “consuming nationalism as part of a symbolic economy that generates identity”; in this respect, nationalism – it can be argued – is not “imposed by elites so much as it resonates with people’s feelings as it is circulated in the market.”²²⁷ In other words, how Chinese citizens appropriate (or consume) nationalism may be quite different from that of state prescription. This means that Chinese nationalism may be far more dynamic and diffusive than is assumed, and that attempts by the state to demarcate clearly the parameters of nationalistic ideas may be less successful than expected.

Projecting the idea of China’s goodness vs. the evil outside world

The emphasis on identity also represents a particularly potent weapon to help promote “nation-building” amidst the social flux pervading Chinese society. Crucially, this is seen by the promulgation of the Chinese state as “good”, and that Chinese civilization is magnanimous and embracing of outsiders.²²⁸ As Callahan notes, “Beijing’s idealized view of imperial China is constantly repeated as a way of explaining how China’s peaceful rise is not a threat, but an opportunity for all to prosper in a harmonious world.”²²⁹ By positing a priori that Chinese ideals are representative and

²²⁷ Callahan, William A. "History, Identity, and Security: Producing and Consuming Nationalism in China." *Critical Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2006): 179-208, see 179 and 202.

²²⁸ Callahan, William A. *China : The Pessoptimist Nation*, pp.1-31.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.21.

reflective of what all (or at least, a majority) countries in the world ought to approximate and accept, Chinese leaders are able to justify their policy actions on the basis of a superior morality, while in the process challenging those who are against its actions by characterizing them as lacking in morality (or evil).

One way this has been done is via the “scapegoating” of the West in which China’s ills and problems are often blamed upon. In a series of studies on the role of violence towards the sustainability of a society, Rene Girard suggests that beneath the calm surface of peaceful and friendly cooperation of communal life lies the seeds of violent urge. Given the propensity of modern society to eschew violence within their own communities, such a violent disposition has to be channeled beyond the borders of the in-community on to an external group. Hence the need to channel such sentiments on to a “surrogate victim” (or scapegoat) who would take on the sacrifice so as to restore a sense of communal unity. According to Girard, “the victim is not a substitute for some particularly engendered individual, nor is it offered up to some individual of particularly bloodthirsty temperament. Rather, it is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from its own violence. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice.”²³⁰

The selection of the victim is crucial; to be suitable for the sacrifice, the potential object “must bear a sharp resemblance to the human categories excluded from the ranks of the ‘sacrificeable’ while still maintaining a degree of difference that forbids all

²³⁰ Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. London: Continuum Books, 1988, p. 8.

possible confusion.”²³¹ The candidates must be outside, but not too far; similar to “us rightful community members” yet unmistakably different. The purpose of sacrifice is to draw tight unsurpassable boundaries between the “inside” and “outside” of the community. Interestingly, Girard observed such literature sacrificial rites existed in ancient Chinese literature and possessed a propitiatory function – such practices “pacify the country and make the people settled...It is through the sacrifices that the unity of the people is strengthened...sacrificial ceremonies, music, punishments, and laws have one and the same end: to unite society and establish order.”²³²

How should we understand this in light of China’s construction of its national identity? To what extent can scapegoating provide the means to ensure Chinese social solidarity, thus providing the basis whereby to generate support for its international politics and foreign relations? And how does the human propensity for “mimesis” (as Girard terms it)²³³ fits into the wider scope of the Chinese leaders’ strategy of building a unified Chinese society? In Bauman’s discussion of scapegoating within the context of liquid modernity, it is argued that the sacrifice of such “surrogate victims” provide the means of calling into “remembrance of an historical or mythical ‘event of creation’, of the original compact on the battlefield soaked with enemy blood. If there was no such event, it needs to be retrospectively construed by the assiduous repetitiveness of the sacrifice rite.”²³⁴

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p.12

²³² *Ibid.*, p.9.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p.107-108.

²³⁴ Bauman Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*, p.195.

To understand how this scapegoat mechanism works in Chinese politics, we need to see how the CCP has refashioned itself to ensure that it retains a monopoly of power over the right to rule over China. In his study of elite training and state building in modern China, Frank Pieke observes that the CCP's greatest strength lies in its "organizational (rather than ideological) credibility" to play the leading role in society. "As the undisputed ruling party, the CCP continues to draw on the charismatic impersonality of Leninist party organizations. As the infallible source of absolute truth, the party has an unchallengeable and almost mystical mandate to resolve contradictory trends and objectives by relating them to an unquestioned final and overriding mission and desire, no matter how vaguely defined."²³⁵ This claim to infallible truth means that Chinese leaders are wont to transfer blame to others rather than admit that the Party could possibly err. While party members individually are open to prosecution for personal mistakes, as a collective whole, the Party is absolved from blame. As Pieke puts it, "at the root of [the CCP] survival as a Leninist organization lies the party's almost uncanny ability time and again to learn from its mistakes and act upon itself and its ideology. Approaching revolution and later rule as a learning process has given the party a virtually unique capacity for renewal, change and reinvention."²³⁶ By scapegoating the West, Chinese leaders avoid the burden of blame and "buy time" to respond to internal criticisms and to ultimately preserve their moral standing among its domestic constituents.

²³⁵ Pieke, Frank, N. *The Good Communist: Elite Training and State Building in Today's China*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p.191.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

But more than just maintaining party rule, there is a need to present the party as a positive attractive force so that Chinese citizens are able to actualize their aspirations only if the Party remains in power. This is where Chinese soft power and the practice of scapegoating comes in hand-in-hand. According to Callahan, a “positive Chinese self” is built “through the negative exclusion of Otherness.”²³⁷ Furthermore, Chinese domestic politics and Chinese foreign relations are also intimately intertwined via means of drawing a civilization/barbarian distinction, “a positive, civilized inside takes shape only when it is distinguished from a negative barbaric outside...to understand the soft power of China’s dreams, [one] needs to understand the negative soft power of its nightmares.”²³⁸ Hence the West becomes the source of Chinese nightmares, its actions and policies towards China – as the argument goes - are representative of a larger effort to contain China’s rise and to preserve Western global primacy and leadership. However, in order to persuade its citizens that this is so, it is necessary to incarnate the West in real, tangible terms which its citizens can relate to in their everyday life. Seen this way, issues such as the Dalai Lama, cross-straits relations, Hong Kong independence and the South China Sea disputes thus become surrogates for the West, whereby Chinese leaders claim to hold the moral high ground and are consequently perceived to be infallible. According to Rey Chow, what is frequently encountered in modern day China is a type of cultural essentialism or Sinocentric worldview, which draws an imaginary boundary

²³⁷ Callahan, William A. "Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream." *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 216-29, see 217.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

between China and the world, “everything Chinese, it follows, is fantasized as somehow better – longer in existence, more intelligent, more scientific, more valuable, and ultimately beyond comparison.”²³⁹

Relating this to China’s foreign relations with the West, one sees certain parallels, not least because the West has been the subject of repeated criticisms by Chinese leaders in what they perceive as historical injustices towards China up until today. As pointed out by a number of scholars, the “century of national humiliation” has been a common refrain among Chinese leaders in framing the manner in which modern China relates with the West.²⁴⁰ This is most clearly seen in China’s relations with Japan whereby a vivid sense of victimhood continues to pervade Chinese

²³⁹ Chow, Rey. “Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem, 10.

²⁴⁰ See Gries, Peter Hays. *China's New Nationalism : Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004; Callahan, William A. "History, Identity, and Security: Producing and Consuming Nationalism in China." *Critical Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2006): 179-208; Chong, Ja Ian. "Popular Narratives versus Chinese History: Implications for Understanding an Emergent China." *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 4 (2014): 939-64; Wang, Zheng. "National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China." *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 783-806.

thinking.²⁴¹ Indeed, this deep suspicion towards the West and its allies is seen in the attempts by Chinese leaders, possibly President Xi Jinping himself, to clamp down on Chinese teachers in recent years for spreading “subversive values”, synonymous with “Western capitalist values.”²⁴²

To be certain, scapegoating the West is not a novel practice, particularly in geopolitics whereby Western foreign policies are frequently touted by political regimes who are antagonistic to the West as the reason for the problems in their respective countries. What makes China stand out however, is that unlike some of these countries, it can be argued that China has benefitted most from the rules-based Western-led international order and thus have little incentive to want to modify that order upon which much of its success is derived from.²⁴³ As such, it would seem that Chinese leaders, in their criticism of the West, is doing so as a result of a deep-seated suspicion that the West is attempting to challenge its domestic political system and consequently, to bring about political changes that will erode the power of the CCP.

²⁴¹ Suzuki, Shogo. "The Importance of 'Othering' in China's National Identity: Sino-Japanese Relations as a Stage of Identity Conflicts." *The Pacific Review* 20, no. 1 (2007): 23-47, see 25.

²⁴² Gan, Nectar. “China’s President Xi Jinping warns Communist Party schools against ‘Western capitalist’ values”, *South China Morning Post*, May 1, 2016, retrieved <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1940396/chinas-president-xi-jinping-warns-communist-party> (July 15, 2016).

²⁴³ Ikenberry, G. John. "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?" *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (2008): 23-37.

By scapegoating the West, it also offers Chinese leaders a ready-made panacea to deflect attention from its own domestic limitations and to maintain the aura of “sacredness” that the CCP is wont to possess.²⁴⁴

Conclusion

As the above discussion suggests, the issue of identity remains highly enigmatic and elusive in modern China’s engagement with the wider world. At the same time, identity represents an integral aspect of the Chinese political worldview and deeply influences how Chinese leaders perceive China’s relations with the world. Given the conditions of liquid modernity, the question of whether the party-centric worldview of Chinese leaders is sufficient in responding to the myriad and complex social challenges pervading Chinese society. While scholars like Pieke have pointed out the durability and strength of party leaders to evolve and reinvent itself, a number of scholars have also noted the increasing challenges to governance in China, not least in the lack of coherence in its foreign policy and domestic governance,²⁴⁵ or as Jonathan Fenby puts it, “a series of different agendas pursued at different times in

²⁴⁴ See Pieke, Frank N. *Knowing China: A Twenty-First Century Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp.21-27.

²⁴⁵ Two of the more recent works that deal with these issues are Shambaugh, David L. *China Goes Global : The Partial Power*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, and Lampton, David, M. *Following the Leader: Ruling China, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

different ways by different actors.”²⁴⁶ Furthermore if we maintain that a country’s political order is dependent upon its social order and the extent to which its citizens are able to freely participate in social life, then the Chinese government growing assertion over matters of culture and society in recent years is problematic, particularly in a time of flexible economic and social relations that characterize liquid modernity. Consequently, I argue that the idea of Chinese social capital that is circumscribed by ethnic affiliation is highly debatable, especially if individuals do not see themselves as part of a broader Chinese narrative (Chinese Dream?) which is able to encapsulate their own private aspirations. In my view, the international system, which is configured around nation-states is unlikely to acquiesce to a Pax-Sinica arrangement; indeed, efforts by the Chinese government to expand its circle of influence beyond Chinese shores have been difficult, even in ethnic-majority city-states such as Hong Kong and Singapore. Finally, the attempt to present the Chinese state as “inherently good” and “superior” to others is increasingly called into question. A case in point would be Chinese intransigence in its territorial disputes with its neighbors. The refusal to play by international norms, to a large extent, blunts the claims of Chinese leaders that China’s rise would be non-hegemonic and peaceful, and that China is not unlike other

²⁴⁶ Fenby, Jonathan. “China’s Geoeconomic Strategy: does China have a Foreign Policy? Domestic Pressures and China’s Strategy.” *LSE IDEAS, Special Report SR012*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012.

great powers, and that its actions are similar to other great powers (including the United States which it frequently criticizes).²⁴⁷

Relating to China's political worldview and its claims to exceptionalism, it would seem that China finds itself in a double bind: it wants to be exceptional (good and different) from the West in its international politics, yet at the same time it needs to contend with domestic problems such as social mistrust and growing unrest that are not unlike those faced in other societies. To what extent then can an authoritarian government be sufficiently responsive to the needs of its citizens, given the emphasis on domestic stability and a monopolistic claim to truth? Can top party leaders suffer damage to themselves and the party for the greater good of its citizens and the country (however that "greater good" be defined)? While a full assessment of China's domestic conditions is beyond the scope of this thesis to address, a central point of contestation, I argue, lies in the extent to which the CCP's worldview is being accepted by ordinary Chinese citizens. Given the fading memory of ideological factors (during the Maoist period), especially among the younger generation, who are given to very different set of considerations and ambitions about what a "good life" entails, it remains to be seen whether the Chinese government's brand of governance is able to obtain wider resonance among the public.

²⁴⁷ See Allison, Graham. "Of Course China, Like All Great Powers, Will Ignore an International Legal Verdict." *The Diplomat*, July 11, 2016, retrieved

<http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/of-course-china-like-all-great-powers-will-ignore-an-international-legal-verdict/> (July 17, 2016).

Chapter 4

Dressing up the Dragon:

Chinese national image and global leadership

In my earlier chapters, I examined how China's political worldview is being reflected in the study of China's international relations thinking as well as the issue of its national identity. From these, we also see how embedded in its worldview is a deep sense of exceptionalism in which China claims itself to be good and different from the West. Building from this, I will analyze in this chapter and the next the issue of China's national image and how this is played out in China's international relations. In this chapter, I will look at the national image(s) that Chinese leaders are attempting to project on the world stage vis-à-vis Beijing's global interactions. In chapter 5, I will examine the discourse surrounding the high profile Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) rolled out by President Xi Jinping in 2013 to see how such a worldview is being understood by Chinese thinkers and what it tells us about China's view of the global order.

In this chapter, I will argue that a positive national image is essential for a country's political worldview to be accepted by others, and strengthening a country's claim to be an exceptional power. Furthermore, a positive national image could proffer states with diplomatic goodwill in their international relations and affecting the way political relations are being structured. States which are negatively perceived by other states face greater diplomatic challenges, not least in the issue of trust, which is seen to be

a central backbone of any societal or political arrangement.²⁴⁸ Likewise the apprehension of a threat is also closely related to the *perception* of the target. According to Stein, “perception is the process of apprehending by means of the senses and recognizing and interpreting what is processed...the basis for understanding, learning, and knowing and the motivation for action.”²⁴⁹ While it can be argued that states’ perceptions of each other are not the only decision-making variables that are important, Robert Jervis argues in his seminal work that “the roots of many important [international] disputes about policies lie in different perceptions. And in the frequent cases when the actors do not realize this, they will misunderstand their disagreement and engage in a debate that is unenlightening.”²⁵⁰

Seen this way, many countries, particularly in East Asia, regard the rise of China with some unease, and are wont to perceive Chinese activities within their own

²⁴⁸ For further discussion of the importance of trust in international relations, see Seligman, Adam B. *The Problem of Trust*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997; O'Neill, Onora. *A Question of Trust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

²⁴⁹ Stein, Janice G. “Threat perception in international relations” in Sears, David O., Huddy, Leonie, and Levy, Jack S. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp.364-395, see 365.

²⁵⁰ Jervis, Robert. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, N.J. :Princeton University Press, 1976, p.31.

territorial jurisdiction with some measure of suspicion.²⁵¹ It is argued that China has been unable to shed its image of an “international propagandist inherited from the years past” even though it has attempted - through means of public diplomacy (gonggong waijiao 公共外交) - to boost the legitimacy of the CCP to rule China, lure foreign investment to China while making China “palatable to the region and the world at large.”²⁵² Indeed, as a sovereign nation-state with global ambitions, managing China’s national image is crucial to how China is perceived by the rest of the world. As one study of China’s public diplomacy puts it, “China has not yet been successful in projecting the image of a responsible great power”²⁵³; if this is so, then what steps are Chinese leaders taking to remedy this problematic image, and to what extent have they been successful in doing so?

In my subsequent discussion, I will first relate my study of China’s political worldview, particularly on its claims of exceptionalism to the issue of national image so as to highlight the importance such an image has towards whether a country is perceived as exceptional or not, and whether its political worldview is being accepted

²⁵¹ Linley, Matthew, James Reilly, and Benjamin E Goldsmith. "Who's Afraid of the Dragon? Asian Mass Publics' Perceptions of China's Influence." *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 13, no. 4 (2012): 501-23.

²⁵² D'Hooghe, Ingrid. "Into High Gear: China's Public Diplomacy." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 3, no. 1 (2008): 37-61, see 43 ; Chang, Tsan-Kuo, and Lin, Fen. "From Propaganda to Public Diplomacy: Assessing China's International Practice and Its Image, 1950–2009." *Public Relations Review* 40, no. 3 (2014): 450-58.

²⁵³ D'Hooghe, Ingrid. "Into High Gear: China's Public Diplomacy", 57.

or otherwise. I go on to analyze the ways in which Chinese leaders attempt to promote the country's national image on the world stage. Finally, I will examine the extent to which these images have been successful in promoting China's national image to the outside world, and what this tells us about its political worldview.

The Importance of National Image

What then constitutes a "national image", and more importantly, how does a state arrive at a "favorable" national image? In his analysis of images, Kenneth Boulding defines perceived images as the "total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure of the behavior unit or its internal view of itself and the universe."²⁵⁴ Given that decision-makers do not make decisions in a social vacuum, but to their "image" of the social situation as it is being perceived, Boulding argues "it is what we think the world is like, not what it is really like, that determines our behavior."²⁵⁵ The desire to maintain "cognitive consistency" would compel decision-makers to attribute "favorable characteristics...to liked nations, and unfavorable characteristics to disliked nations."²⁵⁶ Seen this way, whether a country is 'liked' or 'disliked' has got to do with

²⁵⁴ Boulding, Kenneth E. *The Image : Knowledge in Life and Society*. Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1961, pp.121-122.

²⁵⁵ Boulding, Kenneth E. "National Images and International Systems." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3, no. 2 (1959): 120-31, see 120.

²⁵⁶ Scott, William. "Psychological and Social Correlates of International Images." In H.Kelman, ed., *International Behavior*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965, p.100.

whether it is able to project a “favorable” national image, one that is sufficiently “attractive” to be worthy of emulation. Furthermore, a well constructed national image can serve a dual function of shoring up domestic support while expanding a country’s global and regional influence.²⁵⁷

Relating this to the study of China’s political worldview and its claims to be exceptional, I argue that a country that seeks to have its worldview accepted must foremost be able to project a positive national image of itself. In his study of public opinion, media theorist Walter Lippmann argues that one’s external environment is so complex that humans reduce it to a simpler model in order to comprehend and to take decisive action.²⁵⁸ Scholars of international relations have also utilized image theory in relating how state-to-state relationships are being conceived of as a function of perceived threat or opportunity that a subject believes another actor represents.²⁵⁹ This national image is closely related to what a country *does*, both domestically and internationally. In this respect, a national image is not inherently self-evident, and actions are interpreted within a certain mental framework which involve prior assumptions, preconceptions and value judgment about a country’s intentions and interests. At the same time, these images and actions are not entirely a relative matter:

²⁵⁷ Li, Xiufang. and Chitty, Naren. ‘Reframing national image: A methodological framework’, *Conflict & Communication Online* 8, no. 2 (2009):1-11.

²⁵⁸ Lippmann, Walter. *Public Opinion*. New York: Macmillan, 1934.

²⁵⁹ Herrmann, Richard K., James F. Voss, Tonya Y. E. Schooler, and Joseph Ciarrochi. "Images in International Relations: An Experimental Test of Cognitive Schemata." *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1997): 403-33.

there exists certain characteristics of state behavior, or “baseline social processes”, that function as key determinants of international social processes.²⁶⁰ To the degree countries are able to exhibit such traits, they are likely to be favorably perceived, and vice versa. In other words, a national image is produced not simply by words, but through the actions of the state.

Given my analysis of China’s worldview and its exceptionalist claims involve the examination of how Chinese elites view China as being good and different from the West, having a favorable national image is essential towards the achievement of that objective. In this chapter, I will look at how Chinese elites perceive China as being “different” from the West within the space of domestic governance and the extent to which these governance priorities reflect the playing out of Chinese exceptionalism ideas. To do so, I will look at the speeches made by President Xi Jinping that are being published in the book *The Governance of China (Xi Jinping Tan Zhiguo Lizheng)*.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ For a more detailed explanation, see Dale C. Copeland, “The constructivist challenge to structural realism”, in S.Guzzini and A. Leander eds., *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and his critics*. London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 1-21.

²⁶¹ In late 2017, a second volume of *The Governance of China* was published which covered major speeches made by Xi between August 2014 to September 2017. Notwithstanding some new themes, such as community of shared future and the Belt and Road Initiative, the majority of the speeches revolve around similar narratives covered in the first volume. As this chapter is not meant to be an exhaustive review

Through a closer study of this work, I hope to uncover several key themes that reflect how China is being presented to the outside world as “different” vis-à-vis the processes of domestic governance. I will also examine how China’s national image is being portrayed in these instances, and the extent to which they help or hinder attempts to generate a favorable national image.

Xi Jinping: *The Governance of China*

First I use *The Governance of China* as a springboard to anchor my analysis of China’s national image. The choice of the book is made for the following reasons. Firstly, it comprises of 80 speeches made by President Xi Jinping in his first 18 months of becoming China’s leader, and thus represents an important attempt to narrate how China’s future might be like. Given Xi’s thorough consolidation of power within the party, the book can be viewed as a blue-print concerning Xi’s vision of China under his rule.²⁶² Secondly, given the translation into English by the Foreign Languages Press of Beijing (in 2014), the book was likely written and compiled with an external audience in mind. A careful study of this book would thus allow us to glean further clues on the type of national image that Xi and senior party leaders purport to project to the outside world. Thirdly, it was observed that the book, despite being almost 500

of Xi’s writings, I train my focus on topics that in my view, matter most to China’s image promotion objectives.

²⁶² Hengjun, Yang. “Why Read Xi Jinping’s book?” *The Diplomat*, January 31, 2015, retrieved <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/why-read-xi-jinpings-book/> (retrieved February 8, 2016).

pages long, possess little reference to the United States and the Western world but instead articulates Chinese perspectives in regards to various aspects of global governance, in particular China's relations with Asia.²⁶³ This suggests a desire among Chinese leaders to differentiate itself from the West on the basis of its self-perceived cultural and political superiority. Taken together, the book provides important clues to how Chinese leaders perceive China's international relations ought to be structured and the priorities that Chinese leaders are wont to emphasize, both in their domestic, regional and international affairs. As observed, the book is helpful because it "gathers together otherwise scattered speeches and comments to show Xi's hopes, dreams, goals, and plans for China and the world."²⁶⁴ Indeed, the publisher writes that the book was written in order "to respond to rising international interest and to enhance the rest of the world's understanding of the Chinese government's philosophy and its domestic and foreign policies."²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Ahmad-Noor, Farish. "How China Sees itself and Its Role in Asia." *RSIS Commentaries*, November 19, 2014, retrieved https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co14230-how-china-sees-itself-and-its-role-in-asia/#.Vri_wM5hM_U (8 retrieved February 8, 2016).

²⁶⁴ Callahan, William A. "The Impact of Xi Jinping's Governance of China – III." *The Asan Forum*, May 18, 2015, <http://www.theasanforum.org/the-china-dream-3-2/> (retrieved December 11, 2016).

²⁶⁵ Xi, Jinping. *The Governance of China*. Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 2014. Publisher's note.

In my subsequent analysis, I will focus on three themes which constitute key narratives of China's image promotion. They are: (I) the Chinese Dream and the image of China as a flourishing civilization; (II) an image of a progressive and peaceful China; and (III) China being a moral example for the international community to emulate. Besides analyzing Xi's speeches which relate to the above themes, I will also look at the writings and ideas of Chinese scholars that touch on the above topics. By linking the subsequent analysis to my broader study of Chinese exceptionalism, I argue that China's national image represents a crucial aspect of China's ability to influence and lead the world. A negative image would sorely dent Chinese ambitions to lead and to have others follow its lead. Hence, to what extent do the ideas articulated by Xi in *The Governance of China* allow the PRC to remedy its national image, as exemplified in the area of governance, and to what degree does Xi's vision of governance can be said to be "different" from the West?

I) *The Chinese Dream: Image of China as a flourishing civilization*

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

"In my opinion, achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times. This dream embodies the long-cherished hope of several generations of the

Chinese people, gives expression to the overall interests of the Chinese nation and Chinese people, and represents the shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation.”²⁶⁶

Given that the setting in which the speech was made, one might view Xi as invoking among the Chinese citizenry a strong sense of historical pride towards their country so as to unite them under the umbrella of a shared common destiny. As noted, “expectations are high in China for Xi to act quickly on a range of issues; there is a sense of urgency in Beijing because people feel that China’s ‘window of opportunity’ for global greatness is closing.”²⁶⁷

This appeal towards the Chinese Dream was again made in Xi’s first official address to the Party as president during the 12th National People’s Congress on 17 March 2013 following the official handover of power.²⁶⁸ Unlike his earlier speech where the “Chinese Dream” was defined vaguely as national rejuvenation, this speech was a clarion call to action, with parameters more clearly defined:

“To realize the Chinese Dream, we must take our own path, which is the path of building socialism with Chinese characteristics”

“To realize the Chinese Dream, we must foster the Chinese spirit”

“To realize the Chinese Dream, we must pool China’s strength, that is, the strength of great unity among the people of all ethnic Chinese (zhonghua minzu

²⁶⁶ Xi, Jinping. *The Governance of China*, p.38.

²⁶⁷ Callahan, William A. *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future*, p.22.

²⁶⁸ Xi, Jinping. *The Governance of China*, pp.41-43.

中华民族).”²⁶⁹

The Chinese Dream theme would go on to be repeated in five other speeches in the book that Xi made over the next fourteen months (April 2013 – June 2014).²⁷⁰ As earlier suggested, these multiple reiterations of the Chinese Dream should not be construed or dismissed simply as propaganda or as facts to be proven or disproven. Rather the Chinese Dream represents a “moral drama that expresses a community’s aspirations and fears.”²⁷¹ In this respect, I argue that efforts to forge a Chinese national identity is closely intertwined with how Chinese leaders endeavor to generate the kind of social cohesiveness within Chinese society (as earlier discussed in Chapter 3). But more than just social cohesion, the Chinese Dream also symbolizes an effort to showcase and highlight China’s credentials to the outside world and to enhance its national image, particularly if its citizens are able to identify with a sense of shared destiny in regards to China’s future. To this end, the Chinese Dream can be seen as a way of engaging with the emotions of the Chinese people, thus generating greater affinity between Chinese political leaders and the citizens.

As such, the Chinese Dream can be understood as a proclamation of a Chinese political “gospel”, whereby China seeks to “confer blessings” to both its own citizens

²⁶⁹ Another plausible translation can be read as “Chinese of all ethnicities.” As discussed in Chapter 3, this emphasis on ethnic Chinese and the close connection between them and the Chinese nation is a common refrain. We will revisit this theme in Chapter 6.

²⁷⁰ Xi, Jinping. *The Governance of China*, pp.47-69,

²⁷¹ Callahan, William A. *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future*, p.145.

and the international community. As one Chinese scholar writes, “the core message of the Chinese Dream is that China’s rise is not a zero-sum game, but a mutual win–win situation for the rest of the world.”²⁷² The image is then of China as a flourishing civilization whose values and way of life is attractive to both insiders and outsiders, thus rendering cooperation inevitable and conflict obsolete. Such an outcome, however, is not a certainty, but is contingent on the preservation of two key criteria, namely, socialism (with Chinese characteristics) and the centrality of the Communist Party of China.

Given that socialist ideology and the CCP are closely intertwined, it is not surprising to see how they contribute to Xi’s vision of the Chinese Dream. Socialism represents a ideological core of the CCP’s institution while the CCP likewise presents itself as a custodian of the doctrines of socialism. Indeed, as Xi himself puts it, socialism with Chinese characteristics, according to Xi, remains an indispensable “doctrine” which “can save China...[and] bring development to China.”²⁷³ Xi refers to China’s history to buttress his point, noting that the socialist system was a result of the Party’s “painstaking efforts” over the years.²⁷⁴ As such, Xi is allying himself with Chinese history – as interpreted through the Party’s vantage point – and concludes that Chinese socialism remains the “only way to achieve China’s socialist

²⁷² Li, Xing. "Interpreting and Understanding “The Chinese Dream” in a Holistic Nexus." *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 8, no. 4 (2015): 505-20, see 517.

²⁷³ Xi, Jinping. *The Governance of China*, p.24.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.7.

modernization and create a better life.”²⁷⁵ Xi also maintains that Chinese socialism – however imperfect at present – remains “unique and effective” and that party members should guard against “erroneous views aimed at abandoning socialism.”²⁷⁶

Similarly, on the CCP leadership, Xi emphasizes the importance of party members to “accomplish concrete deeds that can stand the test of practice, survive the scrutiny of the people and history.”²⁷⁷ Quoting the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Zi, Xi said “governing a big country [like China] is as delicate as frying a small fish (zhidaguo ru pengxiaoxian, 治大国如烹小鲜)”, thus party members ought not to be negligent in the smallest of matters and need to devote themselves to work and the public interest.²⁷⁸ Interesting, the above quote was also used by former U.S. president Ronald Reagan in his 1988 State of the Union speech, but with the added words “do not overdo it.” From this, it can be adduced that while Reagan’s emphasis was for a more laissez-faire approach to domestic governance, Xi’s approach would be to retain considerable Party oversight over matters of governance and policy affairs. This is because given the single-party system of Chinese governance, the fortunes of the Communist Party are coterminous with the fortunes of China.

Why should we care about the Chinese Dream, Chinese socialism and the Chinese leadership? Xi’s words are not entirely unexpected, and his proclamations are not exactly unique. At the same time, the China dream discourse is not simply

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.11.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.445.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.458.

empty talk, but reflect a broader Chinese mindset concerning how Chinese leaders perceive China's economic development and its place in the world. In the words of Zhou Tianyong, who is the vice director of Research at the Party School of the Communist Party of China's Central Committee, the Chinese dream "is rooted in [the Chinese] people's obligations, trust, hopes and dreams for themselves, families, society and country in the future, and the pursuit for the vision and ideal of China."²⁷⁹ However, it raises the larger question of the extent to which the Chinese dream is able to incorporate and account for the interests of other countries, and that Chinese leaders are not thought of merely acting on the behalf of only China's own national interests. In a discussion of "the China model", which was widely promulgated in the late 2000s, Suisheng Zhao observes that such a model, despite its "non-ideological, pragmatic and experimental approach" suffers from several fault lines: one, it lacks moral appeal, two, it had not been effective in dealing with important dimensions of human development home and abroad, and, three, the success of the model is very short and its durability is questionable.²⁸⁰ If one sees such a model as possessing

²⁷⁹ Zhou, Tianyong. *Zhongguomeng yu zhongguo daolu* [*The China Dream and the China Path*]. Shanghai: Shehuikexuewenxianchubanshe [Shanghai: Social Science Academic Press], 2011. The above citation is taken from the English translation work published by World Scientific in 2014, p.7.

²⁸⁰ Zhao, Suisheng. "The China Model: Can It Replace the Western Model of Modernization?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 65 (2010): 419-36. For a succinct outline of the China Model, See Pan, Wei "The Chinese Model of

shades of what the China dream entails, then the bigger question that needs to be answered is: does it possess universal appeal?

In other words, we might ask as to whether a Chinese model (however it may be defined today) is sufficiently attractive enough so as to persuade other states to follow its lead, thus affirming the positive aspects of the Chinese dream and consequently improve China's national image? If China is to be perceived as exceptional and if its leaders are wont to present China's governance as being both good and different from the West, then how much traction does such a line of exceptionalist reasoning have with the states that the PRC purports to influence? According to one study of China-Africa relations, the Chinese government is challenged by the need to reconcile ideal aspirations with policy prescriptions (and the messy reality on the ground), in addition to the difficulty in ensuring that Chinese official rhetoric can be conclusively demonstrated in the substantive nature of its day-to-day interactions with African counterparts.²⁸¹

This brings us back to the crucial question surrounding the Chinese dream: can it be actualized in the the day-to-day work of governance or is it simply an exercise in idealized reality? In a recent study of China, Frank Pieke notes that the future "of and

Development", Speech made in London, Oct 11, 2007,

<http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/888.pdf> (retrieved Apr 7 2017).

²⁸¹ Alden, Chris, and Daniel Large. "China's Exceptionalism and the Challenges of Delivering Difference in Africa." *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 68 (2011): 21-38.

with China will not be determined by a simple clash of ideologies or civilizations. Recombination and evolution will produce new realities and ideas...not only in China but across the world. Not only will they require new analytical concepts; they will also bring new expectations, apprehensions, fears, desires and, ultimately, ideologies.”²⁸² Similarly, Callahan observes that the Chinese dream reflects a wider debate within Chinese society about values, even as the objective of the dream is national rejuvenation through state power.²⁸³ Seen this way, I argue that the Chinese dream is not without deeper political overtones: to achieve the Chinese dream, the party-state needs to be in charge, and will not tolerate any challenge to its monopoly of power. To be certain, the desire to preserve political power is not unique to China, and likewise, Beijing’s political system should not be simply labelled as a dictatorship (and thus to be condemned) as opposed to a democratic system (which is to be praised). As Pieke puts it, “democracy and dictatorship are not...antagonistic political systems. Democratic enclaves can exist within authoritarian regimes just as authoritarian enclaves can exist within democratic political systems...[China] is a bit of both and at the same time also something altogether new.”²⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the need to preserve party centrality and control at all costs presents sharp difficulties for Chinese leaders, not least because of the rapidly changing character of Chinese society, whereby the CCP does not necessarily possess sole monopoly over ultimate values (or what its citizens should value). As discussed in Chapter 3, the conditions of liquid modernity

²⁸² Pieke, Frank N. *Knowing China : A Twenty-first Century Guide*, pp.4-5.

²⁸³ Callahan, William. *China Dreams: 20 Views of the Future*, pp.144-162.

²⁸⁴ Pieke, Frank N. *Knowing China : A Twenty-first Century Guide*, see pp.117-118.

complicate the CCP's efforts in enforcing a single unifying narrative of what Chinese national identity ought to encompass. Hence, I argue that the Chinese dream and the conjuring of the image of China as a flourishing civilization is diluted by flux in Chinese social life, and thus showing up the limitations of the CCP in responding, let alone providing a solution, to the deeper moral and existential tensions in Chinese society. The highly diffusive nature of the Chinese dream means that it can be taken to mean anything and everything, and consequently rendering the concept itself ultimately vacuous and empty of concrete meaning. Indeed some Chinese scholars themselves have questioned the concept of the Chinese dream, and the extent to which the concept can be used to generate feelings of patriotism and national identity among Chinese citizens.²⁸⁵

II) Reform and restraint strategy: Image of China as “progressive and peaceful”

a) *The Language of Reform: China is progressing*

A frequently emphasized refrain of Xi is the need for “all round and deeper-level reforms” which are described as “ongoing tasks [that] will never end”²⁸⁶. Indeed the topic of reforms was viewed by the Communist Party as crucial to China's future that it was made the central topic for discussion during the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CCP Central Committee. Reforms, according to Xi, had to be comprehensive

²⁸⁵ See Callahan, Willam A. China Dreams: The Debate. Video on <https://vimeo.com/80820310> (retrieved April 7, 2017).

²⁸⁶ Xi, Jinping. *The Governance of China*, p.75, 77.

(from the economy to the ecology), but most importantly, these reforms were to be “connected to and integrated in the reform of *Party* building.”²⁸⁷ In this respect, I argue that whether specific reforms can be actualized or not in practice is not the point, since no policy is without consequences; rather the fact that reforms are often emphasized suggest that they are of paramount importance, even if they are unable to be fully applied in reality. Why then, are reforms so important to the Communist Party, and how should one understand this repeated emphasis? Is it purely used as a rhetoric device to bolster the Communist Party legitimacy or is there more to what reform entails and how reforms are being perceived? More importantly for our study, how do reforms help to promote a favorable Chinese national image?

To be certain, the concept of “reform” (改革 *gaige*) is not unique to Xi’s administration, instead it is frequently echoed among Chinese leaders since Deng Xiaoping, all recognizing its necessity in governing China successfully. This is because reforms, as David Lampton points out, confer legitimacy on Chinese leaders, and is premised on “bringing China’s social, economic, and governing systems into greater harmony with one another in the very different PRC that has evolved since mid-1977.”²⁸⁸ More importantly, the Communist Party – as a result of reforms – would emerge stronger and be better prepared to meet the needs of the country.²⁸⁹ In

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.99.

²⁸⁸ Lampton, David M. *Following the Leader: Ruling China, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping*, p.222.

²⁸⁹ Deng, Xiaoping. “On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership”, in *On Reforms*. New York: CN Times Book, 2013, pp.191-215.

addition, Xi's recent recentralization of political power around himself suggests that reforms in China are not without a political purpose: to strengthen Xi's governing authority and solidify his control of the party.

For instance, the "Rule of Law" is being espoused by Xi as a "fundamental principle by which the Party leads the people in running the country [so as] to ensure that the people lead a happy life."²⁹⁰ In a speech to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the PRC's post-Cultural Revolution constitution, Xi spent considerable amount of time explicating on the need to "comprehensively implement" the constitution.²⁹¹ However, six months later in the summer of 2013, Chinese leaders started to clamp down on constitutionalist academic and popular discourse that flourished following Xi's speech. Since then, a number of human rights lawyers have been arrested or detained for having participated in "subversive activities."²⁹² Scholars argue that adherence to the rule of law in China is a problematic notion, and checks and balances have traditionally played a smaller role in limiting a leader or empowering the ordinary citizen in China than in the West.²⁹³ As Xi puts it, "our judicial, procuratorial and public security

²⁹⁰ Xi, Jinping. *The Governance of China*, p.152, 165.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.153.

²⁹² Buckley, Chris. "Charges Against Chinese Rights Lawyers Draw Foreign Criticism." *New York Times*, Jan 18, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/world/asia/china-lawyers-arrest-reaction.html> (retrieved December 28, 2016).

²⁹³ Zhao, Suisheng. *Debating Political Reform in China : Rule of Law vs. Democratization*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2006.

officers are good. They are loyal to the Party, serve our people, are able to take on tough challenges, and brave death.”²⁹⁴ To the degree which members of the judiciary are expected to abide by Party guidelines and serve the interests of the party, these reforms remain limited in scope and contingent upon the decisions of China’s top political leaders.

Seen against this backdrop, I argue that China’s reforms are conceptualized in order to further strengthen institutional power, to project the image of Chinese leaders as being capable and coherent in their governance, so as to ultimately lend legitimacy to their being in power. Given that the Chinese government is frequently criticized by the West for human rights’ violations, the use of “reforms” provide Chinese leaders with the necessary credentials by which to impress both its citizens and the outside world that its political processes are in tandem with the domestic needs of its polity, and thus accentuating the competency of its leaders. Moreover, the language of reform also lends weight in generating a “progressive mindset” among Chinese leaders, in that these changes are necessary to imbue China with the required skill sets to ensure its ongoing development.

To what extent then are these reforms sufficient to improve China’s image? In a discussion of how images permeate the political process, Kenneth Boulding observes the difference between democratic and authoritarian political systems which lies in the nature of the feedback from lower to higher roles in the decision-making process. Whereas in democratic models the feedback is more direct and thus resulting

²⁹⁴ Xi, Jinping. *The Governance of China*, p.166.

in a more powerful influence in the modification of decisions, feedback in authoritarian structures tend to be inadequate as the “tyrant controls his sources of information [thus rendering] these sources [to] become increasingly unreliable.” In addition, the leader also tends to surround himself with likeminded people (i.e. “yes men”) and hence “his image of the world becomes increasingly divorced from the image of the lower roles.”²⁹⁵ Can this be said of China, and is President Xi’s increasing centralized approach to governing China symptomatic of a bigger problem within China’s governing system? Indeed, the decision made by the Communist party Central Committee to bestow the title of “the core” (hexin 核心) upon President Xi in October 2016, thus arrogating maximum political power to Xi in a manner similar to that of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping was justified by the need to push forward the “fundamental needs of the Party and the nation” and to achieve national rejuvenation.²⁹⁶ But as a number of scholars have noted, it is unclear whether such an attempt by Xi to exert such widespread control is at all feasible, let alone effective in managing the needs of the country.²⁹⁷ One might even ask, are reforms meant to progress the country, or to prosper the party?

²⁹⁵ Boulding, Kenneth E. *The Image : Knowledge in Life and Society*, p.100.

²⁹⁶ Song, Wei. “Xi as core is key to China Dream.” *China Daily*, November 8, 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2016-11/08/content_27305292.htm (retrieved February 15, 2019).

²⁹⁷ See for instance, Lampton, David M. "Xi Jinping and the National Security Commission: Policy Coordination and Political Power." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 95 (2015): 759-777.

b) *The Logic of Restraint: China is “peaceful”*

On China’s relations with major powers, three powers, namely Russia, the United States and the European Union loom large in Beijing’s imagination. Xi’s speeches in Moscow, Sunnylands (California) and Bruges all attempted to find common ground between Chinese civilization and his respective hosts.²⁹⁸ There was virtually no mention or acknowledgement of existing bilateral problems and his speeches touched mostly on positive developments, including the role played by China in helping these nations to flourish. Why is this so?

Part of the answer lies in China’s acute sensitivity towards major power relations and a foreign policy tradition of “realist thinking, situational ethics, and a deeply embedded sensitivity to being bullied.”²⁹⁹ At the same time, Chinese leaders since Deng Xiaoping are wont to describe Chinese foreign policy as being fundamentally peaceful, and that China does not harbor hegemonic designs nor would it seek global expansion.³⁰⁰ By affirming areas of common interests with major powers, Xi is pursuing two objectives, one for a domestic audience, the other for a foreign audience. In the case of the former, Xi is attempting to narrate, and consequently instill a sense of pride among Chinese citizens towards China’s global achievements and

²⁹⁸ Xi, Jinping. *The Governance of China*, pp.297-315.

²⁹⁹ Lampton, David M. *Following the Leader: Ruling China, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping*, p.136.

³⁰⁰ China will never seek hegemony, expansion: Xi says, *Xinhua*, September 3, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-09/03/c_134583427.htm (retrieved December 30, 2016).

international parity with the major powers.

More crucially, such a platform also proffered Xi with an opportunity to portray China as not wanting to seek international dominance, but instead to usher a “new model of major country relationship“ (新型大国关系, *xinxingdaguoguanxi*), a foreign policy slogan that would be repeated many times over among Chinese scholars and diplomats in the following two years.³⁰¹ A central theme underlining this policy, as observed, was to provide a basis for solving bilateral issues between China and the United States, but from a “more symmetrical position than before” and a “signal of an acceptance” that China has a special role and duty as a major power to work with the United States and other major powers to solve global problems.³⁰² As one Chinese scholar puts it, Xi’s diplomacy strategy is leading the major-country diplomacy with

³⁰¹ See for instance, Cui, Tiankai. “Tuidonggoujian zhongmei xinxing daguo guanxi” [Promoting and constructing Sino-American new type of major power relations], *Qiushi*, 2014 (10): 58-60; Jia, Qingguo. “Xinxing daguo guanxi: jiyu yu tianzhan [New type of major power relations: challenges and opportunities] Beijing: Beijingdaxuechubanshe, [Beijing: Peking University Press], 2015; Wang, Jisi. *Daguoguanxi* [Major power relations] Beijing: Zhongxinchubanshe [Beijing: Zhongxin Publishing], 2015.

³⁰² Zeng, Jinghan, and Shaun Breslin. "China's 'new Type of Great Power Relations': A G2 with Chinese Characteristics?" *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016): 773-94, see 774.

Chinese characteristics.³⁰³ But what are these characteristics, and why are they important for China? In one sense, it is highly symbolic (more on this later); but beyond symbolic value, such expressions are intended to shore up China's national image, in that Beijing would eschew Cold-war style confrontational politics but instead exercise restraint and responsibility in its external relations. While both the U.S. and China remain deeply suspicious of each other (notwithstanding their leaders' high-profile meetings), at the same time, it can be argued that Chinese leaders and scholars – more so than Western counterparts – frequently go to great lengths to characterize Chinese foreign policy as inherently peaceful.³⁰⁴ This fits into the “peaceful development” narrative that was earlier promoted by President Hu Jintao during the 2000s, casting China as a model of a benevolent power that pursues peaceful development.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Su, Ge. “Xi Jinping’s Strategic Thought Guiding Chinese Diplomacy.” *China International Studies*, No. 61, November/December (2016): 5-32.

³⁰⁴ See for instance, Zheng, Bijian. *China's Peaceful Rise : Speeches of Zheng Bijian, 1997-2005*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005; Guo, Sujian. *China's 'peaceful Rise' in the 21st Century : Domestic and International Conditions*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2006; Qin, Yaqing. "International Society as a Process: Institutions, Identities, and China's Peaceful Rise." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 2 (2010): 129-53.

³⁰⁵ “Hu Jintao: Zhongguo jiang shizhong bu yu zou heping fazhan daolu [Hu Jintao: China will unswervingly follow the path of peaceful development]. *China Daily*,

To see how the notion of Chinese peaceful development is being understood, we look at the “Asian security concept” which was mooted by Xi in in a 2014 speech made at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia.³⁰⁶ While much of his speech covered predictable terrain, notably Xi spoke of the need for the “people of Asia [to] run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia.”³⁰⁷ Not surprisingly, the notion of “Asia for Asians” was met with substantial debate both among Chinese and Western scholars.³⁰⁸ Is China attempting to coerce Asian countries to stand up with China to challenge American primacy in Asia? Or, is China attempting to create a Pan-Asia community of nations in which China sits at the apex of such a grouping? According to Jakobson, Xi's speech reflects his aspirational vision of a new Asian security framework, although the details of such a security framework remain at present, vague.³⁰⁹ What then, is the value of such a security framework, if indeed China – at present – is not prepared (institutionally or capability-wise) in establishing it?

In my view, this emphasis on Asia tells us two things about China’s present and future priorities: one, China sees Asia as a key region in its global quest for greatness,

October 15, 2007. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqzg/2007-10/15/content_6175356.htm (retrieved Apr 10, 2017).

³⁰⁶ Xi, Jinping. *The Governance of China*, pp.389-396.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.392.

³⁰⁸ Jakobson, Linda. "Reflections From China on Xi Jinping's 'Asia for Asians.'" *Asian Politics & Policy* 8, no. 1 (2016): 219-23.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

and two, China is attempting to reduce American influence in Asia, particularly in the realm of its security relations. The Asia for Asians framework, as observed, demonstrates Chinese contestation against the relevance of the U.S. regional alliance as a Cold War relic and as irrelevant to its more “exclusivist vision of Asian regionalism and institutionalism.”³¹⁰ In order to do so, China needs to differentiate itself from the United States and to promote a regional – even international – order that is *distinctively* different from the U.S.-led system. One way this is done by Chinese leaders is by repeatedly emphasizing the peaceful nature of Chinese international relations and contrast it with the United States as a hegemonic power. This sense of competition is especially vivid in China’s interactions with its Asian neighbors, and more specifically, in its relations with countries within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as we shall see in the next chapter. Furthermore, as observed by Callahan, debates about how China can fit into the world system as a “responsible great power” have emerged in recent years among liberal Chinese IR scholars. “China is trying to prove to the world (especially the West) that it is no longer a revolutionary state that challenges international order, but is a responsible member of international society.”³¹¹ Another view proposed by Deborah Larson is that China wants to restore its previous status as a great power, but at the same time to preserve its culture and norms, without

³¹⁰ Tow, William T., and Satu Limaye. "What's China Got to Do With It? U.S.

Alliances, Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific." *Asian Politics & Policy* 8, no. 1 (2016): 7-26, see 23.

³¹¹ Callahan, William A. "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony?" *International Studies Review* 10, no. 4 (2008): 749-61, see 757.

assimilating Western liberal values, that are seen to be problematic.³¹²

How successful has this strategy been? Has China been able to convince skeptics that it eschews the behavior of a hegemon (particularly that of the United States which it frequently criticizes?) The answer is no. Despite the best efforts of Chinese diplomats and scholars to promote a peace-loving image of Beijing, China's closest neighbors continue to eye its actions with suspicion. This reinforces the earlier idea that states' actions, and not words, matter more in how its national image is being perceived. Seen this way, the proclamation of China's peaceful rise, if not backed up by concrete action, is insufficient to produce a favorable national image (I shall return to this in Chapter 5 in my discussion of Southeast Asia perceptions of China).

(III) China as a moral example in international politics

The notion of morality features widely in Chinese international relations scholarship, especially in recent times where Chinese scholars attempt to distinguish China's practice of international politics from those of the West (as analyzed in Chapter 2). Among them, Yan Xuetong – who leads the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University – has been highly vocal in formulating what is considered to be a normative model of Chinese international relations.³¹³ Two of his

³¹² Larson, Deborah Welch. "Will China Be a New Type of Great Power?" *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 8, no. 4 (2015): 323-48.

³¹³ Paltiel, Jeremy T. "Constructing Global Order with Chinese Characteristics: Yan Xuetong and the Pre-Qin Response to International Anarchy." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4, no. 4 (2011): 375-403.

recent works, as we have touched upon in Chapter 2, deals heavily with the theme of moral standing in international politics, which in Yan's mind, is indispensable to a country's ability to lead.³¹⁴ Yan distinguishes hegemonic authority from humane authority and argues that the latter – while more difficult to achieve – would provide a better basis for international leadership. More pertinently, Yan regards the United States as a hegemonic power and argues that China should strive for a higher moral standing: "If China wants to become a state of humane authority, this would be different from the contemporary United States. The goal of our strategy must be not only to reduce the power gap with the United States but also to provide a better model for society than that given by the United States."³¹⁵

Seen this way, I argue that part of how Chinese leaders perceive and attempt to project China's moral quality is through "symbolic acts" whereby the social reality of China is being constructed through "performative acts." As observed, states are not passive objects of socialization but active agents who continuously attempt to shape international discourse of themselves, hence much of everyday political interaction can be construed as a performative act, whereby states attempt – through policies

³¹⁴ Yan, Xuetong. *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011; Yan, Xuetong. *Shijie quanli de zhuanyi: zhengzhilingdao yu zhanluejingzhen* [The Transition of World Power: Political Leadership and Strategic Competition]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2015.

³¹⁵ Yan, Xuetong. *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, pp.15-16.

enacted and articulated – to communicate how they *ought* to be seen and treated.³¹⁶ Indeed Erving Goffman’s seminal work on *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* highlights the importance of co-constitution of social relations. “When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them.”³¹⁷ Following from this, the importance of symbolic action becomes of crucial importance in determining the type of impression that is conveyed by a state to the outside world, but also how a state understands itself to be. As Goffman notes, “an individual may be taken in by his own act or be cynical about it.”³¹⁸

Relating this to China, one sees a number of actions that, I would argue, are highly symbolic in nature. More so, given that Chinese society is largely given to “ritualistic” action, the act of governance thus becomes not a social contract between the government and the people, but also carries with it certain obligations that are morally defined.³¹⁹ Fei Xiaotong defines ritual (礼, li) as “an act performed in

³¹⁶ Adler-Nissen, Rebecca. "Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society." *International Organization*, 68, no. 1 (2014): 143-76.

³¹⁷ Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin Books, 1990, p.10.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.11.

³¹⁹ See Fei, Xiaotong. *From the Soil, the Foundations of Chinese Society*, pp. 94-101; Pye, Lucian W. *International Relations in Asia: Culture, Nation and State*. George Washington University, Washington D.C.: Sigur Centre for Asian Studies, 1998, p.5.

accordance with ceremonial forms” and that “rituals work through the feeling of respect and of obedience that people themselves have cultivated. People conform to rituals on their own initiative.”³²⁰ Thus those who govern would have to “perform” as expected, if they are to be viewed as legitimate by the people. More so, given the challenges of domestic governance, there is a need for symbolic action, or what Lucian Pye terms as, “theatrical gesture” whereby great importance is placed on the “manner and the form of actions and not just to look for substance.”³²¹ To this end, whether such acts are merely performance in nature or whether they are in and of themselves “good” and beneficial to the people is not as important as how these actions are being constructed and perceived.³²² From this, we might say that China’s national image is contingent on the extent to which its leaders are able to convince its citizens that they are discharging their responsibilities with recourse to moral considerations. As pointed out by Richard Madsen in a classic study of the interpersonal dynamics within a Chinese village, the emphasis on the importance of good “human feeling” in political conduct reflect the broader commitment to a Confucian paradigm that govern individual thinking – self-consciously or otherwise – in which man is not by nature selfish.³²³

Such a framework thus allows us to better understand of some of Xi’s social

³²⁰ Fei, Xiaotong. *From the Soil, the Foundations of Chinese Society*, pp.98-99.

³²¹ Pye, Lucian W. *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, p.168.

³²² In my view, reality probably constitutes both “performative” and productive elements.

³²³ Madsen, Richard. *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village*, pp.12-13.

undertakings, especially those with utopian-sounding objectives or goals that seem overly idealistic. As Sujian Guo observes, although the post-Mao era has become far less attentive than in Mao's era to utopian visions of an ideal future, "CCP ideology still officially retains many utopian elements as stipulated in the CCP constitution and reflected in the leaders' speeches."³²⁴ In this case, one might interpret these utopian elements as statements or actions expressing symbolic intent and not necessarily realistic initiatives to be achieved. For instance, at a 2013 Politburo study session, Xi spoke on the need to "usher in a new era of ecological progress", the speech however, provided no details as to how this might transpire, except to highlight the importance of implementing the "guiding principles of the Party's 18th National Congress", "Deng Xiaoping Theory", "the Three Represents" and "Scientific Outlook on Development" among others.³²⁵ Similarly during a visit to Hebei province in 2012, Xi spoke on the need to "eliminate poverty and accelerate development in impoverished areas", but did not specify how that is to be done, except to note the importance of the Party committees in achieving this goal.³²⁶

To be sure, statesmen are not always expected to be intimately involved in day-to-day policy making given that this is done by lower officials. However in the case of China, this is complicated by the fact that "Chinese national politics revolves around the personages of leaders...the mystique of the leader as the great man, the savior of

³²⁴ Guo, Sujian. *Chinese Politics and Government : Power, Ideology, and Organization*. London: Routledge, 2013, p.119.

³²⁵ Xi, Jinping. *The Governance of China*, pp.230-232.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.209-210.

the nation, the one whose will and wishes become the collective obligations of the country.”³²⁷ This is particularly so in the case of President Xi, who has far more personal power invested in himself than his predecessors, hence the expectation that his words carry substantial weight even though those who subsequently interpret and translate these words into actual policies may face a very different set of situational constraints from that of Xi. According to Lucian Pye, symbolism, when faced against the constraints of reality, produces the “peculiar Chinese combination of wishful thinking and cold practicality.”³²⁸ This is particularly so if institutional capability is unable to cope with what is politically demanded, thus potentially deepening the fissures between the party leadership and ordinary citizens.

What symbolic action can achieve however, is that it serves to imbibe political action with a certain moral quality, thus lending legitimacy to Chinese leaders in their course of government. This fixation with morality is most vividly seen in Xi’s high profile anti-corruption campaign since he took power. In a January 2013 speech, Xi touched on the need to catch “tigers” and “flies” (in a reference to powerful leaders and lowly bureaucrats respectively) and that party members should not “seek any personal gain or privilege” over and above what they are entitled to in their course of their jobs.³²⁹ It is unclear however whether such a campaign is truly aimed at eradicating corruption, or, to purge Xi’s political opponents. As such, anticorruption campaigns can be said to be dual purposed: as an instrument of personal power (for political purges) and as a

³²⁷ Pye, Lucian W. *The Mandarin and the Cadre : China's Political Cultures*, p.135.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.65.

³²⁹ Xi, Jinping. *The Governance of China*, pp.425-431.

demonstration of good governance whereby the party is able to – or at least be seen to – claim a moral high ground.³³⁰

Furthermore, the fact that Chinese society is particularly sensitive to issues of “face”³³¹ means that social policies are often couched in moral language: not only are they expected to benefit the people in a real way, they are also expected to portray the Party in a favorable light (i.e. the Party is “good”), which is ultimately linked to China’s success or failure in the world. As Pye observed, “[the] powerful and essentially mystical belief that moral uprightness and ethical correctness on the part of rulers is enough to determine the fate of empires.”³³² What is different, I argue, is the *basis* upon which a moral code is built upon. Unlike Western ethical systems that posit values from a Judeo-Christian base (however imperfectly), Chinese society lacks a transcendental referent point with which to establish a set of guiding – and binding – moral code. In this respect, the Communist Party is being enthroned (or made sacred) and thus becomes the ultimate reference point to which Chinese citizens (including party officials) are required to pledge their allegiance to. As Pye notes, “the absence of an unchallengeable code of ethics or a widely-held belief in otherworldly retribution sets the stage for a purely opportunistic calculus of behavior. The problem has been intensified with the decline in ideological faith in Communism and the

³³⁰ Broadhurst, Roderic, and Peng Wang. "After the Bo Xilai Trial: Does Corruption Threaten China's Future?" *Survival* 56, no. 3 (2014): 157-78.

³³¹ Ho, Benjamin Tze Ern. "About Face-the Relational Dimension in Chinese IR Discourse." *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 98 (2016): 307-20.

³³² Pye, Lucian W. *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, p.128.

consequent weakening of the concept of socialist morality.”³³³

In sum, the value of morality lies in its symbolic power for the Party to utilize in order to claim credit for its success in ruling China. Given the one-party system of the Chinese state and the absence of popular elections, besides bringing economic prosperity, Chinese leaders are also being appraised through their “moral standing” among the people. The Chinese saying, “if the leader is not upright, the subordinates will also be crooked” (shangliangbuzheng xialiangwai 上梁不正下梁歪) dovetails well with how Chinese politics function: to legitimize their governance, Chinese leaders have to be perceived as being “morally good”, insofar as they represent the public face of the CCP and reflect the extent to which the Party and the nation are being viewed favorably by the outside world. Hence Frank Pieke argues that the CCP is being vested with a certain “sacredness and secret void at the heart of its rule that has to remain separate and untouched by the profane realities of ordinary politics.”³³⁴ The image of the party which the CCP seeks to project is that of a party which remains untainted by the immoral vagaries and vicissitudes of everyday politics, instead it is kept pure through a process of self-criticism and self-reflection, all these without without “expos[ing] the inner core of CCP politics to the gaze of ordinary people [thus] stripping the Party of the mystery and sacredness that have rendered its rule unquestionable and untouchable for so long.”³³⁵

³³³ Pye, Lucian W. *The Mandarin and the Cadre : China's Political Cultures*, p.52.

³³⁴ Pieke, Frank N. *Knowing China : A Twenty-first Century Guide*, p.26.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.27

Conclusion: Whither China's National Image

As my above analysis has shown, China's national image remains largely problematic notwithstanding efforts made by Chinese leaders to remedy it through image-promotion efforts. Consequently, China's political worldview remains unattractive to the outside world and is unlikely to be accepted by other countries. In the case of the Chinese dream, it is unclear how much Chinese citizens themselves identify with this dream. Furthermore, as Callahan observes, the "optimism of the China dream relies on the pessimism of the national humiliation nightmare... rather than being attractive and embracing difference, the China dream is part of a broad practice whereby identity is constituted by excluding difference."³³⁶ The Sino-centric focus of the China dream also raises questions concerning the extent to which nations which do not subscribe to the Chinese worldview are being excluded, or worse, seen as hostile to China.

Likewise, the leitmotifs of reforms and restraint propounded by Chinese leaders are not entirely convincing. For one, the reluctance by the Party to cede control of power severely limits the extent to which domestic reforms can be made; as Francis Fukuyama warns, "the very stability of institutions is also the very source of political decay...[as these] institutions fail to adapt to changing circumstances."³³⁷ In its foreign

³³⁶ Callahan, William A. "Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream", see 223 and 225.

³³⁷ Fukuyama, Francis. *Political Order and Political Decay : From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2014, p.463.

relations, particularly with Southeast Asian neighbors such as Vietnam, Philippines and Indonesia, China's image has also been severely dented since 2009 as a result of territorial disputes. In the next chapter, I will examine how China's self-image is being perceived by two of these countries, namely Indonesia and Vietnam.

Finally the ritualistic character of Chinese society may yet afford Xi's administration some leeway if reality falls below expectation (provided the necessary rituals are kept up). But given the increasing diversity and "restlessness" of China³³⁸, to what extent social transformation can be made without political reforms, even to the weakening of party power. As such, I argue that for China to improve its international image, more than just political rhetoric slogans are needed: China will be evaluated not by what it says, but by what it does, both domestically and internationally. In my view, this is not going to be easy. The biggest obstacle I argue lies in the highly particularized character of how China's image-building is being convened: if Chinese leaders and scholars purport to represent the Chinese worldview as being *utterly distinct* from the West, then on what basis is it possible to validate the Chinese worldview as a model for other nations to follow, let alone in claiming global appeal (i.e. this is what all countries want). As the American political scientist David Shambaugh notes, China needs to go beyond making claims about its own *uniqueness* and to instead appeal to more universal standards.³³⁹ For China to be seen as more than just "looking out for itself", it would have to eminently demonstrate

³³⁸ See, Link, E. Perry, Madsen, Richard, and Pickowicz, Paul. *Restless China*, 2013.

³³⁹ *Personal interview*, Singapore, April 10, 2017.

that its approach to global governance display broader standards that are internationally valid. Consequently, for China's image promotion to work, a less Sino-centric way of seeing and relating with the world might be needed, particularly in its diplomatic relations with its closest neighbors. This may however compromise the authority of the CCP in portraying itself as the vanguard of Chinese rejuvenation efforts, particularly if a "desacralized" image of the party would to prevail.

Relating this to Chinese exceptionalism, for Chinese leaders to project an image of China as being different and good, they would have to – paradoxically speaking – divest the party of its power, particularly those which purport to inhibit the operation of basic human rights, such as the freedom of worship and the ability to express one's individual conscience with regards to sensitive issues without fear of political persecution or party purge. Hence to do so, there is a need to harness the energies and dynamism of a far more diverse and politically-heterogeneous population of people, both home and outside China, and beyond party prescriptions. This identity dilemma (as earlier discussed in Chapter 3) is something Chinese leaders would have to wrestle with if China's global influence is to be positively perceived and sufficiently attractive for international emulation.

Chapter 5

The Belt and Road Initiative and China's Quest for Global Greatness

In 2013, China proposed the establishment of a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Among the objectives, the Silk Road Economic Belt was focused on promoting the development of China's Western territories, spanning a region from Central Asia to Europe while the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road served to promote economic cooperation within major maritime regions and links between coastal regions. Termed as the One Belt One Road (OBOR), it was later renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2016³⁴⁰, and was said to enable China to strengthen its relations with countries around the world while also shouldering greater responsibilities and obligations to others.³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Notwithstanding the name change, it is still termed the "One Belt One Road" (yidaiyilu 一带一路) in Chinese. For purposes of this chapter, I will use the term Belt and Road Initiative unless referring to Chinese primary sources in which the term One Belt One Road will be used.

³⁴¹ "Full text: Action plan on the Belt and Road Initiative", *The State Council of the People's Republic of China*, March 30, 2015, http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm (retrieved May 23, 2018). See also, "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road", *National Development and Reform Commission*, March 2015,

As noted in Chapter 4, China wants to promote a favorable national image to the outside world and for its political worldview to be accepted by others. As such, the Belt and Road Initiative represents a key center piece of China's international outreach strategy and to articulate its preferences towards global order. This was vividly demonstrated by the speeches made by Chinese leaders, led by President Xi Jinping, all touting the benefits and opportunities that the Belt and Road Initiative would bring about, not just to China, but to countries all throughout the world that were connected with it.³⁴² In addition, scores of Chinese scholars and commentators had attempted to articulate the finer aspects of what the Belt and Road Initiative entailed. For instance, results of a simple search on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database—currently the largest and most comprehensive of its kind on Chinese journals and periodicals, through the liberal arts/history/philosophy, politics/military affairs/law and education/comprehensive social sciences sections of CNKI journals and periodicals in 2014 (1 Jan to 31 December) showed 1,002 papers featuring the phrase *yidaiyilu* (“one belt one road”) in their titles. The same search for subsequent years (i.e. 2015, 2016 and 2017) saw a tremendous increase in the Belt and Road

http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html (retrieved Aug 22, 2018).

³⁴² This was most vividly illustrated by Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos. See <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/full-text-of-xi-jinping-keynote-at-the-world-economic-forum> (retrieved May 23, 2018).

Initiative with 12,780, 13,628 and 22,892 articles found respectively.³⁴³ While not all these papers or newspaper articles were directly relevant to China's international politics or had to do with its foreign relations, the fact that the Belt and Road Initiative had garnered much popularity within Chinese intellectual circles suggested the extent of interest among Chinese observers and scholarly interlocutors. As clear evidence of the importance that the Belt and Road Initiative wields in Chinese political circles, a Belt Road Forum was held in May 2017 in Beijing which saw 28 other heads of state and representatives from more than 130 countries and 70 international organizations with the stated purpose of building "a more open and efficient international cooperation platform, a closer, stronger partnership network, and to push for a more just, reasonable and balanced international governance system."³⁴⁴

What do all these developments mean, and how should we understand the Belt and Road Initiative from an international relations perspective? How does the Belt and Road Initiative reflect China's vision concerning international order and Chinese preferences on the rules and norms underlining international relations? What kind of political worldview is being envisaged and expounded through the Belt and Road Initiative? What does it tell us about the way China perceives the present configuration of global power, and the future arrangement of global political order? In relating to my

³⁴³ From 1 Jan 2018 till 11 July 2018, 8,512 articles containing *yidaiyilu* were found.

This suggests a slight dip compared to 2017.

³⁴⁴ "Belt and Road forum agenda set", *China Daily*, April 18, 2017,

http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-04/18/content_28982925.htm (retrieved May 23, 2018).

study of China's political worldview and its claims to exceptionalism, what does the Belt and Road Initiative tell us about the manner in which China perceives its own initiative as being good and different from existing initiatives and institutions, particularly those which are Western-led? As discussed in earlier chapters, many countries look to China for economic opportunities and consequently, the Belt and Road Initiative can be said to function as an instrument of Chinese economic statecraft, so as to allow Beijing to extend its global influence.

The chapter will proceed as follows. Firstly, I will discuss the importance of economic statecraft to China's global diplomacy and public image, in particular the extent to which economics is being understood as a form of Chinese soft power and as a means of procuring political influence. Next, I will go on to analyze both official and unofficial sources proffered by Chinese international relations scholars on the Belt and Road Initiative and to examine how it is being understood within the broader worldview characterizing China's foreign policy and international relations. To this end, I argue that the Belt and Road Initiative represents an ambitious attempt at economic statecraft with the objective of entrenching and promoting China's geopolitical influence abroad, as well as preserve the Communist Party legitimacy of ruling China domestically. I then go on to relate these ideas to the study of Chinese exceptionalism and to examine the degree to which these ideas – carried along by the Belt and Road Initiative - attempt to portray China as a good and different power compared to the West. Through a study of the discourse emanating in Chinese scholarly circles about the Belt and Road Initiative, this chapter hopes to provide important clues as to how China – in its quest for global greatness – seeks to challenge the existing international

system in place, and the associated set of ideas it purports to promulgate within its own theatres of influence.

Economic statecraft and Chinese political influence

According to existing studies of Chinese economic statecraft, Chinese leaders have been highly adept in perusing economic tools in promoting its own national objectives, particularly in those which it perceives as core national interests.³⁴⁵ This is certainly not unique to China, countries all over the world have in varying degrees utilized economic statecraft in pursuing their political objectives. According to Baldwin, economic measures are particularly useful in helping states gain political influence for they are “likely to exert more pressure than either diplomacy or propaganda, and are less likely to evoke a violent response than military instruments.”³⁴⁶ In this respect, we might echo what Huntington has posited, “[in] that economic activity is probably the most important source of power...in a world in which military conflict between major states is unlikely [and] economic power will be increasingly important in determining

³⁴⁵ See for instance, Norris, William J. *Chinese Economic Statecraft : Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016; Zhang, Shuxiu. *Chinese Economic Diplomacy : Decision-making Actors and Processes*. London: Routledge, 2016; Li, Mingjiang, ed. *China's Economic Statecraft: Co-optation, Cooperation and Coercion*. Singapore: World Scientific, 2017.

³⁴⁶ Baldwin, David A. *Economic Statecraft*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985, p.110.

the primacy or subordination of states.”³⁴⁷ Seen this way, if we take economic relations between states – not as a dispassionate realm of economic activity (concerned purely with profit) – but as a derivative of wider geopolitical interests and calculations, then the political character of economic statecraft cannot be ignored.

From this, I argue that in the case of China, the Belt and Road Initiative represents a grand strategy through economic means³⁴⁸; hence, economic power is seen as a means of generating greater political influence among the countries Beijing seeks to win over into its camp. From this, I argue that the goal of economic initiatives (like the BRI) is linked to how Chinese leaders seek to present and project Beijing’s worldview to others and to ultimately achieve China’s foreign policy and domestic goals. This “selling” of Beijing’s worldview is also closely linked to how Chinese soft power is being conceptualized and operationalized. While Western iterations of soft power tend to emphasize the non-coercive aspect of soft power, and thus the stress on culture and values as instruments of soft power,³⁴⁹ such a distinction as to whether

³⁴⁷ Huntington, Samuel P. "Why International Primacy Matters." *International Security* 17, no. 4 (1993): 68-83, see 72.

³⁴⁸ For existing discussions of Chinese grand strategy, see Friedberg, Aaron L. "Globalisation and Chinese Grand Strategy." *Survival* 60, no. 1 (2018): 7-40; Ma, Lian. "Thinking of China’s Grand Strategy: Chinese Perspectives." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 13, no. 1 (2013): 155-68.

³⁴⁹ This line of thought is most popularly captured in the ideas of Joseph Nye’s discussion of soft power. See, Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power : The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

economics ought to be seen as “hard” or “soft power” is less clear cut in China. According to one study, Chinese discourse concerning soft power is frequently expressed within its domestic context and towards domestic objectives, and also involves touting the economic success of China’s development model.³⁵⁰ Such a narrative suggests that in the Chinese mind, economic resources can be used as a source of soft power as it also allows China to evidence its political model and worldview to the outside world, thus rendering Beijing a model for others to emulate. For instance, it was observed that the “success story of China’s own economy make China cultural merits self-evident...[and] a prime opportunity to expand its cultural influence.”³⁵¹ This was further evidenced through interviews with various Chinese scholars who also observed the highly fluid nature of soft power and its relevance to economic sphere in China.³⁵²

From the above, I argue that economic activity in China is not purely restricted to the economic sphere, but intermeshes with geopolitical objectives. Indeed studies in Chinese business fields have noted the pervasive influence of politics in the economic sphere³⁵³ while the practice of Chinese politics, as one Chinese scholar

³⁵⁰ Li, Mingjiang. "China Debates Soft Power." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2, no. 2 (2008): 287-308.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 292.

³⁵² Interviews conducted in Beijing and Guangzhou, 2017 and 2018 respectively.

³⁵³ Wank, David L. *Commodifying Communism : Business, Trust, and Politics in a Chinese City*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Brødsgaard, Kjeld

recounted, is subjected to monetary forces.³⁵⁴ According to one study, the biggest Chinese enterprises which account for most of the Chinese companies on the Fortune Global 500 list of the world's largest companies also dominate the strategic sectors of the Chinese economy. The leaders of the 53 largest companies, "national champions" as they are called, are not being appointed by the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), but rather by the Party's Organization Department. "They are part of the Party's nomenklatura system and are cadres ranked at vice ministerial level. This means many business executives are subject to cadre rotation and are moved to take up government or Party positions...The renewed emphasis on cross appointment and on the role of Party organizations in SOEs indicates that the CCP's current policy is to strengthen rather than weaken its control over SOEs."³⁵⁵

From the above discussion, we can surmise the following: one, that Chinese economic power and Chinese geopolitical objectives go hand-in-hand with the former representing a means to achieve the objectives of the latter, and two, Chinese economic activities are used to generate political influence, regardless whether such

Erik. "Politics and Business Group Formation in China: The Party in Control?" *The China Quarterly* 211 (2012): 624-48.

³⁵⁴ Interview with Renmin University professor, 13 June 2017, Beijing, China.

³⁵⁵ Brodsgaard, Kjeld, E. "Can China Keep Controlling its SOEs?" *The Diplomat*, March 5, 2018,

<https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/can-china-keep-controlling-its-soes/> (retrieved June 8, 2018).

influence take on the form of soft or hard power. In other words, China perceives its utilization of economic statecraft as a legitimate means with which to substantiate its exceptionalism claims, and that its economic influence allows Beijing to claim that its approach to global economic governance is good and different compared to Western economic practices and norms. In the following, I will analyze how this sense of exceptionalism, and its broader political worldview is being reflected in the discourse surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative among Chinese scholars and the type of international order that is being envisaged amidst China's growing global influence. Notwithstanding the expansive variety of topics that permeate discussions of the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese international relations scholars in their writings, have tend to train their focus on three areas: (I) rules of the international system, (II) competition for regional influence, and (III) China's own internal-domestic affairs and its responsibility towards its own people. Taken together, these three themes provide important hints as to how Chinese thinkers conceptualize the Belt and Road Initiative as a platform for China to highlight its sense of exceptionalism and consequently how this seeks to portray China as both different and good.

Chinese discourse of the Belt and Road Initiative

(I) Challenging the Rules of the International System

This need to call into question the existing rules of the international system represents a key starting point of how the Belt and Road Initiative is being conceptualized by Chinese thinkers. In this respect, the ideas of Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang (whose thoughts on international relations we have discussed in

Chapter 2) are useful for our understanding towards how Chinese thinkers consider the existing rules of the international system. In an article entitled “New Game Expects New System” (xinyouxi xuyao xintixi 新游戏需要新体系) Zhao cited globalization as having ushered new political conditions and political issues which requires states to fundamentally alter the manner in which they approach the practice of international relations.³⁵⁶ In Zhao’s mind, the pursuit of national interests and modern political thinking within a Western paradigm was a zero-sum game in which countries struggle for power to dominate and compete for hegemony thus resulting in “suspicious and irrational anticipations, which are, ironically, based upon the modern rational analysis.”³⁵⁷ Instead countries of the world ought to forge closer interdependency with each other whereby all nations are involved in “reciprocal interrelations” with one another, or as his all-under-heaven (Tianxia) system puts it, “an all-inclusive and all-compatible system for the world.”³⁵⁸ Seen this way, we might say that in Zhao’s thinking, the rules of the existing international system do not cohere with the changed reality of the world (brought about by globalization) and thus the need for a new system of political arrangements. While Zhao’s worldview is highly problematic (as I analyzed in Chapter 2), they reflect a common ideological thread permeating the thinking among Chinese IR scholars, that is, the widely-held perception that the norms and governing

³⁵⁶ Zhao, Tingyang. “Xinyouxi xuyao xintixi” [New Game Expects New System]. *Guoji anquan yanjiu* [Journal of International Security Studies] 1 (2015), 4-14.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

principles of the post-World War 2 international system are deeply flawed, and thus in need of a change.³⁵⁹

To this end, other Chinese scholars thus propose the need for deepened interaction between China and the world, and thus perceive the Belt and Road Initiative as a means to achieve that end. For instance, Xing argued that the Silk Road has traditionally been an icon of Chinese history and culture and thus possess much significance and value. Given economic globalization, it was said that “China will reshape cultural and economic exchange in a civilized, modern, and convenient manner to create a friendly atmosphere in Eurasia as a whole.”³⁶⁰ Similarly the Belt and Road Initiative was also perceived as allowing China to actively shape its external environment, and through deepened cooperation with other countries, to allow China to further integrate itself with the wider world. As observed, “it will create a new situation, an all-around opening up, that will further the global interaction and exchange of China and the entire Asia-Europe-Africa region.”³⁶¹ Zheng Yongnian also

³⁵⁹ This is a common refrain among many Chinese scholars and policy interlocutors that I spoke to in the course of this dissertation.

³⁶⁰ Xing, Guangcheng. “Lijie zhongguo xiandai sidiao zhilu zhanlue” [Understanding China’s Modern Silkroad Strategy]. *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], 12 (2014): 4-26, see 6-7.

³⁶¹ Hu, Angang, Ma, Wei, and Yan, Yilong. “Sidiao zhilu jingjidai: zhanlue neihan, dingwei he shixian lujing” [Silkroad Economic Belt: Strategic Essence, Orientation and Path to Achievement]. *Xinjiang shifan daxue xuebao* [Journal of Xinjiang Normal University], 2 (2014): 1-9.

wrote that the Belt and Road Initiative was primarily designed so as to allow China to play a leading role in international development, and to promote a global economy with the participation of other countries within such an arrangement. Hence, both China and international society were seen to be in need of globalization, and to this end, the objectives pursued by China and the wider world are seen to be synonymous with one another.³⁶² Zhao Kejin, the deputy director of Tsinghua's University Center of U.S.- China relations observed the Belt and Road Initiative as China's response to "international anarchy" (guoji wuzhengfu zhuangtai 国际无政府状态) and at its core sought to transcend "the international system and international order" so as to forge a more just and equitable world order.³⁶³ Similarly, another Beijing-based scholar Zhong Feiteng also argued that the Belt and Road Initiative would allow China to "transcend Western centralism" (chaoyue xifang zhongxin zhuyi 超越西方中心主义) and thus to provide a novel model of development that is not dependent on a "limited Western

³⁶² Zheng, Yongnian. "Yidaiyilu yu guojijingji guize de shuxie" [One Belt One Road and the writing of the rules of international economic order]. *Lianhe Zaobao*, May 16, 2017, <http://beltandroad.zaobao.com/beltandroad/analysis/story20170516-760701> (retrieved February 27, 2019).

³⁶³ Zhao, Kejin. *Daguo fanglue: yidaiyilu zai xingdong* [China's Statecraft: The Belt and Road Initiative in Action]. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe [Beijing: People's Publishing House], 2017, p.6.

posture of fixed thinking” (bushou xifang guhua siwei yueshu de zitai 不受西方固化思维约束的姿态).³⁶⁴

From the above observations, I argue that the Belt and Road Initiative – in the eyes of Chinese political scientists – is not simply an economic endeavor, but presents a form of grand strategy for the Chinese state to achieve its strategic interests. According to one study of Chinese economic statecraft, economic tools of national power presented a particularly attractive lever for China to use to attain its foreign policy strategic objectives for several reasons: (I) its exercise need not be as obvious, threatening or as dislocating as military or diplomatic power can be; (II) relying on economic power limits the domestic bureaucratic influence of military-related political interests; (III) it offers the possibility of attracting partners with a win-win mentality thus assuaging regional concerns over a growing China, and (IV) the possibility that China can realize its economic growth objectives while pursuing its foreign policy goals (to the extent the two are complementary).³⁶⁵ Beyond achieving its strategic objectives, the Belt and Road Initiative – I argue – represents also a challenge to the rules and norms that of the international system that is traditionally associated with the Western

³⁶⁴ Zhong, Feiteng. “Chaoyue xifang zhongxin zhuyi jianshe yidaiyilu” [Transcend Western centralism to build the One Belt One Road]. *Zhongguo shehui kexue wang* [China Social Sciences Website], May 14, 2017, http://econ.cssn.cn/jjx/jjx_gzf/201705/t20170514_3517739.shtml (retrieved February 27, 2019).

³⁶⁵ Norris, William J. *Chinese Economic Statecraft : Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control*, pp.62-63.

liberal order.³⁶⁶ Indeed this point was made by a number of Chinese interlocutors I spoke to in the course of my fieldwork in which it was perceived that the Western-led order – as a result of 2008-09 financial crisis – was delegitimized as being universally valid, thus offering an opportunity for China to articulate its ideas concerning how global governance ought to be like.³⁶⁷ In this respect, we might say that in the eyes of Chinese scholars, political order and economic order are interrelated in which the success of the latter to some extent legitimizes the practice of the former. Seen this way, the Belt and Road Initiative was seen as an opportunity to showcase Beijing's vision of global governance and to put forth its suggestions as to what such a political order ought to entail.

To this end, the domestic problems faced by the United States in the past decade were perceived by Chinese scholars to present the ideal opportunity for China to stake its claim to global leadership, to promote its worldview and its claims to exceptionalism. American international image – as a result of its global war on terror

³⁶⁶ For a discussion of China's challenge to the rules-based international order, see Ikenberry, G. "The Rise of China and the Future of the West; Can the Liberal System Survive?" *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (2008): 23-37.

³⁶⁷ Indeed the topic of global governance (quanqiu zhili 全球治理) has been of great interest to Chinese scholars. A simple search on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database saw an exponential increase in the articles discussing global governance. Between 1995 and 2000, there were only 14 articles; between 2001 and 2005, this number increased to 296; between 2006 and 2010, it increased to 1,010, then 2,785 (2011-2015), and 3,448 (2016-17).

and the economic crisis – was seen to have taken a battering, thus presenting China with favorable circumstances with which to portray its leadership as being good and different. As Zheng Yongnian wrote, “the United States is currently undergoing a period of adjustment, once it readjusts, it will come out (zai chufa 再出发). From this vantage point, to the Chinese, this undoubtedly is an opportunity. However it should be emphasized that this is not a simple case of American decline and thus an opportunity to write the rules, but rather a process to explore what a different set of rules might entail.”³⁶⁸ In my view, this articulation of *difference* is crucial to how the Belt and Road Initiative is being positioned as: an opportunity to offer the world an alternative source of global governance and to subscribe to the rules associated with such a form of governance.³⁶⁹

(II) Competition for Regional Influence

As will be discussed in Chapter Six, Sino-America competition for influence can be most pervasively felt within the Southeast Asia region whereby both countries were significantly invested (both economic and military). While security issues continue to frame and dominate the discourse of Sino-American relationship, economic issues have taken center stage of late as witnessed by the ongoing trade war as of writing

³⁶⁸ Zheng, Yongnian. “Yidaiyilu yu guojijingji guize de shuxie” [One Belt One Road and the writing of the rules of international economic order], 2017.

³⁶⁹ See also, Zhou, Weifeng and Esteban, Mario. “Beyond Balancing: China’s approach towards the Belt and Road Initiative.” *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no.112 (2018): 487-501.

between both countries. Seen this way, the Belt and Road Initiative represents not only a challenge to the rules of the international system, but at the same time, a competition for regional influence, that is, which country is perceived to be *good and better* in delivering difference (measured in economic growth) to other countries in the region.

As such, the Belt and Road Initiative was seen to proffering China with several advantages in cultivating positive influence among the countries that it comes into contact with. According to one comparative study of China and American economic relations in the Asia-Pacific and Eurasia, the US strategy primarily was one that focused on regional security while China was focused on regional economics. As the authors put it, “the economic relationship between China and countries along the belt is like one of fish and water, whereas the relationship between the United States and these countries is more like one of oil and water.”³⁷⁰ Indeed, the presence of the United States was seen to be the main reason that China’s global influence was being impeded. One Chinese scholar puts it bluntly, “if the United States did not exist on the planet, the rise of China basically would have been realized. In large part, the United States intends its strategy of rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific region to counter the rise of China. In turn, the Chinese government introduced the One-Belt-One-Road Initiative, in part, to offset the unfavorable impact that the US rebalancing strategy may

³⁷⁰ Lu, Feng, Li Xin, Li Shuangshuang, Jiang Zhixiao, Zhang Jieping, and Yang Liwei. “Why China? The Economic Logic behind China’s One-Belt-One-Road Initiative”, in Binhong Shao ed., *Looking for a Road: China Debates Its and the World’s Future*. Leiden: Brill, 2017, pp.181-203, see p.192.

impose on China.”³⁷¹ At the same time, it was recognized that many of China’s neighboring countries continue to distrust it (for various reasons), and had adopted a strategy of depending on Beijing for their economic needs while looking to the US for security.³⁷²

According to Shi Yinhong, Chinese leaders usage of military hard power since the 18th national congress in 2012 had eroded its international soft power, thus resulting in a danger of “strategic overreach” (zhanlue touzhi 战略透支) and consequently the danger of being overstretched in its political commitments and material resources.³⁷³ To avoid such pitfalls, Shi suggested that Chinese leaders ought to emphasize that the security, prosperity and development of its neighbors were synonymous with China’s own and to also win trust among the governments and people of those countries. Shi added that “Chinese leaders must be careful not [to] give the impression that they consider their help to other countries as charity. China must neither play the role of big brother to other countries nor rush to scramble for benefits at the sacrifice of justice...The One-Belt-One-Road Initiative should be

³⁷¹ Xue, Li. “Zhongguo yidaiyilu zhanlue miandui de waijiao fengxian” [Diplomatic Risks Facing China’s One-Belt-One-Road Initiative] *Guoji jingji pinglun* [International Economic Review] 2 (2015): 68-79, see 70.

³⁷² This point was made by many Chinese scholars I spoke to in the course of fieldwork interviews, thus resulting in a strategy of hedging.

³⁷³ Shi, Yinhong. “Yidaiyilu qiyuanshenshen” [Prudence Crucial for the One-Belt-One-Road Initiative]. *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics] 7 (2015): 151-154.

understood as an undertaking of both China and the international community. Instead of just trying to predict what countries along the One-Belt-One-Road Initiative route need, China should make direct enquiries...By assuming that other countries along the One-Belt-One-Road Initiative route accept all facets of its initiatives, China could ignore the complex and unique conditions of other countries or fail to see conflicts in policy and strategy. If it does not take all of these issues into considerations, China risks repeating universalistic Western practices that it has repeatedly criticize.”³⁷⁴

This competition for regional influence was also emphasized in Central Asia, this time involving not only the United States, but also Russia. As such, the Belt and Road Initiative proffered China with the opportunity to distinguish itself from the two other superpowers, and more importantly, to demonstrate that its conceptualization towards geopolitical matters was better than others. For instance, it was suggested that the United States had largely viewed Central Asia as a region that is “full of danger” (weixian zhongzhong zhidi 危险重重之地) and “difficult to tame” (nanyi xunfu 难以驯服) whereas Russia had perceived the region as its “soft underbelly” (ruan fubu 软腹部) and under its “sphere of influence” (shili fanwei 势力范围). In contrast, China was said to view Central Asia as “among the sources of human civilization” (renlei wenming de fayuan zhidi 人类文明的发源地之一) and the “central of the world which potential has yet to be realized” (qianli shangwei dedao chongfen wajue de shijie zhongxin 潜

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

力尚未得到充分挖掘的世界中心).³⁷⁵ Hence, it was said that while the policies of the US were aimed at getting countries in Central Asia to adopt the Western model of development and Russia was pushing for policies that would integrate these countries within Russia's own geopolitical orbit, the Chinese approach was to respect the national sovereignty of these countries and promote mutual "beneficial cooperation" (huli hezuo 互利合作).³⁷⁶

As the story goes, Chinese influence was being portrayed as benign that was sharply contrasted with the influence of other major powers. To this end, I argue that in the minds of Chinese thinkers, bringing economic development was sufficient to legitimize Chinese initiatives as being good and better than Western alternatives. In this respect, it would seem that what was assumed is that countries in the region ultimately desired economic prosperity and that China was well-placed to meet those needs through the Belt and Road Initiative. According to Zhang Yunling, who heads the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Belt and Road Initiative represented a certain spirit (jingshen 精神) whereby China would peacefully engage with the outside world in achieving a win-win outcome. It was further pointed out that China's rapid economic development had made it to become the main market for its neighboring countries. This expansion of economic development was said to be the "highest common factor" (zuida gongyueshu 最大公约数) in deepening relations between

³⁷⁵ Zeng, Xiang Hong. "Yidaiyilu de diyuan zhengzhi xiangxiang yu diqu hezuo" [Geopolitical thinking and regional cooperation of the One-Belt-One-Road] *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics] 1 (2016): 46-72.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

between China and its neighbors, and allowing for a rich and dynamic process of interaction.³⁷⁷ Furthermore, the practice of public diplomacy (gonggong waijiao 公共外交) to generate political influence was primarily achieved through economic and financial means, according to one recent commissioned study.³⁷⁸ Seen this way, the Belt and Road Initiative – I argue – can be said to allow China to showcase its superiority compared to the West and in by doing so, to effect a shift of regional influence in which countries that are traditionally supportive of Western objectives perceive their national interests more in tune with Beijing’s. This sense of eschatological inevitability and Chinese exceptionalism – that a Chinese-led future is both certain and better – pervades the message of the Belt and Road Initiative as being China’s grand contribution to the world.

(III) China’s domestic environment and responsibility to its people

While the earlier two points reflected a confident Chinese posture to the world, Chinese leaders and scholars nonetheless frequently lament the problems that China

³⁷⁷ Zhang, Yunling. “Foreword” in Yunling Zhang and Zhengqing Yuan, eds.,

Yidaiyilu yu zhongguo fazhan zhanlue [The Belt and Road and China’s Development Strategy]. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2017.

³⁷⁸ Custer, Samantha, Brooke Russell, Matthew Dilorenzo, Mengfan Cheng, Siddharta Ghose, Harsh Desai, Jacob Sims, and Jennifer Turner. *Ties that Bind: Quantifying China’s public diplomacy and its “good neighbor” effect*. Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William and Mary, 2018.

continues to face domestically due to its size and population.³⁷⁹ According to Fu Ying, who chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress, China's magnitude belies its actual strength as it was still learning how to become a global player:

“On numerous occasions, American and Europeans have asked China to play a leading role with regard to international affairs. Leading role, to the ears of the Chinese, is an almost alien phrase. It will take time for us to master the steps necessary to waltz gracefully across the global stage. Domestically, we have our own issues and challenges to resolve, which demand our focused attention.”³⁸⁰

This reference to domestic conditions in somewhat inhibiting China's ability and willingness to play a more active role in international politics may at first glance, seem to contradict the earlier discussion of China's intention to challenge the rules of the international system as well to compete with the United States for regional, if not

³⁷⁹ This is a point made by many Chinese scholars I spoke to during fieldwork. While they share the view of an influential and powerful China in global politics, they were also quick to remind that “China has many internal problems” and thus had no intention to lead the world.

³⁸⁰ Fu, Ying. “Fu Ying: Tansuo zhongmei zhijian de xiangchu zhidao” [Fu Ying: Analyzing Sino-America relations]. *Zhongguo shehui kexuebao* [Chinese Social Sciences Today], No. 749, June 10, 2015, http://intl.cssn.cn/zx/bwyc/201506/t20150610_2028872.shtml (retrieved June 29, 2018).

global, influence. To this end, I argue the Belt and Road Initiative represents an important conduit for China to utilize in legitimizing its overseas forays in response to domestic demands. According to the prominent Chinese economist Justin Lin, the Belt and Road Initiative showcased China's new opening-up strategy in response to the changed domestic and international circumstances. As such, it would provide China with a sounder market economic system thus further its development into a high income country, in addition to facilitating the industrialization and modernization of other developing countries.³⁸¹ Renmin University professor Wang Yiwei also argued of the "Sinicization of globalization" (zhongguohua de quanqiuha 中国化的全球化), and that the Belt and Road Initiative was not just about encouraging Chinese companies to head out, but rather to allow "China itself to head out" (rang zhongguo de difang zouchuqu 让中国的地方走出去) so as to enable China to build and deepen its relations with the world.³⁸² From this vantage point, Wang's contention was that the Belt and Road Initiative represented an effort to marry together both the "sinicization of globalization" (zhongguohua de quanqiuha 中国化的全球化) and "China's own globalization" (zhongguo de quanqiuha 中国的全球化)³⁸³ with the resulting effect not unlike Zhao Tingyang's earlier proposal of an all-under-heaven system. Similarly, Zhao Kejin also explained that the success of the Belt and Road

³⁸¹ Lin, Justin. "One Belt and One Road" and Free Trade Zones-China's New Opening-up Initiatives 1." *Frontiers of Economics in China* 10, no. 4 (2015): 585-90.

³⁸² Wang, Yiwei. *Shijieshitongde: yidaiyilu de luoji* [The World is Flat: The Logic of the One-Belt-One-Road]. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2017, p.28.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

Initiative would not be dependent on the responses of the countries along the belt and road, but rather on the assessment of the sustainability of the funding that would be contributed by Chinese stakeholders. Zhao observed that in the short run, it was unlikely that the Belt and Road Initiative would bear much fruit given the volatility and uncertainty of the domestic conditions among the recipient countries. Nevertheless, it was said that once the basic infrastructure was being set up, then the Belt and Road Initiative – in the medium to long term – would proffer China with much “spillover effects” (yichu xiaoying 溢出效应) . Given this, Chinese companies ought to continue to persist in doing “loss-making” transactions (赔钱买卖) as the other “derived benefits” (yansheng shouyi 衍生受益) would be well worth the money spent.³⁸⁴

From the above Chinese narratives, I argue that the Belt and Road Initiative was conceptualized with an acute awareness of China’s own domestic conditions, and consequently, also reflect China’s own domestic priorities and concerns. To speak of China’s going out (zouchuqu 走出去), one needs to take into account the Chinese actors at work, and the domestic interests that these actors represent. According to Norris, China today defines its strategic security interests in maintaining the Communist Party’s control of power. To do so however, requires continued economic growth which in turn requires raw inputs, especially energy inputs.³⁸⁵ For instance, in a study of the “going out” activities of the China National Petroleum Corporation, it was observed that the original impetus to go abroad was primarily driven by commercial

³⁸⁴ Zhao, Kejin. *Daguo fanglue: yidaiyilu zai xingdong*, pp.26-28.

³⁸⁵ Norris, William J. *Chinese Economic Statecraft : Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control*, p.70.

factors, and without prior government approval. However, given the difficulty of working with certain unsavory regimes where oil reserves were still available, the Chinese authorities sought to re-establish control over these activities of its commercial actors but only after much struggle.³⁸⁶

To what extent then is the Belt and Road Initiative an instrument of state control, and what are the effects of the Belt and Road Initiative in benefitting ordinary Chinese citizens? According to one Chinese scholar, there are six domestic relationships that would determine the success or failure of the Belt and Road Initiative. These are: relations between the Chinese government and business enterprises, relations between the central government and provincial governments, relations between the historical and contemporary conceptions of the Silk Road Belt, relations between financial and non financial institutions, relations between utilizing comparative advantage and the development of new comparative advantages, and relations between institutional cooperation and non-institutional cooperation.³⁸⁷ Indeed, the degree to which the Chinese state is able to exercise control over commercial and economic activity – while maintaining the profitability and dynamism of these enterprises – is a subject of considerable debate, and beyond the scope of this chapter to answer. Seen this way, it was also unclear whether the Belt and Road Initiative

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.84-89.

³⁸⁷ Li, Xiangyang. *Yidaiyilu: Dingwei, neihan ji xuyao youxian chuli de guanxi* [One Belt One Road: Orientations, Contents And Challenges], Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe [Social Sciences Academic Press], 2015, pp.27-40.

would bring about the economic prosperity that is being talked about by Chinese leaders, or would it exacerbate existing economic inequalities within Chinese society.

To this end, Chinese IR scholars were relatively more guarded in their assessment of the Belt and Road Initiative vis-à-vis the improvement of domestic conditions. The common refrain among Chinese scholars is that China had enough problems of her own and thus possessed little appetite to shoulder the problems of the wider world. According to Zhao Kejin, Chinese leaders have their hands full with domestic problems, and are generally contented to be “number 2 in the world and to let the United States bear the load of providing public goods to the rest of the world.”

³⁸⁸ While American scholars like David Shambaugh criticize such reasoning as indicative of China being a “selfish power”³⁸⁹ it also mitigates the extent to which China – through the Belt and Road Initiative – will be able to generate positive influence among its neighbors, particularly if a slowing Chinese economy imposes limitations on Beijing’s economic statecraft. Indeed, if “China’s ambition is not to surpass the United States but to look after its own people”³⁹⁰ – as former Singapore foreign minister George Yeo puts it – then one should be cautious and not overstate the degree to which the Belt and Road Initiative can truly represent a unique Chinese economic proposal to the wider world. Relating to Chinese exceptionalism, I argue that domestic conditions are likely – in the long run – to dampen over exuberant claims of China’s

³⁸⁸ Speech made at the RSIS-CSIS conference on China’s public diplomacy, June 27, 2018, Singapore.

³⁸⁹ *Personal interview*, April 10, 2017, Singapore.

³⁹⁰ *Email interview*, June 10, 2015.

economic leadership and global influence. Indeed some Chinese scholars have voiced concerns that other countries were overly dependent on Chinese economic resources and were not prepared to contribute an equitable share of their own developments needs.³⁹¹

The Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese exceptionalism

I provided in the preceding paragraphs a non-exhaustive excursion of Chinese discourse over the Belt and Road Initiative insofar as they were being spoken about by Chinese IR scholars. While Chinese scholars generally eschewed using the term exceptionalism (liwailun or teshulun 例外论 / 特殊论) in academic discourse, many of them nevertheless do insist on the existence of “Chinese characteristics” (zhongguotese 中国特色) in their exegesis of China’s international politics, believing that these characteristics presented a unique Chinese model and contribution that was substantially distinct from Western political configuration.³⁹² Seen this way, Chinese characteristics were seen to be unique and hence, exceptional, to the degree that they proffer the Chinese state with the means of justifying Chinese initiatives as being “non-Western” and thus necessarily good and better than those of Western origins. This is where the contribution of the Belt and Road Initiative comes in. While Chinese scholars

³⁹¹ See for instance the series on essays on the topic of “Yidaiyilu de qianzai fengxian” [Inherent risks in the One-Belt-One-Road] in Li, Yining, Yifu Lin and Yongnian Zheng, eds., *Dudong Yidaiyilu* [Understand the One-Belt-One-Road]. Beijing: Zhongxin chuban jituan [ChinaCiticPress], 2015, pp.279-299.

³⁹² Interviews with Chinese scholars in 2017 and 2018.

generally did not go so far as to claim the Belt and Road Initiative as being utterly of Chinese-origin, many of them do insist that the Belt and Road Initiative provide a more equitable outcome between China and other countries compared to Western initiatives. As argued earlier, the utilization of economic initiatives in order to generate economic influence and in turn validating China's global prominence is central to understanding the strategic consideration behind the Belt and Road Initiative. To this end, the Belt and Road Initiative can be said to confer China with the opportunity in presenting itself as a non-hegemonic power, and that it harbored no ill-will or intentions to interfere in the domestic affairs of countries it comes to contact with. Hence Chinese scholars frequently emphasized the need for mutual respect and trust in how the Belt and Road initiatives ought to be conducted. As Chinese economist Li Yining observed, "China wants to cooperate better with countries along the Belt, and to understand them, this is very important, all countries have to offer mutual trust and sincerity, and the One-Belt-One-Road would certainly succeed."³⁹³ In my view, such an argument was borne out of the belief and perception that Western economic initiatives were fundamentally hegemonic, and inherently bad in character, as they sought to entrench Western strategic interests. In contrast, Chinese economic initiatives were frequently touted as non-hegemonic, as they allowed countries to preserve their domestic political autonomy and thus were said to be inherently good.

³⁹³ Li, Yining. "Yidaiyilu wei zhongguo jingji dalai zhongyao zengzhang dongli" [One-Belt-One-Road as an important driving force to China's economy] in Li, Yining, Yifu Lin and Yongnian Zheng, eds., *Dudong Yidaiyilu*, pp. ix-x.

But how true is this in practice, and how do existing examples of Chinese economic initiatives bear out this non-interference principle of China's foreign policy? Current debate over Chinese economic investments in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, to speak of two examples, suggest that the Chinese state remain considerably active, if not coercive, in employing economic initiatives to achieve geopolitical goals, even if these run against the political autonomy of states in concern.³⁹⁴ Indeed, there are concerns that countries who are economically overly dependent on China run the risk of being caught in a "debtbook diplomacy" whereby China extends loans to developing countries who are unable to repay these loans, and thus having to give up strategic assets in exchange to Beijing.³⁹⁵ A bigger issue at stake here – I argue – is the question as to whether China is able to articulate a new set of rules – through the Belt

³⁹⁴ See for instance, Lim, Darren, and Rohan Mukherjee. "Does Debt Pay? China and the Politics of Investment in Sri Lanka." *The Diplomat*, January 20, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/does-debt-pay-china-and-the-politics-of-investment-in-sri-lanka/> (retrieved February 27, 2019); Lim, Guanle. "China's Investments in Malaysia: Choosing the "Right" Partners." *International Journal of China Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 1-30.

³⁹⁵ Parker, Sam, and Gabrielle Chefitz. *Debtbook Diplomacy: China's Strategic Leveraging of its Newfound Economic Influence and the Consequences for U.S. Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2018, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/Debtbook%20Diplomacy%20PDF.pdf> (retrieved Aug 20, 2018).

and Road Initiative – as evidence of its claim to be good and better than the West which it criticizes. To this end, Chinese scholars’ treatment of globalization as being a new global reality in which China – through its Belt and Road Initiative – is well-placed to respond to compared to the Western liberal system which was seen as being inadequate to meet the challenges of globalization.³⁹⁶ Indeed Zhao Tingyang’s sweeping claim that a new game required a new system is reflective of such thinking among the Chinese intelligentsia notwithstanding disagreement over what the attributes of such a system might actually be.³⁹⁷

In addition, the competition for regional influence was most vividly seen in China’s depiction of its relations with its neighbors – particularly smaller countries in Southeast Asia – as being “a partnership of good neighborliness and mutual trust”

³⁹⁶ See for instance, Yan, Xuetong. “Yan Xuetong: Xifang gainian yi wufa yongyu lijie xianjin guojiguanxi” [Yan Xuetong: Western thinking no longer can be used to understand modern international relations]. *Pengpai [The Paper]*, July 4, 2018, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2239041 (retrieved July 6, 2018).

³⁹⁷ Some Chinese scholars I spoke to were uncomfortable with the idea that China would play a leading role in such a system, although the majority critiqued the existing international system as being problematic and in need of reform. At the same time, there was a tacit acknowledgement that China was an influential player and that its preferences and interests needed to be reflected, or at the very least, acknowledged in international affairs.

(mulinhuxin de huoban guanxi 睦邻互信的伙伴关系).³⁹⁸ This was premised on two assumptions: one, that China's economic power is seen as proffering Beijing with political influence over its neighbors, and two, that its neighbors have little choice, but to align themselves with Beijing if they are to prosper economically. Both of these assumptions are problematic to begin with. While China's economic might does allow it to some extent in advancing its strategic objectives, effecting actual political influence among elites remain largely limited. To this end, I argue that Chinese conceptions of soft power (through the utilization of economic initiatives) are highly problematic. This is because economic influence *alone* is unable to generate the sustaining effect that would result in political goodwill and attraction to the Chinese worldview. For instance, Chinese efforts to use financial diplomacy in its relations with Malaysia had provoked criticism that these projects increased Malaysia's indebtedness while advancing China's strategic interests. Also, the lack of sensitivity to Malaysia's domestic context on the part of Chinese companies and the Chinese embassy had also undercut the efficacy of Beijing's public diplomacy overtures. Furthermore, while Beijing possessed outsized influence in setting terms for its economic deals, it was uncertain how much real concessions it has won from Malaysia

³⁹⁸ Liu, Mei Ping. *Yidaiyilu de lilun yuju yu jianshe fanglue yanjiu* [A Study of the Theoretical Basis and Construction Strategy of the One-Belt-One-Road]. Henan: Henan Renmin Chubanshe [Henan People's Press], 2016, p.129.

leaders.³⁹⁹ This suggested that economic power alone was insufficient to persuade countries of China's claim of its benign intentions and that it was different and good.

In the same way, I argue that China's neighbors are not without choices or options in who they seek to engage with to maximize their geostrategic objectives. This is particularly important to our understanding of how Chinese exceptionalism is being framed in Beijing's geopolitical strategy. Indeed the idea that China is good and different and countries in the region ought to align their choices and preferences with Beijing if they are to prosper is a frequent refrain in China's diplomatic overtures. According to former Singapore top diplomat Bilahari Kausikan, the Chinese state – in their public diplomacy – often made use of coercion techniques to “create a psychological environment which poses false choices for other countries...This technique of forcing false choices on you and making you choose between false choices is deployed within a framework of either overarching narratives or specific narratives... The purpose is to narrow the scope of choices and they are usually presented in binary terms.”⁴⁰⁰ To what extent then, are countries in Southeast Asia are then beholden to China in achieving their own domestic objectives? According to Evelyn Goh, in a study of China's influence in Southeast Asia, countries in the region

³⁹⁹ See Custer et al., *Ties that Bind: Quantifying China's public diplomacy and its “good neighbor” effect*, p.23.

⁴⁰⁰ Wai, Albert. “S'pore should guard against false binary choices in Chinese public diplomacy: Bilahari Kausikan.” *Todayonline*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/spore-should-guard-against-false-binary-choices-chinese-public-diplomacy-bilahari-kausikan> (retrieved July 11, 2018).

possessed considerable ability in negotiating with Beijing. As observed, “China’s record of influence is mixed, and often unsuccessful, in persuading, inducing or coercing developing Asian states to do what they do not want to do.”⁴⁰¹ From this vantage point, we can surmise that Chinese influence is not a one-way street as countries seek to maximize their gains from working with China while simultaneously ensure they do not compromise on more fundamental national interests such as territory or political autonomy.

Moreover, the ability of China’s economy to generate a sustained economic presence – vis-à-vis Belt and Road initiatives – should not be taken for granted. This is particularly so if the Chinese economy in the coming years faces structural limitations to its growth and starts to slow down, thus impacting the extent of China’s overseas forays. Also, the domestic conditions of recipient countries can also pose a challenge to Chinese economic statecraft. Indeed, Chinese scholars I spoke to also expressed caution against Chinese risk-taking behavior in their economic endeavors, particularly in countries where insufficient attention had been paid to matters of domestic governance as this was seen as posing long-term challenges and threats to China’s presence on the ground.⁴⁰² As earlier mentioned, China’s foreign aid frequently saw Beijing charging much higher market rates and no grants to countries it seeks to cultivate relations with unlike Western countries, including Japan which provide grants and low interest loans to developing countries. This may back fire on

⁴⁰¹ Goh, Evelyn. "The Modes of China’s Influence. Cases from Southeast Asia." *Asian Survey* 54, no. 5 (2014): 825-48, see 848.

⁴⁰² Interviews in Beijing and Guangzhou, 2017 and 2018.

China especially if these countries perceive their national interests as compromised due to having to acquiesce to Chinese terms. For instance, following Malaysia's general elections in May 2018 where the opposition Pakatan Harapan coalition was voted into power, the East Coast Railway Link and two gas pipeline projects worth billions of dollars that were inked under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative by the Chinese government and the previous government administration were being cancelled due to concerns that the terms of these projects were excessively benefitting Beijing while presenting Kuala Lumpur with unfavorable terms.⁴⁰³ This push-back effect – if sufficient political will can be mustered – suggests that China's economic might do not always result in determinative outcomes. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Hambantota port, which was handed over to China as a result of the country being unable to service its debt, remained highly unattractive to cargo ship thus raising concerns on the long-term economic viability of such an undertaking.⁴⁰⁴ Again this suggests that notwithstanding certain geopolitical benefits that Beijing might stand to

⁴⁰³ "East Coast Rail Link and pipeline projects with China cancelled, says Malaysia PM Mahathir Mohamad." *The Straits Times*, August 21, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/east-coast-rail-link-and-pipeline-projects-with-china-cancelled-says-malaysian-pm> (retrieved Aug 21, 2018).

⁴⁰⁴ "Inside China's US\$1 billion port in Sri Lanka where ships don't want to stop." *The Straits Times*, April 18, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/inside-chinas-us1-billion-port-in-sri-lanka-where-ships-dont-want-to-stop> (retrieved Aug 20, 2018).

gain from possession of the port, the possibility of such assets becoming an economic burden to China cannot be ruled out as well.

Finally, the state of China's own domestic environment also represents a challenge to the Chinese state ability to project influence abroad. According to Norris, in order for economies to be used as an active instrument of statecraft, nations must be able to control or direct the behavior of the economic actors that carry out the international economic activity. To this end, it was argued that a state that is divided often cannot even agree on what its best national interests, let alone pursue those interests via economic channels of national power.⁴⁰⁵ To what extent then can the Chinese state said to be acting in a unified manner, particularly concerning its core national interests? Given the size and magnitude of governing China, it can be argued that elements of factional politics will continue to exist in the CCP,⁴⁰⁶ nevertheless, China ultimately remains a hierarchical, single-party authoritarian regime, and thus state unity can be forged from the top down where deemed necessary - as seen by the setting up of the National Security Commission led by President Xi in November

⁴⁰⁵ Norris, William J. *Chinese Economic Statecraft : Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control*, pp.222-223.

⁴⁰⁶ Li, Cheng. "The End of the CCP's Resilient Authoritarianism? A Tripartite Assessment of Shifting Power in China." *The China Quarterly* 211 (2012): 595-623; Ho, Wing-Chung. "The Rise of the Bureaucratic Bourgeoisie and Factional Politics of China." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42, no. 3 (2012): 514-21.

2013 in order to coordinate the policies of the state.⁴⁰⁷ That said, I argue that one should not assume that top Chinese leaders possess a monopoly over the knowledge and wisdom needed to make decisions on behalf of China's best interests. Indeed, given the growing complexity of decision-making and the increasing pantheon of political and commercial actors involved in economic enterprises, top CCP leaders may find it hard-press to provide appropriate responses to the challenges of domestic governance, let alone those of the Belt and Road Initiative which involve political relations with other countries. Furthermore, if the Belt and Road Initiative is seen primarily as a domestic issue to deal with the problem of overcapacity and overproduction within China, then such an emphasis raises the bigger question as to how prepared China is in taking on the challenges of the global economy, which would necessitate the Chinese government to look beyond domestic priorities in its policy-making. This brings us back to the question as to "how unique is the Chinese model of domestic governance", and to what extent can the governance principles in such a model be said to possess principles that can be universalized and thus applied to other countries which do not share its political values. Indeed, I argue that while the West is frequently being criticized by China as being hegemonic and that Western political models are seen to be incompatible with Chinese preferences, however what these Chinese alternatives might be remain vague. While many Chinese scholars have articulated the problems they perceive with the Western led international order (as I

⁴⁰⁷ See, Lampton, David M. "Xi Jinping and the National Security Commission: Policy Coordination and Political Power." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 95 (2015): 759-777.

discussed in Chapter 2), it remains unclear what kind of global order China is truly for, except for the fact that its interests ought to be taken into account, or at the very least, acknowledged.

Finally, I argue that the lack of clearly spelt out objectives in the Belt and Road Initiative discourse also suggest considerable ambiguity and the lack of consensus among Chinese scholars and policy makers as to the actual outcomes that the Belt and Road Initiative is designed to achieve. If it is to entrench China's position and influence in the world, then the growing suspicion among many countries towards Beijing's economic statecraft (vis-à-vis the Belt and Road Initiative) is inherently limiting China's ability to cultivate political goodwill and positive diplomatic relations. Likewise, the increasing chorus of domestic opposition – notwithstanding the Chinese state attempts to muzzle these voices - towards China's outward economic forays that are seen to be ill-advised and highly risky, are also generating social turbulence that may inadvertently affect the CCP's mandate to govern.

Conclusion:

In the above chapter I discussed the importance of economic statecraft to China's quest in being perceived as a great power globally and also to enhance its national image in the wider world. As I alluded to in Chapter 4, the conception of China's national image is crucial to Beijing's aspirations to be seen as being good and different from the West, and consequently to having its political worldview being accepted by others. To this end, economic power remains a central instrument that the Chinese government uses in order to wield influence in its international relations as this is seen as being less direct, thus allowing Beijing to subvert official diplomatic

channels while at the same time also applying political pressure in the pursuit of its national interests. Furthermore, China perceives the use of economic statecraft to be a legitimate means of procuring soft power, which is unlike Western iterations of soft power which tend to focus on aspects such as culture and values.⁴⁰⁸ As such, the Belt and Road Initiative ought to be understood beyond mere economics, but a state-backed attempt to generate political influence among countries traversing the belt and road.

Relating the study of the Belt and Road Initiative to the study of Chinese international relations, I also highlighted three key themes that frequently permeate the discourse among Chinese IR scholars. Seen as such, I argue the Belt and Road Initiative can be interpreted as a geostrategic instrument for China to challenge the rules of the international system so as to better reflect its national interests and global objectives. This is supplemented by the criticism of Western economic initiatives such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that are said to be entrenching Western interests while presenting developing countries – whose rights Beijing claim to represent – with unfavorable terms. At a regional level, China uses the Belt and Road Initiative to cultivate influence among countries that it seeks to influence to its side. From the Southeast Asia region, poorer countries like Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are highly susceptible to Chinese economic inducements as examples in recent years show.⁴⁰⁹ Given existing territorial disputes between China and other

⁴⁰⁸ See Zheng, Yongnian and Zhang Chi. "Guoji zhengzhi zhong de ruan liliang yiji dui Zhongguo de ruan liliang de guan cha" [Soft power in international politics and an observation of China's soft power]. *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], 2007 (no.7): 133-138.

⁴⁰⁹ For a discussion of how China's exercises economic influence in Southeast Asia, see Nyíri, Pál, and Tan, Danielle. *Chinese Encounters in Southeast Asia : How*

Southeast Asian countries, how much trust Beijing receives from the region will be crucial to how the Belt and Road Initiative is being perceived and received. Last but not least, domestic conditions continue to affect how the Belt and Road Initiative is being conceptualized and put into practice. While some Chinese scholars read the Belt and Road Initiative as an opportunity for China to “go out” and demonstrate its credentials to the world and “striving for achievement” (yousuo zuowei 有所作为), others caution China not to overstretch its resources and to instead focus on domestic development.⁴¹⁰ To this end, I argue that any economic or political turbulence in China’s domestic conditions would affect Beijing’s ability to conduct its foreign policy, including aspects of its Belt and Road Initiative.

Finally as part of a broader discussion on the Chinese worldview and its claims to exceptionalism, this chapter also raises the question as to how *different* and *good* the Belt and Road Initiative can be said to be in comparison to existing economic institutions and initiatives. While many Chinese scholars shun the term “exceptionalism”, preferring to preface their analysis of China’s geopolitical worldview with the phrase “with Chinese characteristics” (zhongguo tese 中国特色), the issue of whether these characteristics are unique or otherwise remains an issue of considerable debate, particularly if China seeks to claim its brand of global governance

People, Money, and Ideas from China Are Changing a Region. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017.

⁴¹⁰ For a discussion of China’s “striving for achievement”, see Yan, Xuetong. “From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement.” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 2 (2014): 153-84.

as being superior to the West. Given more than five years (as of writing) have passed between President Xi's high-profile proclamation of the the Belt and Road Initiative and now, there exists a dearth of clear ideas, let alone actions as to how the Belt and Road Initiative ought to progress. While some Chinese observers have attempted to recast the objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative as not so much goals to be achieved, but rather as an ongoing process underlining Beijing's long-term direction,⁴¹¹ the fact that little substantive outcomes have been achieved up till now suggests that the need to reexamine the thinking behind the Belt and Road Initiative and the ideological foundations upon which it is built.⁴¹² Furthermore, it remains to be seen if China's economic statecraft represents an utterly novel endeavor or whether it merely rehashes the tenets of Western political norms which Chinese leaders often criticize. More crucially, the issue as to whether these Chinese characteristics are sufficiently universal so as to be attractive for other countries to emulate will determine

⁴¹¹ See, Wang, Wen. "Belt and Road Initiative: Creating a smoother path." *China Daily*, May 21, 2018, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201805/21/WS5b02689da3103f6866ee9a4a.html> (retrieved Aug 20, 2018).

⁴¹² Given the recent trade war between China and the United States, some Chinese scholars are also questioning the entire edifice of the Belt and Road Initiative arguing that it has resulted in the Chinese government profligacy abroad. See, Xu, Zhangrun. "Women dangxia de kongju yu qidai" [Our imminent fears and imminent hopes]. *China Strategic Analysis Center Inc*, July 26, 2018, <http://zhanlve.org/?p=5823> (retrieved Aug 20, 2018).

the extent to which China can be said to be a model for global governance and force for global good. As the responses of Southeast Asia countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore (as I will point out in the next two chapters) to Beijing's global influence show, China's approach to international politics continue to raise suspicion among political elites in the region as to whether Beijing could be trusted to do good as a global power. In sum, I argue that if the Belt and Road Initiative is to be perceived to be more than just China looking out for itself, then Beijing might have to inadvertently begin to assume a bigger share of global public goods and burdens where they exist. Paradoxically speaking, this may require the Chinese to de-emphasize their "Chinese characteristics" and to articulate a vision of political governance that coheres with the realities of international society rather than that of what its own Communist Party stands for.

Chapter 6: Perceiving China – Two case studies (Indonesia and Vietnam)

In chapter four, I analyzed the themes germane to the priorities of China as seen from the speeches made by President Xi Jinping during his first 18 months in office. As argued, the images of China as a flourishing civilization, China as a peaceful and progressive country, as well as China being a moral example in international politics are themes that are frequently expressed by Chinese leaders in their international relations. To this end, the important question of how the outside world perceives China needs to be likewise asked. Just as China's view of the world is being reflected in its foreign policy actions and international behavior, then how other countries react and respond to China would also provide us with important insights into how China is being perceived, and more crucially, whether its political worldview and its thinking towards global order are being accepted. To do so, I will focus my analysis on three Southeast Asia countries, Vietnam and Indonesia in this chapter, and Singapore in the next. By doing so it would not allow me to understand how countries interpret China's political behavior, but also whether they perceive China as being exceptional, that is, being different and superior to the West in Beijing's claim to global leadership.

In my following discussion, I will examine how two ASEAN countries, namely, Vietnam and Indonesia, perceive China in the course of their political relations,

particularly from 2013 onwards following President Xi's taking over of power.⁴¹³ Given the sizeable population of both countries (Indonesia and Vietnam ranks as 1st and 3rd most populous states in Southeast Asia), they represent a significant community of views to draw from with which to analyze China's regional influence. Furthermore, Vietnam's proximity to China (and its territorial disputes) means that it is highly sensitive to Chinese actions within its periphery and will thus provide highly contextualized insights into China's regional diplomacy. Moreover its Communist government structure mirrors that of Beijing thus allowing for a sharper appreciation of how party dynamics factor into the broader scheme of policy-making. In the case of Indonesia, being one of the region's major players, and widely considered as a middle-power, its views are undoubtedly taken very seriously by China and the region. Of late, Indonesia-China tensions have also surfaced with instances of Chinese fisherman being detained by Jakarta over allegedly illegal fishing activities within the maritime waters of Indonesia.⁴¹⁴

The selection of these two cases also allow us to analyze the extent to which historical events contribute to and color overall ASEAN-China relations. In this respect,

⁴¹³ See, Singh, Bhubhindar, Sarah Teo, and Benjamin Ho. "Rising Sino-Japanese Competition: Perspectives from South-East Asian Elites." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1 (2017): 105-20.

⁴¹⁴ Morrie, Lyle. "Indonesia-China Tensions in the Natuna Sea: Evidence of Naval Efficacy Over Coast Guards?" *The Diplomat*, June 28, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/indonesia-china-tensions-in-the-natuna-sea-evidence-of-naval-efficacy-over-coast-guards/> (retrieved September 23, 2016).

both Indonesia and Vietnam have had turbulent relations with Beijing. During the mid-60s when many ethnic Indonesian Chinese were killed during then President Sukarno's anti-communist purge, while Vietnam have had border conflicts with China throughout its history (the latest being the 1979 Sino-Vietnam war). Contemporary studies of ASEAN-China relations tend to focus more on economic and geopolitical themes, but tend to downplay historical factors, in particular during the Cold War period in Southeast Asia. How then do locally narrated experiences in Vietnam and Indonesia in historical encounters with Chinese actions affect the manner in which China is consequently being perceived today? Given the Chinese leaders frequent use of historical narratives, particularly national humiliation discourse, to highlight the rightful place of China on the world stage,⁴¹⁵ it will be useful to compare how these two countries – through their respective histories – perceive themselves vis-à-vis their relations with China so as to flesh out patterns in Chinese international behavior that reflect both change and continuity in Beijing's regional relations.

Finally, this study hopes to also probe further the extent to which norms and values matter in relations between China and its ASEAN neighbors. Besides economic opportunities, what do smaller states look for in China? This is particularly salient given that China's economy has since late 2014 slowed down and is unlikely to return to the high growth of the 90s and 2000s. This is not to suggest that economic inducements do not matter, indeed they do, as China represents Indonesia's second-largest export market and its largest source of imports while it is also Vietnam's largest

⁴¹⁵ See, Callahan, William A. "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism." *Alternatives* 29, no. 2 (2004): 199-218.

trading partner, and which Vietnam runs a huge trade deficit with.⁴¹⁶ Yet, if we argue – as Martha Finnemore has done – that “state interests are defined in the context of internationally held norms and understandings about what is good and appropriate”, then what are those norms and values which China purport to hold and to what extent does its regional neighbors “subscribe” to these values? ⁴¹⁷ As Evelyn Goh has argued, China’s record of influence in Southeast Asia is highly complex, “there are not many cases in which Beijing tries to make these countries do what they otherwise would not have done.”⁴¹⁸ In other words, does Chinese regional diplomacy contain certain attributes of Chinese exceptionalism that are congruent with the social purposes and political values and objectives of these states? If so, then one is able to argue that Chinese economic influence might be less important as imagined, and China’s influence is not contingent on its ability to dole out economic incentives but rather on normative and ideational aspects embedded within its political relations.

⁴¹⁶ See U.S.- China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 17, 2015, <http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China's%20Economic%20Ties%20with%20ASEAN.pdf> (retrieved September 23, 2016); “Vietnam - China economic relations after 25 years” , <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/business/145683/vietnam---china-economic-relations-after-25-years.html> (retrieved September 23, 2016).

⁴¹⁷ Finnemore, Martha. *National Interests in International Society*. Cornell Studies in Political Economy. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1996, p.2.

⁴¹⁸ Goh, Evelyn. "The Modes of China's Influence: Cases from Southeast Asia." *Asian Survey* 54, no. 5 (2014): 825-48, see 848.

Further to that, proponents of Chinese exceptionalism would thus be able to affirm the validity of China claiming to be good and different in its relations with its neighbors. On the other hand, if little or minimal common ground in terms of normative values exist between China and these two countries, then it severely weakens the claims of Chinese exceptionalism and one might seriously question the extent and sustainability of China's regional influence should its economic strength weaken.

This chapter will proceed as follows. I will first provide a brief overview of the state of relations between China and Southeast Asia since 2010, which a number of scholars view as a turning point in Beijing's relations with the region, marked by a more assertive approach to the former's territorial claims.⁴¹⁹ Next I will go on to examine the perceptions that Vietnamese and Indonesian scholars and senior policy makers have towards China utilizing the data gathered from fieldwork trips to both Hanoi and Jakarta made in the fall of 2017.⁴²⁰ Given this chapter is not meant to be a

⁴¹⁹ Hoo, Tiang Boon. "Hardening the Hard, Softening the Soft: Assertiveness and China's Regional Strategy." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 5 (2017): 639-62; Hong, Zhao. "The South China Sea Dispute and China-Asean Relations." *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 1 (2013): 27-43.

⁴²⁰ Most of the Vietnamese respondents are scholars and senior policymakers who are still active in Track 1.5 and Track 2 work, and agreed to the interviews on the condition of anonymity. Where possible, I included their institutional affiliation without making mention of their names. In the case of Indonesia, all of them were amenable to be identified, and had expressed the "open and democratic" nature of Indonesia's political system for their views to be openly cited.

comprehensive discussion of bilateral relations between China and the two countries, but rather a snapshot analysis of existing perceptions towards China, the focus will be largely on how these countries *react* to China's image-promotion efforts. More specifically, I look at how the three images proffered by President Xi as discussed in Chapter 4 are being understood and appropriated in these two countries. In my interviews, I pose these three questions to my respondents (i.e. what do you think of the Chinese Dream, what do you make out of China's peaceful rise, do you think China can be said to be a moral example in international politics?) and subsequently use their responses to elicit further observations and views towards China.⁴²¹ Given the varying contexts circumscribing these two countries' experiences with China, my interviewees' responses likely differ particularly in terms of how they perceive their respective countries' political priorities in dealing with China. From these, I will identify points of convergence and divergence in these countries' perceptions of China and how these views reflect a wider debate over China's international influence and global ambitions. I contend that notwithstanding the strong economic leverage China has among Southeast Asian countries, the experiences of Vietnam and Indonesia is illustrative of broader global perceptions towards China as well as reflective of the

⁴²¹ Given that a number of my interviewees are well-known Sinologists in their respective countries, and are more proficient in Mandarin than the English language, the interviews were thus conducted in Mandarin. On these occasions, I translated their responses to English while retaining the original verbatim in Chinese (in the parentheses).

dynamics present in China-Southeast Asia relations.⁴²² From my study, I argue that China – despite its strong influence in the region – is still perceived with considerable suspicion by its Southeast Asian neighbors. This is in due to the fact that Beijing was seen to be attempting to modify – though not entirely revise – the rules of Asian politics to suit its needs without taking sufficiently into account specific national interests of other ASEAN states. Furthermore, how Beijing is perceived has more to do with what it does rather than what it says. In this respect, I argue that China’s assertive actions in the South China Sea has generated a negative image of itself with ASEAN, given the importance these countries place on territory issues. Finally, in relating this analysis to the overall study of Chinese exceptionalism, this chapter hopes to provide a textured understanding of China’s regional diplomacy, and the extent to which

⁴²² In a 2018 survey conducted by a Singapore-based think-tank on political developments in Southeast Asia, it was found that while many respondents agreed that China wields the most influence within Southeast Asia, more than half of them expressed little or no confidence that China would “do the right thing” in contributing to global peace, security, prosperity and governance. These findings further corroborate the overall perceptions held by respondents in this chapter. For results of this survey, see Tang, Siew Mun, Moe Thuzar, Hoang Thi Ha, Termsak Chalermphanupap, Pham Thi Phuong Thao and Anuthida Saelaow Qian. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report*, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2019.pdf (retrieved February 18, 2019).

Beijing's claims of being different and good is shared by its neighbors in the course of their respective international politics.

Return of the Dragon: Sino-Southeast Asia relations since 2010

Since 2010, China's political relations with the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have been unusually tense. Territorial disputes over maritime boundaries, which existed in the past but were largely absent from political dealings between the 80s to early 2000s, were cast into the spotlight as China was perceived to be acting increasingly assertive over its territorial demands, particularly in the South China Sea (SCS).⁴²³ In 2012, for the first time in its 45-year-history, the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were left with a diplomatic embarrassment as it found itself unable to issue a joint communique following its annual meeting of its foreign ministers. Cambodia, who was then ASEAN chair, was criticized by many as not abiding by ASEAN norms, but instead choosing to ally itself with China in exchange for Beijing's economic benefits.⁴²⁴ Subsequent years

⁴²³ See for instance, Thayer, Carlyle A. "Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea and Southeast Asian Responses." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 30, no. 2 (2011): 77-104. Chapman, Bert. "China's nine-dashed map: Continuing Maritime Source of Geopolitical tension." *Geopolitics, History and International Relations* 8, no. 1 (2016): 146-68.

⁴²⁴ Sutter, Robert, and Chin-hao Huang. "China-Southeast Asia Relations: Hu Visits Cambodia as South China Sea Simmers." *Comparative Connections* 14, no. 1 (2012): 69-80,154-155.

witnessed further clashes between China and ASEAN claimant states, notably the Philippines and Vietnam over what was perceived as further incursions into the latter maritime waters through Beijing's aggressive island-building works. Attempts to curtail China's territorial expansion through diplomatic means proved largely futile, as Beijing insisted that these disputed islands were under its jurisdiction, and thus within its sovereign right to do as it wished.

In July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled that there was no legal basis for China to claim historical rights to resources within the so-called "nine-dashed line." Among others, the Tribunal also ruled that Chinese actions in the South China Sea such as persistent interference with Philippine fishing and exploration activities and its failure to regulate its own fishing activities were either in violation of the sovereign rights of the Philippines, or had breached various obligations under the Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁴²⁵ Not surprising, Beijing's reaction was blunt, its foreign minister Wang Yi described the judicial decision a "political farce under the pretext of law." President Xi further stated that "China will not accept nor recognize the decision, while the country's territorial sovereignty and maritime

⁴²⁵ Chan, Jane G.Y. and Liow, Joseph C.Y. "The PCA Ruling and ASEAN: A Call for Unity", RSIS Commentaries, July 14, 2016, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co16177-the-pca-ruling-and-asean-a-call-for-unity/#.V9QrImWQL-Y> (retrieved September 10, 2016).

interests in the South China Sea will not be affected under any circumstance.”⁴²⁶ Notwithstanding the tough talk, scholars have observed that the PCA ruling may have affected China’s future ability to assert its territorial rights for a number of reasons: (I) that the success of its domestic economic transformation could be undermined by regional instability;⁴²⁷ (II) any future conflict in the South China Sea will inevitably be linked to and scrutinised through the arbitration ruling;⁴²⁸ and (III) Beijing would not want to further provoke unnecessary conflict with its neighbors, and thus might rein in some of its aggressiveness in the wider interest of its regional relations.⁴²⁹ At the same

⁴²⁶ Beech, Hannah. “China slams the South China Sea Decision as a Political Farce”, *Time*, July 13, 2016, <http://time.com/4404084/reaction-south-china-sea-ruling/> (retrieved September 19, 2016).

⁴²⁷ Goh, Evelyn. “How should Southeast Asia respond to the South China Sea ruling?” *East Asia Forum*, July 17, 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/07/17/how-should-southeast-asia-respond-to-the-south-china-sea-ruling/> (retrieved September 19, 2016).

⁴²⁸ Li, Mingjiang. “The South China Sea Arbitration: Turning Point in Chinese Foreign Policy?” *RSIS Commentaries*, August 12, 2016, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co16205-the-south-china-sea-arbitration-turning-point-in-chinese-foreign-policy/#.V-AXPjuQKu4> (retrieved September 19, 2016).

⁴²⁹ Hayton, Bill. “What will follow China's legal defeat in South China Sea?” *Nikkei Asian Review*, July 13, 2016, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Viewpoints/Bill-Hayton-What-will-follow-China-s-legal-defeat-in-South-China-Sea> (retrieved September 19, 2016).

time, realist scholars have long highlighted the structural factors that could yet provoke major power conflict.⁴³⁰ To what extent then, are these characteristics exhibited by China in its regional/international relations, and how is Chinese behavior being understood by its smaller neighbors? Is conflict inevitable, as structural realists maintain, or is China able to – as some of its leading scholars argue⁴³¹ - avoid the “tragedy of great power politics” that is associated with a realist reading of international politics?

Following from Chapter 4, in which I argued that Chinese leaders are highly sensitive to the management of China’s international image, hence the portrayal and perception of China’s image represents a crucial aspect of its international diplomacy and foreign policy. This is not to suggest that China will compromise on its national interests if they are being threatened by external powers in order to preserve a positive image. As Graham Allison writes in the aftermath of the PCA ruling, “China, like all great powers, will ignore an international legal verdict...except in particular cases

⁴³⁰ See for instance, Mearsheimer, John. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated edition. NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014.

⁴³¹ See for instance, Qin, Yaqing. "Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China’s International Strategy." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 3 (2014): 285-314; Yan, Xuetong. "China's New Foreign Policy: Not Conflict But Convergence Of Interests." *New Perspectives Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2014): 46-48; Zhang, Feng. *Chinese Hegemony : Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History*. California: Stanford University Press, 2015.

where they believe it is their interest to do so.”⁴³² Nevertheless, if one takes seriously the importance of national image in international relations,⁴³³ then it becomes essential for China, especially if it wants to assume a greater share of global leadership, to be able to project a favorable image. Joseph Nye, for instance, writes on the necessity of “soft power” – the ability to attract and co-opt, rather than to coerce others - as being essential to success in global politics,⁴³⁴ while Robert Jervis highlights the spiraling effect that a negative national image can bring about in state relations, including giving rise to misperceptions.⁴³⁵

⁴³² Allison, Graham. “Of Course China, Like All Great Powers, Will Ignore an International Legal Verdict.” *The Diplomat*, July 11, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/of-course-china-like-all-great-powers-will-ignore-an-international-legal-verdict/> (retrieved July 17, 2016).

⁴³³ See for instance, Valencic, Jana. and Chong, Alan. *The Image, the State and International Relations*. European Foreign Policy Unit Working Paper No. 2001/2, International Relations Department, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2001; Kaplowitz, Noel. "National Self-Images, Perception of Enemies, and Conflict Strategies: Psychopolitical Dimensions of International Relations." *Political Psychology* 11, no. 1 (1990): 39-82.

⁴³⁴ Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power : The Means to Success in World Politics*. 1st ed. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

⁴³⁵ Jervis, Robert. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, N.J. ; Princeton University Press, 1976.

More specifically for my study, the issue of Chinese national image, I argue, is a crucial element of its regional diplomacy, given that Chinese leaders constantly exhort on the need to differentiate and distinguish China's international relations from the West (as we have seen in Chapter 2). In other words, how China is being perceived among its regional neighbors is highly indicative of the extent of its international influence, and whether it is able to muster broader support for its global initiatives. More importantly, if China is to play a more substantial role in the international system – as many Chinese scholars have argued – then it stands to reason that such a role requires China to be positively perceived and that Beijing's interests do not come into sharp conflict with those of its neighbors. While much has been made of China's economic relations with its neighbors in East Asia, and the substantial diplomatic goodwill that is accorded Beijing's policy makers as a result of such ties,⁴³⁶ political tensions continue to fester as a result of contentious territorial claims, to the extent of possibly upsetting the balance of power in East Asia. As Singapore's former top diplomat pointed out, "these developments are reinforcing powerful centrifugal forces that are pulling ASEAN away from its preferred balance, with potentially profound

⁴³⁶ Chin, Gregory. "China's Bold Economic Statecraft." *Current History* 114, no. 773 (2015): 217-23; Goh, Evelyn. "The Modes of China's Influence: Cases from Southeast Asia."; Wong, John, Zou, Keyuan, and Zeng, Huaqun. *China-ASEAN Relations : Economic and Legal Dimensions*. London: World Scientific, 2006.

political and strategic consequences.”⁴³⁷ With this in mind, I will examine in turn the perceptions of China from Vietnam and Indonesia.

China and Vietnam: The meeting of two dragons

Among various studies of Sino-Vietnamese relations, Brantly Womack’s description of the inherently asymmetrical character of their relationship represents a valuable framework with which to consider the interactions both countries have with each other.⁴³⁸ Arguing that contemporary international relations scholarship is accustomed

⁴³⁷ Kausikan, Bilahari. “ASEAN will not drown in the South China Sea.” *Nikkei Asian Review*, September 2, 2016, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Viewpoints/Bilahari-Kausikan-ASEAN-will-not-drown-in-the-South-China-Sea?page=2> (retrieved September 23, 2016).

⁴³⁸ Womack, Brantly. *China and Vietnam : The Politics of Asymmetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Other sustained studies of Sino-Vietnam relations that I have consulted in this analysis include, Hiep, Le Hong. "Vietnam’s Hedging Strategy against China since Normalization." *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2013): 333-68; Hoang, Thi Tuan Oanh. *The Evolving Hedging Strategy of Vietnam towards China*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Singapore: RSIS, 2016; Thayer, Carlyle A. "Vietnam’s Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-US Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence." *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017): 183-99; Thayer, Carlyle A. "Vietnam and Rising China: The Structural Dynamics of Mature Asymmetry." *Southeast Asian Affairs* 1 (2010): 392-409.

to view “asymmetry as a disequilibrium rather than as a sustained condition” , Womack puts forth the theses that “disparities in capacities create systemic differences in interests and perceptions between the stronger and weaker sides of the relationship [and] mutual perceptions and interactions in an asymmetry relationship will be fundamentally shaped by the different situation of opportunity and vulnerability that each side confronts.” At the same time, Womack suggests that “given that the basic disparity of capacities between the two is unlikely to change, and the stronger power is unlikely to be able to eliminate the weaker power”, asymmetry relations tend to be robust as “both sides manage their affairs with the confidence that the power of the larger side will not be challenged and the autonomy of the smaller side will not be threatened.”⁴³⁹

Notwithstanding this fundamental asymmetrical character of the relationship, Vietnamese scholars I spoke to expressed determination to ensure that Vietnamese national interests, particularly territorial ones, were not being compromised in the course of bilateral relations. At a roundtable in Singapore, responding to a question by a Chinese IR scholar on “what your country fears most about China”, a senior Vietnamese scholar provided the feisty answer “Vietnam does not fear China”, before adding that Vietnam hopes to “find ways to live harmoniously with China.”⁴⁴⁰ This need to live with China (as a big brother) is intrinsically etched into the mindset of Vietnamese I spoke to as they acknowledged both the benefits that a prosperous

⁴³⁹ Womack, *China and Vietnam : The Politics of Asymmetry*, pp.17-18.

⁴⁴⁰ “Contesting Visions of Regional Order in East Asia.” Roundtable organized by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, October 11, 2017, Singapore.

China would bring to Vietnam while being cautious, and at times, suspicious towards Beijing's long-term intentions. Given this ambivalence, I will examine how the three images of the Chinese Dream, China's peaceful and progressive rise, and China being a moral example in the international system are being thought of and understood by the Vietnamese.

l)The Chinese Dream:

On how the Chinese Dream was being understood in Vietnam, one scholar from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam perceives it as a "long term and strategic goal of China to become a world power."⁴⁴¹ To some extent, this desire for China to become a strong and prosperous nation was seen to be a legitimate desire, and to which the Vietnamese see no reason to deny, particularly given the close interconnectedness of their respective economies. Another view understands the Chinese Dream within China's own domestic conditions, particularly as an endeavor to foster a strong sense of nationalism which could result in a "zero-sum" outcome in terms of the pursuit of national interests.⁴⁴² In addition, the Chinese dream was also seen as a project towards national rejuvenation whereby President Xi attempts to "look

⁴⁴¹ Interview with scholar from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV), September 19, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.

⁴⁴² Interview with senior official from the Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam, September 18, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam; Interview with professor from the Institute of Chinese Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam, September 29, 2017.

backwards in history in terms of thinking” with which to fan the flames of nationalism.⁴⁴³ One scholar also highlighted the notion of “Han nationalism” (dahan minzuzhuyi 大汉民族主义) which could create additional problems between itself and citizens from regions such as Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan who do not see themselves as Chinese nationals, notwithstanding China’s jurisdiction over their territories.⁴⁴⁴ (This will be further discussed in the next chapter on the Chinese-ness and Chinese exceptionalism).

From this vantage point, I argue that what unites Vietnamese scholars in their views is the keen, and sometimes cynical, perception that the Chinese Dream was conceived ultimately with China’s interests in mind, and that the national interests of other countries remain periphery or coincidental if they are taken into account at all. This pursuit of the Chinese Dream is also fuelled by rising nationalism which, according to one Vietnamese professor, could result in China “abdicating its socialist responsibilities” thus further resulting in conflict between China and socialist Vietnam.⁴⁴⁵ Indeed, such an observation suggests a qualified, if not limited, allegiance by Chinese leaders towards ideological motifs and that national interests come to the forefront in the course of China’s international relations. While Vietnamese scholars perceive the Chinese Dream as a slogan of sorts for President Xi Jinping, which was

⁴⁴³ Interview with senior policy maker from the DAV, October 11, 2017, Singapore.

⁴⁴⁴ Interview with professor from the Institute of Chinese Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam, September 29, 2017.

⁴⁴⁵ Interview with professor from the Institute of Chinese Studies, September 29, 2017.

not unlike those articulated by his predecessors,⁴⁴⁶ it was also observed that President Xi was viewed to be “relating with the world from a position of strength” and thus the Chinese Dream reflects a much more confident Chinese self-ability to effect changes in the world.

As such, a number of scholars have described “hedging” to be the favored strategy Vietnam adopts towards China.⁴⁴⁷ According to one definition, hedging is “an insurance-seeking behavior under high-stakes and high-uncertainty situations, where a sovereign actor pursues a bundle of opposite and deliberately ambiguous policies vis-à-vis competing powers to prepare a fallback position should circumstances change.”⁴⁴⁸ To this end, the United States, and to some extent, the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) are seen as important players in Hanoi’s hedging strategy. Despite the Vietnam war, Vietnamese policy-makers view the presence of the United States in the region as an important stabilizing factor towards ensuring the

⁴⁴⁶ For instance, former president Hu Jintao was credited with the slogan of “harmonious society” (和谐社会) while the slogan of “Three Represents” (三个代表) was attributed to his predecessor Jiang Zemin.

⁴⁴⁷ Hiep, Le Hong. “Vietnam’s Hedging Strategy against China since Normalization.”; Hoang, Thi Tuan Oanh. The Evolving Hedging Strategy of Vietnam towards China; Do, Thuy T. “Firm in Principles, Flexible in Strategy and Tactics.” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 2, no. 1 (2017): 24-39.

⁴⁴⁸ Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. “How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States’ Alignment Behavior towards China.” *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (2016): 500-14, see 504.

present configuration of power, which is geared to best serve Vietnam's national interests.⁴⁴⁹ This suggests that despite the best efforts by Chinese leaders and diplomats to convince Southeast Asia countries that China will not be a hegemonic power, the Vietnamese I spoke to remain cautious of Chinese intentions – given ongoing territorial disputes.

II) China's peaceful and progressive rise

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

“China has always been crystal clear that there are limits to its peaceful intentions: China will not rule out the use of force or coercion where matters of its territorial integrity are at stake. The most obvious example is Taiwan, but China also includes its maritime territories in the East and South China Sea in this category. To the Chinese mind, there is no contradiction between Beijing's peaceful inclinations and a strong defense of its own territory.”⁴⁵⁰

Scholars like Barry Buzan have previously raised questions concerning whether Chinese leaders' pronouncements of peaceful rise/development represent a means to an end (China's global dominance) or whether it represents a desirable end

⁴⁴⁹ Interview with senior officials from Vietnam's Ministry of Defence, September 26, 2017, and October 3, 2017.

⁴⁵⁰ Email interview dated October 28, 2016.

in and of itself.⁴⁵¹ From the above response, it would seem that Chinese claims that its rise would be peaceful is not unconditional, and is premised upon the preservation of its own territory. Unlike countries which purport to state their peaceful intentions but subsequently become hostile when they are being threatened or invaded, given that China's vision of territoriality is expanding, Beijing is able to attack other countries while still saying it's peaceful (on the pretext of claiming the need to safeguard its territorial interests).

Indeed, one senior military officer I spoke to observed that China presently faces the dilemma of trying to “pursue stability and protecting its own rise.”⁴⁵² This was because Chinese national interests were seen as a “zero-sum game” which run contrary to the “win-win” rhetoric that Chinese leaders frequently talk about.⁴⁵³ This point was most vividly observed during the *Haiyang Shiyou 981* incident between May to August 2014 in which a Chinese oil rig conducted drilling activities within Vietnamese-claimed exclusive economic zone. The actions of the Chinese, as

⁴⁵¹ Buzan, Barry. "The Logic and Contradictions of 'Peaceful Rise/Development' as China's Grand Strategy." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 4 (2014): 381-420. See also Guo, Sujian. *China's 'peaceful Rise' in the 21st Century : Domestic and International Conditions*. Aldershot ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006; Yee, Herbert S. *China's Rise : Threat or Opportunity?* London: Routledge, 2011.

⁴⁵² Interview with a senior officer from the Institute of Defence and International Relations, Ministry of Defence of Vietnam, Hanoi, September 26, 2017.

⁴⁵³ Interview with DAV scholar, September 15, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam; Interview with a director-general of the DAV, October 11, 2017, Singapore.

observed, demonstrated the intractable nature of territorial issues, and the difficulty of compromising given national pride at stake. Furthermore, as noted, “China generally frames its ‘peaceful rise’ as an overt comparison to the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. By promising a ‘peaceful rise’, China is, in effect, promising not to use force to expand its territory - but this promise has no bearing on the areas China already claims. Thus China’s peaceful rise should not be read as a promise to compromise on issues such as the South China Sea.”⁴⁵⁴ From this perspective, one might argue that the terms ‘peaceful rise’ are irrelevant to Vietnam; instead, peaceful rise is perceived to be only of relevance when China seeks to differentiate itself from the West (which it frequently criticizes as being hegemonic). From Vietnam’s view, what was more important is whether these territorial disputes would be peacefully resolved or not.

One impediment to China’s peaceful rise, it was pointed out, also lies in the tendency for Chinese leaders to project problems internally to its external environment. In other words, it is China’s domestic environment, more so than its external conditions, which “sets the rhythm” for how its foreign policy is to be constructed.⁴⁵⁵ Such a view posits that the biggest obstacle to China’s project its

⁴⁵⁴ Interview with a senior officer from the Institute of Defence and International Relations, September 26, 2017.

⁴⁵⁵ Interview with professor from the Institute of Chinese Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam, September 29, 2017. For in depth studies into the nexus between China’s domestic and foreign policies, see Nathan, Andrew J. "Domestic Factors in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy." *China Report* 52, no. 3

global influence lies in the presence of strong interests groups (lijituan 利集团) within the Chinese political system, and to which President Xi is attempting to wage an internal struggle with. For instance, Chinese observers have highlighted the crucial role of the People's Liberation Army in the foreign policy decisions of Beijing's decision makers, in particular those pertaining to its territorial claims.⁴⁵⁶ It was also pointed out to me by a source who works in a Chinese construction company that the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) proffered Chinese businesses the opportunity to "park" their money in overseas assets given the perceived slowing down of the Chinese economy and the strict capital controls enforced by the Chinese government of late.⁴⁵⁷ Seen this way, the future contours of Chinese foreign policy, and whether it will be peaceful or

(2016): 179-91; Bhalla, Madhu. "Domestic Roots of China's Foreign and Security Policy." *International Studies* 42, no. 3-4 (2005): 205-25; Liao, Nien-Chung Chang. "The Sources of China's Assertiveness: The System, Domestic Politics or Leadership Preferences?" *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016): 817-33.

⁴⁵⁶ Saunders, Phillip C., and Scobell, Andrew. *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015; You, Ji. "Xi Jinping and PLA Centrality in Beijing's South China Sea Dispute Management." *China: An International Journal* 15, no. 2 (2017): 1-21; You, Ji. "The PLA and Diplomacy: Unraveling Myths about the Military Role in Foreign Policy Making." *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 86 (2013): 1-19; Segal, Gerald. "The PLA and Chinese Foreign Policy Decision-Making." *International Affairs* 57, no. 3 (1981): 449-66.

⁴⁵⁷ Personal conversation, 19 October 2017, Singapore.

otherwise, is dependent on the outcome of Xi's power contest within his domestic constituents. As of writing, President Xi is said to have cemented his influence within the CCP rivaling that of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping;⁴⁵⁸ hence, China's foreign policy in the coming years – assuming Xi's power is not challenged within the party – will reflect the vicissitudes of domestic politics as they are played out in the foreign arena.

III) China as a moral example in international politics

According to Vietnamese interviewees I spoke with, the biggest problem seen in Chinese international relations is the disparity between word and deed, or as one respondent puts it, “[Chinese] words are usually not in line with their acts.”⁴⁵⁹ Another scholar in response to whether China's rise would be peaceful commented that one should examine “what China does, not what it says” (kantazenyangzuo bushizenyangshuo 看它怎样做, 不是怎样说).⁴⁶⁰ One scholar also described Chinese foreign policy as being inconsistent and that Chinese leaders were “only concerned

⁴⁵⁸ Brown, Kerry. *CEO, China : The Rise of Xi Jinping*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2016; Mitchell, Tom. “Xi Jinping: China's new revolutionary hero.” *Channelnewsasia*, October 23, 2017, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/commentary-xi-jinping-china-revolutionary-hero-party-congress-9334586> (retrieved Oct 24, 2017).

⁴⁵⁹ Email interview with Vietnamese army officer dated October 28, 2016.

⁴⁶⁰ Interview with professor from the Institute of Chinese Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam, September 29, 2017.

with China's own national interests with little regard for international norms."⁴⁶¹ Furthermore, it was observed that China was amenable to changing the rules of the international order to suit its own interests, thus reinforcing the perception of a "self-centered and selfish nation."⁴⁶² When asked how this was different from how countries in general acted (i.e. in line with their own national interests), the approach of China to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was being contrasted to the U.S.:

"China is party to UNCLOS, the U.S. is not. In the East Sea disputes between Japan, China uses UNCLOS to support its claim but refuse to acknowledge UNCLOS guidelines in their South China Sea disputes with ASEAN countries. If China signs up to UNCLOS then it is obliged to abide by the rules, it cannot just pick and choose what is convenient."⁴⁶³

Another scholar from the DAV expressed the view that "how China does things" was "not noble."⁴⁶⁴ When asked to clarify what this meant, it was said that unlike the U.S. which was more "straight-forward" with its demands in its bilateral relations, the Chinese "tend not to be transparent" in their diplomatic actions and preferring utilizing "under-table methods" to achieve their goals. For instance, it was shared that Chinese companies involved in the ongoing construction of the Hanoi metro trainline had

⁴⁶¹ Interview with senior policy maker from the DAV, October 11, 2017, Singapore.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁴ Interview with DAV scholar, September 15, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.

understated the costs of the project during the bidding process and that there were additional hidden costs that only surfaced in subsequent years.⁴⁶⁵ One respondent also pointed out that following the Permanent Court of Arbitration tribunal's ruling over the South China Sea in July 2016, Chinese leaders had increased the frequency of high level visits to Southeast Asia countries in order to "put pressure on their leaders to keep quiet."⁴⁶⁶

Seen this way, China's claim to being a moral example in international politics is also limited by the perceived inferior quality of its ideas. Despite Vietnam and China having similar party structures, it was shared that many Vietnamese – including its leaders – preferred to look to the West (especially the United States) and its institutional systems in their work of governance. When asked the reason for doing so, the reply was that "Vietnam is so much like China, there is nothing to learn from them. If we want to learn, we need to learn ideas from the West."⁴⁶⁷ Beyond just ideas, some Vietnamese respondents also highlighted the inferior quality of Chinese manufacturing products and goods that were being sold in Vietnam which consequently affected the trust towards China. In addition, the issue of Chinese companies bringing in their own

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.* On the Hanoi metro line, see Tatarski, Michael. Vietnam's tale of two metros, one built by the Japanese and the other by the Chinese. *South China Morning Post*, July 30, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/business/article/2104149/vietnams-tale-two-metros-one-built-japanese-and-other-chinese> (retrieved Oct 25, 2017).

⁴⁶⁶ Interview with senior policy maker from the DAV, October 11, 2017, Singapore.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

workers, thus alienating the local population, was also a frequent gripe among those I spoke with.⁴⁶⁸ To this end, officials from the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense shared the view that China needs to “be more responsible for the region” if its influence is to be perceived positively.⁴⁶⁹

As to whether China was prepared to provide a form of alternative global leadership from that of the United States, Vietnamese respondents cited the lack of China’s “soft power” influence and its “values deficit” as presenting formidable obstacles. When queried as to what this meant, interviewees cited day-to-day encounters such as the “low quality goods of China to export to Vietnam” and “Chinese tourists bad behavior when visiting Vietnam” as problems peculiar to experiences with the Chinese.⁴⁷⁰ One respondent also cited “socialization issues” and that Chinese tourists were not “civilized” (buwenming 不文明) as issues that affect Vietnamese perceptions towards China. Furthermore, China’s growing relations with other Southeast Asia countries such as Malaysia was described as “the exportation of corruption” (chukoufubai 出口腐败) as Chinese entrepreneurs and businessmen were

⁴⁶⁸ Interview with DAV scholar, September 15, 2017; interview with senior official from the Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam, September 18, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.

⁴⁶⁹ Interview with officials from the Ministry of Defense, October 3, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.

⁴⁷⁰ Email interview with senior army officer, October 28, 2016; interview with DAV scholar, September 15, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam; interview with officials from the Ministry of Defense, October 3, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.

seen to be lacking transparency in their business relations, unlike their Japanese counterparts who were perceived to be more upfront and honest in cutting deals. Given these experiences, it was said that China is presently not suited to be a model for the developing world as it did not possess the level of transparency (touting **透明度**) that would allow other countries to trust it. In addition, its development model was not considered as sufficiently attractive and that it presently was not prepared to provide a greater share of global public goods.⁴⁷¹ More crucially, as a senior defense official observes, aggressive Chinese behavior in its territorial dispute with Vietnam had affected the stability of the Southeast Asia region and also undermined the efforts to forge regional unity among the different countries.⁴⁷²

Notwithstanding the above criticisms, Vietnamese respondents did highlight China's economic initiatives as a positive model for emulation, particularly its ability to modernize much of its economy in such a short span of time. One respondent also pointed out that China's claim to international leadership in the future would not be based on indicators such as human rights and democracy, but on how it fares in environmental matters. This was especially so in its relations with developing countries like Vietnam in which issues like human rights and freedom of speech were not as heavily emphasized compared to the West, instead matters pertaining to livelihood

⁴⁷¹ Interview with professor from the Institute of Chinese Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam, September 29, 2017; interview with DAV scholar, September 19, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam.

⁴⁷² Interview with a senior officer from the Institute of Defence and International Relations, September 26, 2017.

and subsistence were seen as more immediate and relevant concerns.⁴⁷³ Another respondent acknowledged the ongoing tension in China between its growing modernization and the associated set of ideas that come with it (earlier discussed in Chapter 3) versus the “old thinking” that dominate China’s political culture which could be potentially problematic for the future of China.⁴⁷⁴

From the above evidence, it can be surmised that China’s growing influence has generally not been perceived positively by Vietnam and that territorial disputes have further exacerbated the hostility among Vietnamese towards the Chinese. In a sense, this is not unexpected given the long history of Sino-Vietnam conflict, and in particular the period between 1979 and 1990 where relations between both countries were overtly hostile.⁴⁷⁵ Indeed Womack’s observation of “systemic misperception” between both countries remain valid for today. As put, “Vietnam’s oversensitivity to China’s actions and China’s insensitivity to Vietnam’s security concerns led to a vicious cycle of Vietnamese escalation and Chinese bullying, culminating in the border war.”⁴⁷⁶ In addition, many Vietnamese in their day to day relations with the Chinese continue to harbor negative views of China. While this in some sense can be attributed

⁴⁷³ Interview with senior official from the Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam, September 18, 2017, Hanoi, Vietnam

⁴⁷⁴ Interview with senior policy maker from the DAV, October 11, 2017, Singapore.

⁴⁷⁵ For a brief discussion of the events of this period, see Womack, Brantly. *China and Vietnam : The Politics of Asymmetry*, pp.186-211.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.209.

to a lack of cultural awareness and misperception, particularly if they involve ordinary Chinese citizens; at the same time, Chinese foreign policy is seen to be assertive, even condescending towards smaller countries like Vietnam and which reflects the thinking and priorities of Chinese elites. Nevertheless, the similar governing ideologies between the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the CCP means that the legitimacy of the CPV, in some respects, is intricately tied to the fortunes of the CCP. As observed by one Vietnamese scholar, Vietnam's behavior towards China since 1991 have been influenced more by domestic variables whereby "different political calculations and the interplays of interests among various actors within the Vietnamese domestic politics."⁴⁷⁷

China and Indonesia: Whither regional influence and domestic politics

While Indonesia's relations with China are less encumbered by the memory of historical conflict, and Jakarta's geographical position affords it some element of distance from Beijing's geopolitical orbit, Indonesia's perceptions of China are no less relevant, not least because of Indonesia's important role as a key player in the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific, but also because of its economic relations with China, and ongoing racial matters in its domestic politics which involve ethnic Chinese Indonesian. According to one observation, despite the palpable development of Sino-Indonesia relations since the post-Suharto era, which also coincided with China's

⁴⁷⁷ Hoang, Thi Tuan Oanh. *The Evolving Hedging Strategy of Vietnam towards China*. Ph.D. Dissertation, pp.248-249.

growing influence in Southeast Asia, academic materials related to China and Indonesia-China bilateral engagements remain relatively nascent.⁴⁷⁸ The growing interest among Indonesians towards China since the 2000s, according to Indonesian analysts, however, can be attributed to Jakarta's growing recognition that China is now "the biggest game in town" that deserves greater attention while forcing Indonesian policy makers to reinterpret and reapply its "free and active foreign policy."⁴⁷⁹ To this end, it was noted that Indonesia-China relations had improved substantially during the ten years of the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY)'s presidency between 2004 and 2014 which witnessed the signing of the 2005 Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership and the subsequent elevation to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership including a visit by President Xi in October 2013.⁴⁸⁰ In general, it was said that Indonesians had regarded the Chinese government as the "strong and unified one...able to mobilize domestic support [in order] to execute its policy effectively and sustainably."⁴⁸¹ Notwithstanding the fact that China seen as a "undemocratic state

⁴⁷⁸ See, Tjhin, Christine Susanna. "Introduction to Special Focus on Indonesia-China Relations." *The Indonesia Quarterly*, Vol. 44, 2 (2016), 85-91, see 85.

⁴⁷⁹ Almuttaqi, A.Ibrahim and Muhammad Arif. "Regional Implication of Indonesia-China Ambivalent Relations." *The Indonesia Quarterly*, Vol. 44, 2 (2016), 92-108, see 95.

⁴⁸⁰ Lalisang, Yeremia. "Indonesians' Perceptions of China during the SBY Administration: A Preliminary Survey." *The Indonesia Quarterly*, Vol. 44, 2 (2016), 131-165.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

ruled by a communist regime that limited significantly the people's freedom", the Chinese government was not being perceived as having "evil intentions, unlike when China was perceived as Indonesia's enemy during the Suharto regime."⁴⁸² China was instead described as a "pragmatic government, whose ultimate goal was providing welfare for its people" and had adroitly done so through the fusion of an illiberal political system and a semi-liberal market economy. More than that, "maintaining domestic stability and national unity were perceived as even more necessary in order to concentrate more on the country's national economic development."⁴⁸³ One recent large-scale study conducted on 1,620 adult Indonesians also show that more than three-quarters of those polled admire China and view Beijing as an important country for Indonesia, although this was still lower than other major countries such as the United States, Japan and Australia.⁴⁸⁴

Given this backdrop, and following my interviewees with Indonesian scholars, I argue that two key themes feature prominently in the analysis of Indonesia's perceptions towards China. One, the issue of regional/international norms and the extent to which China is attempting to contest these norms for influence, and two, domestic politics that had substantially framed the manner in which ordinary Indonesians perceive China. Hence, the earlier themes of the China Dream, China's

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁴ See Herlijanto, Johannes. "Public Perceptions of China in Indonesia: The Indonesia National Survey." *ISEAS Perspective* no.89. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017.

peaceful rise and China's moral example were alluded to insofar as they correspond with the above two themes. For instance, Indonesian scholars - unlike Vietnamese – generally perceive the China dream as mostly targeted at a Chinese domestic audience so as to generate a stronger sense of nationalism and thus they do not worry that such a dream would come at the direct expense of Indonesia's own national interests.⁴⁸⁵ Indeed, as noted by Dewi Anwar Fortuna, who is the deputy secretary for political affairs, a strong China was what Indonesia hoped to engage, although such a relationship cannot be divorced from “the baggage of history” (this will be further discussed below).⁴⁸⁶ It was also observed that China – as a great power – would naturally also want to play a bigger role in international affairs as witnessed by economic projects like the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).⁴⁸⁷ Unlike Sino-Vietnam relations whereby the similar Communist party structures generated ideological motifs, Indonesia's relations with China were said to be motivated by economic opportunities that Beijing proffered, particularly given Indonesian President Joko Widodo's emphasis on the country's

⁴⁸⁵ Interview with A. Ibrahim Almuttaqi, Habibie Centre, November 14, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia; interview with Iis Gindarsah from Centre for Strategic and International Studies, November 17, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

⁴⁸⁶ Interview with Dewi Anwar Fortuna, October 9, 2017. Singapore.

⁴⁸⁷ Interview with A. Ibrahim Almuttaqi, Habibie Centre, November 14, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia

economic growth.⁴⁸⁸ At the same time, China's growing influence in the region, and its territorial differences with Indonesia over the Natuna islands continue to weigh heavily in the minds of Indonesian Chinese watchers as they interpret China's foreign policy actions in and around Southeast Asia.⁴⁸⁹ In the following, I will examine how China's national image, which is interwoven with Beijing's contestation of regional/international norms as well as domestic politics within Indonesia, have resulted in considerable ambiguity towards the overall impression that Indonesian scholars have towards China.

I) A contestation over regional order and norms

To be certain, Indonesian scholars I spoke to do not think that China would engage in open conflict as such an outcome would be disastrous for China. At the same time, they do nonetheless express caution in taking Chinese pronouncements concerning its goodwill and benign intentions at face value. According to Riefqi Muna,

⁴⁸⁸ Wong, Catherine. Indonesian leader Widodo's emphasis on development boosts China ties. *South China Morning Post*, July 6, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2004622/indonesian-leader-widodos-emphasis-development-boosts> (retrieved November 30, 2017).

⁴⁸⁹ For scholarly discussions of Indonesia's Natuna island disputes with China, see Johnson, Douglas. "Drawn into the Fray: Indonesia's Natuna Islands Meet China's Long Gaze South." *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 24, no. 3 (1997): 153-61; Supriyanto, Ristian. "Out of Its Comfort Zone: Indonesia and the South China Sea." *Asia Policy*, no. 21 (2016): 21-28.

a Chinese specialist at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, China's rapid rise to global prominence has resulted in difficulties in Beijing coming to grips in relation to global norms and values. This is seen most vividly in China's South China Sea disputes whereby it was said that "China does not care about international law" given its highly controversial utilization of the nine-dashed-line to demarcate its SCS territorial rights.⁴⁹⁰ As Muna further puts it, "If China wants to show the world that it is a responsible power that can be trusted, then it needs to follow and play by international law. China must prove to the world that its rise is peaceful, otherwise this notion of peaceful rise is problematic and will create fear among its neighbors. How China communicates and interacts with countries around them will be a test."⁴⁹¹

Likewise, A. Ibrahim Almuttaqi, who heads the ASEAN Studies Programme at the Habibie Centre, the notion of China's peaceful rise is not inherently self-evident in the years since President Xi took office:

"We do not hear of many Chinese scholars and leaders talking about peaceful rise these days. This is because China has already risen. It talks about peaceful rise because it needs to reassure the region. Do we believe it? We want to believe that what China says is true, but Indonesia cannot construct a foreign policy simply on this belief alone. We need to have as many friends as possible."⁴⁹²

⁴⁹⁰ Interview on November 20, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹² Interview on November 14, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

From the above views, Indonesia scholars perceive China's diplomatic moves as being fundamentally at odds with the norms and practices of Southeast Asia countries. While this does not mean the inevitability of conflict, it does suggest that China's actions are interpreted as representing a challenge to the long term stability of the region. For instance, it is argued that ASEAN member states, in their various intramural dealings, prefer an approach which is consensus-seeking and where possible, non-confrontational.⁴⁹³ Whatever the limitations and problems in such an approach, Indonesian scholars perceive China as mounting a challenge towards the security architecture of the region, on evidence of Beijing's growing initiatives that parallel existing regional arrangements in which Western countries play substantial role.⁴⁹⁴ According to Iis Gindarsah, a military analyst at the Centre of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) pointed out that Chinese initiatives – in the long run – were conceptualized with the goal of “entrenching Chinese centrality.”⁴⁹⁵ Notwithstanding the fact that every country has a vision of regional order, Indonesia's

⁴⁹³ Haacke, Jurgen, and Morada, Noel M. *Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific: The ASEAN Regional Forum*. London: Routledge, 2010; Ba, Alice. "Institutional Divergence and Convergence in the Asia-Pacific? ASEAN in Practice and in Theory." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 27, no. 2 (2014): 295-318.

⁴⁹⁴ See Chaturvedy, Rajeev, R. "The Beijing Xiangshan Forum: Competition or co-existence?" *RSIS Commentaries*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-beijing-xiangshan-forum-competition-or-co-existence/#.XEGDoa17Gu4> (retrieved January 18, 2019).

⁴⁹⁵ Interview on November 17, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

preference, it was shared, is to preserve ASEAN centrality and the maintenance of the U.S. “hub-and-spokes” system.⁴⁹⁶ In this respect, China’s vision of its desired regional order was seen to be fundamentally at odds with Indonesia’s vision, which was said to be “all inclusive” unlike Beijing’s, which excludes the United States.⁴⁹⁷ To this end, China’s stalling on the discussions over the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea disputes was also seen as a means of “buying time until its influence is such that these disputes would no longer be relevant.”⁴⁹⁸

Another scholar Rene Pattiradjawane captures the situation more starkly by describing China as a “lonely superpower” and argued that Beijing’s actions had “created problems everywhere.”⁴⁹⁹ In his view, China was acting like the West (which it frequently criticizes) and that in the territorial disputes, it had attempted to “Balkanize ASEAN” through challenging the “comradeship” among ASEAN member states. Furthermore, China’s dogmatic insistence on being a “non-aligned superpower” had also limited Beijing’s ability to make friends with smaller countries and to provide genuine global leadership. As put, “no superpower can solve all the world problems on their own. To be a superpower means that you need allies all over the world. If

⁴⁹⁶ See also, Goh, Evelyn. "The ASEAN Regional Forum in United States East Asian Strategy." *The Pacific Review* 17, no. 1 (2004): 47-69; Simon, Sheldon. "US-Southeast Asia Relations: ASEAN Centrality?" *Comparative Connections* 18, no. 1 (2016): 45-54.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁹ Interview on November 20, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

China insists on being non-aligned, then it would not be able to lay claim to global leadership.”⁵⁰⁰

To be certain, the issue of what a Chinese vision of world order portends for the conduct of international relations has been the subject of intense debate in both academic scholarship and public discourse.⁵⁰¹ As I had earlier alluded to in chapter two, the notion of Tianxia represents one possible way of thinking about Chinese world order and its relationship with international and regional norms. Yet, as highlighted by Pattiradjawane, China’s biggest problem lies in the inherent inability for its rules to be universalized, and consequently, it was unable to obtain the necessary “buy-in” from other countries in terms of following its lead. Furthermore, as argued by some scholars, there exists in China’s worldview an “unspoken Sinocentrism in the guise of critiquing Euro-American-centrism. The struggle over which version of universalism is more productive is a familiar story of postcolonial resentment.”⁵⁰² Nevertheless, through my interviews with Indonesian scholars, on present evidence, Chinese

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰¹ See for instance, Wang, Ban, ed. *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017; Wang, Fei-Ling. *The China Order : Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017.

⁵⁰² Chishen Chang and Kuan-Hsing Chen. “Tracking Tianxia: On Intellectual Self-Positioning”, in Wang, Ban, ed. *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017, pp.267-319, see 284;

alternatives are perceived to be highly problematic. For instance, Ibrahim Almuttaqi expressed doubt towards the Chinese model of global leadership, despite the fact that the Chinese were more “flexible” in their working style:

“In terms for investments, the Chinese are quite flexible compared to the Japanese and Americans. It is easier to initiate projects with the Chinese, for instance, the Jakarta-Bandung high speed railway...however at the end of the day, we will have to face the reality of business interests. The Chinese promise a lot, but can they deliver?”⁵⁰³

To this end, the inherent problems behind Chinese attempts to be a global leader were begrudged, but at the same time, due to the perceived “mess” in U.S. domestic politics, countries would have “not much of an option” but to acknowledge a larger Chinese role in international affairs.⁵⁰⁴ At the same time, it was said that there was great uncertainty about how Chinese leadership and influence would transpire in the region given that it was seen to be previously trying to divide ASEAN member states. Echoing Vietnamese views, it was also mentioned that while “China says a lot of good things, it needs more actions to back up its words.”⁵⁰⁵

II) Domestic Politics and the ethnic Chinese factor

The issue of the ethnic Chinese factor has presented a recurring problem for Indonesia, given the history of tensions between Indonesian Chinese and the majority

⁵⁰³ Interview on November 14, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Muslim population in the country.⁵⁰⁶ This was most vividly seen during the final days of the Suharto in the late 90s whereby anti-Chinese riots resulted in violent clashes between indigenous Indonesians and Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent. Similar racial tensions were revived more recently when the ethnic Chinese governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (who is also a Christian) was forced to step down and was also subsequently imprisoned as a result of him being accused of making a blasphemous speech against Islam in September 2016.⁵⁰⁷ In the words of Leo Suryadinata, a scholar of diaspora Chinese studies, the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia represents “an unresolved dilemma” that has complicated the theatre of Indonesian domestic politics. Reflecting on the B.J.Habibie’s administration between 1998 and 1999 after the fall of Suharto, Suryadinata observes:

“[Habibie] is under pressure to improve the Indonesian economy and he needs the full-cooperation of the ethnic Chinese. Besides the economic importance of this community, he must also take into account pressure from indigenous Indonesians in human rights abuses against the Chinese. However, once the

⁵⁰⁶ For further studies, see Suryadinata, Leo. *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008; Tan, Eugene K. B. "From Sojourners to Citizens: Managing the Ethnic Chinese Minority in Indonesia and Malaysia." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 6 (2001): 949-78.

⁵⁰⁷ Wijaya, Callistasia Anggun. “Ahok guilty of blasphemy, sentenced to two years.” *The Jakarta Post*, May 9, 2017.
<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/05/09/ahok-guilty-of-blasphemy-sentenced-to-two-years.html> (retrieved December 7, 2017).

situation has stabilized, he will face growing pressure from *pribumi* [native Indonesians] for a larger economic stake. His ability to address both issues will be an important determinant of whether or not he can control Indonesia's politics in the lead-up to new general elections.”⁵⁰⁸

Two decades on, racial dynamics between ethnic Chinese and native Indonesians continue to exert a not insignificant force in Indonesia-China relations, and have been particularly salient in the realm of domestic politics. Part of this, as Rene Pattiradjawane notes, was due to the economic disparity between the ethnic Chinese and native Indonesians, in which the former was perceived to be wealthier and benefitting at the expense of the latter.⁵⁰⁹ According to Rizal Sukma, who is the Indonesian ambassador to the United Kingdom, “there is still lingering worry that the Indonesian Chinese are loyal to the mainland and that the ethnic Chinese are supportive of China.”⁵¹⁰ Tobias Basuki, who has previously conducted research into Indonesian ‘Millennials’⁵¹¹ (those born in the mid-90s to early 2000s) told me that

⁵⁰⁸ Suryadinata, Leo. *Chinese and Nation-Building in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2004, p.141.

⁵⁰⁹ Interview on November 20, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia. According to one study, of the top 100 top private enterprises in Indonesia in 1995, only 23 were owned by indigenous Indonesians, and the 8 largest companies were all solely owned by ethnic Chinese. “100 Konglomerat Terkaya Indonesia” [100 Richest Conglomerates in Indonesia]. *Eksekutif* no. 194, August (1995), pp.36-37.

⁵¹⁰ Personal interview, February 28, 2017, London, United Kingdom.

⁵¹¹ “Ada Apa dengan Milenial? Orientasi Sosial, Ekonomi dan Politik” [What is with

Islamist groups in Indonesia had a tendency to vilify China as the problem and that the Chinese were frequently used as a “bogeyman” for purposes of domestic politics. For instance, the photograph of tourism minister Mari Elka Pangestu (who is an ethnic Chinese) posing in a Huawei business venture in Indonesia had led to speculation that 10 million illegal Chinese workers would be brought into Jakarta, thus highlighting the ongoing debate whether such Chinese fears were being manufactured or reflected the realities on the ground.⁵¹² Furthermore, it was also observed that Indonesians working in infrastructure building had a more negative disposition towards China, given the accusation among opposition politicians that President Jokowi pro-business approach were resulting in the “selling of Indonesia’s assets to China.”⁵¹³ Also Iis Gindarsah from the CSIS highlighted the view that the presence of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia meant that international issues would be inevitably framed in domestic terms. “If China becomes assertive in the South China Sea, that will affect the perception of native Indonesians towards the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. Whenever we talk about China in Indonesia, it is somehow being associated with communism and the ethnic Chinese.”⁵¹⁴

the Millennial? Social, Economic and Political Orientation]. *Rilis dan Konferensi Pers “Survei Nasional CSIS 2017”* [Release and Press Conference “National Survey CSIS 2017]. Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2017.

⁵¹² Interview on November 16, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁴ Interview on November 17, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Notwithstanding the above, all of the respondents I spoke with shared the view that the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia identified themselves primarily as Indonesian citizens and not with China.⁵¹⁵ At the same time, Chinese economic investments in Indonesia has also resulted in Beijing being unwittingly drawn into the orbit of Indonesia's domestic politics – even if it does not want to. According to Dewi Anwar Fortuna, while Indonesia does not view China as being a colonial power (unlike the Dutch, British or the United States), Beijing nevertheless was perceived as being able to intervene in local politics if it needed to. This was because many Chinese companies working in Indonesia preferred to bring in their own workers instead of hiring from the local population thus creating mistrust and jealousy among the local population. In this respect, Indonesia's economic vulnerability was perceived as a potential area whereby the Chinese could exploit in extending its influence within the domestic sphere.⁵¹⁶

Although it was pointed out that China's anti-corruption had received considerable admiration among Indonesian leaders, overall Indonesian scholars I spoke to had reservations about Chinese global leadership, and the extent to which its leadership was perceived as being beneficial to the wider world. Rizal Sukma shares the view that being a major power, China would have to assume a heavier

⁵¹⁵ As an illustration, it was shared that during the 1998 economic crisis, many wealthy Indonesian Chinese preferred to deposit their money in Singapore, rather than in China. This lack of cultural affinity towards China, despite ethnic similarities will be further discussed in the next chapter.

⁵¹⁶ Interview on October 9, 2017. Singapore.

responsibility, but it was unlikely to do so, except in an incremental way, for instance in peace-keeping operations and in climate change. This was unlike the United States following the second World War in which it assumed “a much heavier burden of the reconstruction of the world.”⁵¹⁷ Furthermore, it was also perceived that China was highly sensitive to external criticism, thus rendering international cooperation difficult and further augmenting the view that Beijing was prepared to work with the international community only on its own terms. For instance, it was recounted that “when working with Chinese academia, the Chinese would insist that negative stuff written about them being taken out. This is different from the United States which is more willing to accept negative views written about it. The Chinese are more dominating and micro-managing thus compromising academic freedom.”⁵¹⁸ When I pointed out that the United States could also resort to “double standards” especially when its own national interests are concerned, the reply was that “the U.S. sets high standards and has low achievements, but China sets low standards, and has even lower achievements...how do you expect us to follow its lead?”⁵¹⁹

Last but not least, it was also highlighted that China’s so-called non-interference into domestic politics of the countries, particularly in the developing world, which it renders economic assistance to is not entirely consistent with what is

⁵¹⁷ Personal interview, February 28, 2017, London, United Kingdom

⁵¹⁸ Interview with Tobias Basuki, CSIS researcher, November 16, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*

happening.⁵²⁰ Riefqi Muna observes that “China has other conditions which it does not spell out in its economic relations” which include the right to “[exploit] these countries for natural resources.” In this respect, Muna expressed the view that “we would have to wait and see what happens in the long run” to ascertain the results behind such a strategy. Also, Muna shared the view that despite China’s insistence that it would be inclusive and respectful to other countries, it was Beijing – and not smaller countries – that would write the “rules of engagement”, and consequently, possessed the authority with which to push its preferences concerning the norms of international order.⁵²¹

From the above evidence, I argue that notwithstanding Indonesia’s strong economic imperative to cultivate good relations with China, there exists deeper feelings of animosity and suspicion behind Beijing’s long-term objectives towards the Southeast Asia region. Indeed, Jakarta’s preoccupation with the overall balance of

⁵²⁰ For studies into China’s relations with countries in the global South, see Alden, Chris, and Daniel Large. "China's Exceptionalism and the Challenges of Delivering Difference in Africa." *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 68 (2011): 21-38; Alden, Chris, and Christopher R Hughes. "Harmony and Discord in China's Africa Strategy: Some Implications for Foreign Policy." *The China Quarterly* 199, no. 199 (2009): 563-84. For a discussion of China’s non-interference approach, see Pan, Zhongqi, and Ping Du. "The Logic of Contingency in China’s Insistence on the Non-interference Principle." *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 8, no. 4 (2015): 597-615.

⁵²¹ Interview on November 20, 2017, Jakarta, Indonesia.

power within the region (given its disposition in seeing itself as a leader-of-sorts in ASEAN) means that it sees China's growing influence as a catalyst for future conflict. Furthermore, ethnic issues would also further complicate Sino-Indonesian ties, particularly if Beijing seeks to impose some form of cultural hegemony over ethnic Chinese Indonesians. Relating to Chinese exceptionalism, Indonesians do not see China as all that different from others, particular in geopolitical matters. To this end, Beijing's claims to uniqueness stem less from what it stands for than what it stands against. Speaking to Indonesian respondents, it would seem that while many of them perceive China's rise as mitigating Western hegemony in the region, at the same time, Jakarta's fundamental insistence that its foreign policy be "free and active" (bebas-aktif) means that it sees any attempts by bigger countries to constrain its decision-making as being inherently bad.⁵²²

Conclusion

From the above study, China – on present evidence – has been unable to translate its regional influence and political worldview into achieving a favorable image among two of its most important Southeast Asia neighbors. According to my study, China was also seen to be attempting to modify – though not entirely revise – the rules of Asian politics to suit its needs without taking sufficiently into account specific

⁵²² Sukma, Rizal. "The Evolution of Indonesia's Foreign Policy: An Indonesian View." *Asian Survey* 35, no. 3 (1995): 304-15.

national interests of other ASEAN states. To this end, all my respondents observed that it would *not* be in China's interests to be a revisionist power as by doing so, it would undercut China's own national interests. At the same time, Beijing is perceived to be seeking to make changes to the rules of the regional, even international order so as to further its political influence. Furthermore, its assertive rhetoric at international and multilateral forums have resulted in a negative impression concerning the type of leadership it purports to undertake. Indeed, the South China Sea tensions have led both Vietnam and Indonesia to strengthen their own militaries in anticipation of further Chinese aggression and the need to rely on the United States to limit China's territorial appetite. While ASEAN states have, for the most part, are prepared to accept China's criticism of the West for interfering in regional issues (which were seen to be mostly for domestic consumption), they are not prepared to bandwagon along with China in propagating an "Asia for Asians" sphere in limiting the role of the United States and other Western allies.

The need to maintain regional stability also features prominently in the priorities of both Indonesia and Vietnam. Hence, diplomatic maneuvers by China to influence ASEAN's decision-making processes, vis-à-vis countries like Laos and Cambodia, were seen as unduly infringing on ASEAN's political prerogatives and driving a wedge between ASEAN states. Moreover, such actions were seen as antithetical to the promotion of Chinese interests in Asia, as they reflected Chinese impatience and the lack of respect towards the national interests of smaller ASEAN states. As observed by Goh, ASEAN states are not simply passive recipients of the foreign policy decisions of major powers; through the practice of "omni-enmeshment" and via a complex balance of influence, they have actively tried to influence the shape of the regional

order in order to arrive at an “interim power distribution outcome”, which is a hierarchical regional order that retains the United States' dominant superpower position while incorporating China in a regional great power position just below that of the United States.⁵²³

Finally, Indonesian and Vietnamese respondents expressed considerable ambivalence towards the notion of Chinese exceptionalism, and whether China's claims of being “good” and “different” from the West was indeed possible, in practice. Notwithstanding China's claims to cultural affinity with Asian states and the promotion of its claimed unique approach to international relations, the *actions* of China in the South China Sea have dimmed the credibility of Chinese rhetoric, particularly when core national interests are at stake. Its political worldview was also seen to be highly problematic as it lacked broader appeal. From this we can say that China has not been successful in persuading other countries, be it that it is inherently peaceful or that its claim to leadership would be beneficial to the region. In this respect, China was seen as “not being any different” from other powerful nations and that it would necessarily want to extend its sphere of influence in East Asia, while primarily through economic means but not ruling out the possibility of military might when territorial matters were concerned. To this end, ASEAN states welcome the former but reject the latter. An uneasy relationship with China remains the likely outcome in the foreseeable future.

⁵²³ Goh, Evelyn. "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies." *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2008): 113-57.

Chapter 7

Deciphering the Dragon: Singapore's relations and response to the rise of China

In my earlier chapters, I attempted to provide a sketch of how Chinese political worldview and conceptions of Chinese uniqueness and exceptionalism were being fleshed out in its international relations theories (Chapter 2), in the articulation of national identity (Chapter 3) as well as the construction of its national image as being different from the West (Chapter 4). In Chapter 5, I looked at the discourse surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative and identified some key themes salient to China's view of global order while in chapter 6, I examined how China's national image is in turn being perceived by its neighbors (Vietnam and Indonesia) and analyzed the extent to which China's professed interests are shared by those countries. Building from these ideas, I will attempt to examine in this chapter the extent to which a Chinese worldview concerning domestic governance and international order is being shared by the overseas Chinese and the exceptionalism discourse surrounding it. More specifically, I will look at the case of Singapore, a city-state whose majority population is ethnic Chinese, and whose approach to governance has been closely studied by Chinese leaders in the past.⁵²⁴ Unlike Hong Kong and Macau which comes under Beijing's rule,

⁵²⁴ The Singapore government broadly divides its population into four main ethnic categories: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others. According to the 2017 population statistics, 74.3 per cent of residents in Singapore are Chinese.

<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document->

and Taiwan which China claim sovereignty over, Singapore's sovereignty as a nation state – since its independence from Malaysia in 1965 – has never been questioned by Beijing (at least publicly) despite the substantial presence of ethnic Chinese community. In recent times however, Singapore's relations with China have undergone some turbulence, given its strong support for American presence in the region and its support of the use of international law to resolve territorial disputes, both of which run against Beijing's preferences.⁵²⁵ This was most vividly magnified in November 2016 when nine Singapore military vehicles were being impounded in Hong Kong enroute to Singapore following overseas training in Taiwan.⁵²⁶ According to

[library/publications/publications_and_papers/population_and_population_structure/population2017.pdf](#) (retrieved Jan 3, 2018).

For a more detailed exposition of Singapore-China relations following Beijing's opening up, see Ho, Benjamin. "Learning from Lee: Lessons in Governance for the Middle Kingdom from the Little Red Dot." *East Asia : An International Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2016): 133-56.

⁵²⁵ Tai, Michael. Singapore's China Conundrum. *The Diplomat*, December 13, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/singapores-china-conundrum/> (retrieved Jan 3, 2018); For a backdrop of Singapore's foreign policy vis-à-vis China, see Tan, See Seng. "Faced with the Dragon: Perils and Prospects in Singapore's Ambivalent Relationship with China." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5, no. 3 (2012): 245-65.

⁵²⁶ See Boey, David. "China has always kept mum on Singapore's defence ties with Taipei, so why is it complaining now?" *South China Morning Post*, November 28,

some observers, the conditions that underpinned the relationship both countries have changed substantially over the past decade (given China's rise) and that Beijing's view on key security and strategic issues remain fundamentally at odds with Singapore's position.⁵²⁷ At the same time, the fact that Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had made two visits to China within a short period of time (September 2017 and April 2018), including meeting President Xi on both instances also suggest that relations between both countries have improved since late 2016, and that Singapore had made strategic changes in its foreign policy position to accommodate China's preferences.⁵²⁸

2016, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2049803/china-has-always-kept-mum-singapores-defence-ties-taipei-so> (retrieved Jan 3, 2018).

⁵²⁷ Interviews with Chinese scholars in Beijing and Guangzhou, 2017 and 2018; for a recent analysis of China's perceptions of Singapore, see Zhang, Feng. "Assessing China's attitudes towards Singapore." *China: An International Journal* 15 (3), August 2017: 1-25.

⁵²⁸ Wang, Xiangwei. "China's welcome for Singapore PM may signal a new approach to smaller states." *South China Morning Post*, September 23, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/2112468/chinas-welcome-singapore-pm-may-signal-new-approach-smaller-states> (retrieved April 12, 2018); Chan, Irene. "Singapore-China relations and the art of communication." *Channelnewsasia*, 27 September 2017, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/commentary-singapore-china-relations-and-the-art-of-9254194> (retrieved April 12, 2018).

In this chapter, I will examine Singapore's perspective towards China and how China's international relations' behavior is being understood and interpreted by Singaporean observers and the ongoing debates that characterize Singapore's perspectives towards China.⁵²⁹ This is important to our study of Chinese exceptionalism for the following reasons. Firstly if a Chinese global order is said to be good and different (from the West), then one would expect this to be reflected in Singapore's perspective towards China, particularly if Beijing is being associated with a benevolent form of global leadership. As a city-state whose national interests are closely intertwined with those of the global community, Singapore is acutely sensitive (and vulnerable) to international geopolitical moods and shifts in the balance of power.⁵³⁰ Indeed, its founding leader Lee Kuan Yew was seen as an expert observer of

⁵²⁹ It must be said that the bulk of these scholarly observations are framed not at China per se, but insofar as what China's rise portends for the world, and more specifically what it means for Singapore. Nevertheless as my subsequent analysis will show, these ruminations and writings provide us with clues as to how Chinese exceptionalism is being understood and the existence of a spectrum of views towards China as being good and different compared to the West.

⁵³⁰ For an indepth discussion of Singapore's foreign policy, see, Leifer, Michael. *Singapore's Foreign Policy : Coping with Vulnerability*. London: Routledge, 2000; Ganesan, N. *Realism and Interdependence in Singapore's Foreign Policy*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

China, and his views were frequently sought after by many American leaders.⁵³¹ From this, we might say that despite Singapore's small size, its reading of international politics remain accurate especially given national interests are at stake.

Secondly, given Singapore's racial Chinese majority composition, coupled with Chinese leaders frequent utilization of racial nationalism themes to muster support for its political objectives⁵³², the city-state would represent the ideal platform with which to assess the extent of Chinese exceptionalism claims, particularly to which identifies with the Chinese state and its purported worldview. For instance, when Chinese defence minister General Chang Wanquan visited Singapore in February 2018, he had commented that coming to Singapore, is not like going away, but visiting good friends in the *same town* (italics mine).⁵³³ Likewise, Shanghai Party chief Li Qiang during a visit by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in April 2018 said in an interview that "the Chinese community accounts for about 70 per cent of the total

⁵³¹ See, Allison, Graham T, Blackwill, Robert D, and Wyne, Ali. *Lee Kuan Yew : The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012.

⁵³² For a recent study of how this is played out, see Carrico, Kevin. *The Great Han Race: Race, Nationalism and Tradition in China Today*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017.

⁵³³ "Singapore and China armies to step up cooperation." *Channelnewsasia*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-and-china-armies-to-step-up-defence-cooperation-9929100> (retrieved April 16, 2018);

population of Singapore...we must appeal to the emotional affinity among the people.”⁵³⁴ These statements suggest that in the minds of Chinese leaders, Singapore –by virtue of its demographic make-up – ought to be favorably predisposed to China in its foreign relations and playing a role as a bridge between China and other countries (particularly those in the West).⁵³⁵

Thirdly, given that Singapore’s model to domestic governance has frequently been touted as an inspiration for China’s own governance, we might argue that China’s ability to pattern itself after Singapore in its governance – both domestically and internationally – would be an indicator of its global influence, or lack of thereof.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁴ Sim, Fann. “Singapore can help Shanghai companies expand as part of Belt and Road Initiative, says PM Lee.” *Channelnewsasia*, April 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-can-help-shanghai-companies-expand-as-part-of-belt-and-10128378> (retrieved April 16, 2018).

⁵³⁵ The shared race/ethnicity/civilization narrative is frequently being touted in Sino-Singapore relations. The Chinese state and its relations with the overseas diaspora is an increasing area of concern among many Western countries, including Singapore. This is however beyond the scope of the chapter to analyze. For a more comprehensive study, see, To, James Jiann Hua. *Qiaowu: Extra-territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese*. Leiden: Brill, 2014.

⁵³⁶ For studies into China’s learning from Singapore, see Ortmann, Stephan, and Mark R. Thompson. "China's Obsession with Singapore: Learning Authoritarian Modernity." *The Pacific Review* 27, no. 3(2014):433-455 ; Ho, Benjamin. "Learning

Given this historical backdrop of Singapore's contribution to China's development, we can say that Singapore represents a rich repository of perspectives towards China, and that a number of its top minds and influential institutions are keen observers of China's political developments and its international relations.⁵³⁷

In the following, I will examine the discourse surrounding Singapore's perspective and its response to China's global influence, in particular regarding Beijing's geopolitical actions within the Asia-Pacific region, in which Singapore is considerably attuned towards. To do so, I look at the ideas promulgated by three Singaporean thought leaders, whose reading and appraisal of China's international relations represent existing elite views in Singapore towards Beijing. They are namely, Bilahari Kausikan, Kishore Mahbubani and Wang Gungwu. Both Kausikan and Mahbubani have had long careers in the Singapore foreign service and following their retirements, have continued to actively contribute their views to aspects of Singapore's foreign policy, including their thoughts on Singapore's political relations with Beijing. Similarly, Wang Gungwu – a trained historian – had led the Singapore-based East Asia Institute between 2007 and 2018 which specializes in the study of contemporary China and East Asia. These views will also be supplemented by interview responses of members in a "Singapore China Studies Group" (which I am part of), which comprise of Singaporean academics and business leaders who are involved in various fields of

from Lee: Lessons in Governance for the Middle Kingdom from the Little Red Dot." *East Asia : An International Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2016): 133-56.

⁵³⁷ The author's own China Programme at the Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies is a case in point.

China-related studies as well as observations obtained from senior policy-makers, including several government leaders that I had spoken with.

The rest of the chapter will proceed as follows. I will first provide a brief overview of Singapore's political relationship with China following the commencement of diplomatic relations in 1990, focusing particularly on key economic and security initiatives that have been undertaken by the Singapore government in the fostering of bilateral relations with Beijing. I will then go on to analyze in turn the ideas put forth by Kausikan, Mahbubani and Wang, whose ideas I contend represent the existing political discourse and perspectives in Singapore towards China. In this respect, I propose that Singapore's position(s) towards China can be broadly divided into three schools, paralleling the theories of mainstream international relations. One, the realist position (represented by Kausikan) which sees the global ascension of China as a challenge to existing international system and its associated norms; two, the economic institutionalism view (as Mahbubani advocates) which perceive a present shift of global power away from the West to the East, and one in which Chinese economic institutions are providing Beijing with greater say and share of international political influence; and three, the constructivist-ideational view (as proposed by Wang) which privilege the contribution of ideas brought about by history, culture and social patterns which consequently contribute to how states perceive their national identities and international relations. I will argue that at the crux of Singapore's perspective(s) towards China is a contestation over these three schools of thought as well as the extent to which Singapore perceives China as being exceptional, that is, being different and good. While the realist position sees China as undifferentiated and a negative influence to the world, the economic institutionalism position is highly

persuaded by China’s economic might and is more optimistic towards Beijing’s ambitions to be a global power. The constructivist-ideational position however, while seeking to celebrate the uniqueness of China as a global power, is agnostic about whether China represents a force for global good and utilizes a comparative perspective in attempting to flesh out the differences between China and the West. Taken together, I contend that each of these three schools in their appraisal of whether China is exceptional or otherwise, have different conclusions and each of these conclusions reflect an ongoing debate within Singapore about how best to engage with China (see table 1). I conclude by arguing that Singapore’s perceptions of China and China’s role in the world is highly ambiguous, paralleling historical relations between both countries and across their leadership administrations. A more basic problem, I suggest, is due to China’s political system and the lack of trust it generates among Singapore’s leaders towards Beijing.

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

(TABLE 1)

Engaging China: the security dimension

While official relations between Singapore and China only began in 1990, unofficial interactions between both countries in fact go back more than a decade since Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's maiden trip to China in May 1976 and subsequently Deng Xiaoping visit to Singapore in November 1978. Nevertheless, the geopolitics, Singapore's dominant Chinese population and the prevailing Cold War environment meant that Singapore in the 1980s remained careful in establishing diplomatic ties with China.⁵³⁸ Following the end of the Cold War, among Singapore's strategic priorities was in managing China's rise as a peaceful great power. Like other Asian nations, Singapore believed that the economic reforms brought about by Deng would make China to become the most important regional great power, and hence the challenge to ensure that Beijing would in turn prosper and stabilize – rather than threaten and disrupt – East Asia in the process.⁵³⁹

Regionally, it strongly supported ASEAN's engagement of China, first by inviting it to become a consultative partner in 1991, and consequently a full dialogue

⁵³⁸ For analysis of Sino-Singapore ties before the 1990s, see, Lee, Lai To, "China's changing attitudes towards Singapore, 1965–75", in Wu Teh-yao, ed., *Political and Social Change in Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975, pp. 171–202; Lee, Lai To, 'Sino–Singaporean relations in the 1970s', in Lee Ngok and Leung Chi-keung, eds, *China: Development and Challenge*, Volume II. Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1979, pp. 265–286.

⁵³⁹ See Goh, Evelyn and Chua, Daniel. *Singapore Chronicles: Diplomacy*. Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2015, pp.49-51.

partner in 1996. Internationally, Singapore leaders attempted to influence the crucial debate about whether to engage or contain China. As observed, Singapore was ASEAN's "most strenuous advocate of engagement" and its leaders argued that a containment policy towards China (as with the Soviet Union) would create a self-fulfilling prophecy, that is, "to fuel Chinese paranoia and hostility and strengthen the hardliners among China's leaders who believed that the West wanted to encircle and weaken China."⁵⁴⁰ In this respect, Singapore leaders believed that as China prospered and its stake in the global economy grew, its interests in upholding the norms of international practices would also increase. As its then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong puts it, "by giving China space and time, the world will accelerate...China's ability and willingness to play by global rules."⁵⁴¹

Nevertheless, given the pervasiveness of realist thinking among Singapore's leaders (this will be further discussed later in the chapter), the possibility that China might well then choose to throw its weight around was also anticipated, particularly given sovereignty disputes in the region.⁵⁴² That said, the United States' ongoing

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.49-50.

⁵⁴¹ "Give China time to integrate – PM", *The Straits Times*, 14 May 1995 [Factiva].

⁵⁴² Besides China's South China Sea disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines, the Taiwan issue also loomed large back then. Between 1995 and 1996, China protested Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui visit to the US by conducting military exercises and test-firing missiles across the Taiwan Straits. The US responded by moving two aircraft carrier groups into the area, thus causing Singapore

presence in East Asia provided Singapore with the assurance and the ultimate deterrent to potential Chinese aggression, thus enabling Singapore leaders to continue to reiterate their support for engaging Beijing. Indeed, Lee Kuan Yew termed this line of reasoning the “fall-back position should China not play in accordance with the rules as a good global citizen.”⁵⁴³ At the same time, the need to diversify its sources of security assurance without depending solely on the US prompted Singapore to embark on building multilateral regional institutions, thus generating new conduits of diplomacy that would in turn promote multilateral and institutional cooperation between the great powers themselves, and consequently stabilizing their relationships with smaller countries in the region.⁵⁴⁴

With the above objectives in mind, Singapore was instrumental in setting up the region’s first annual security dialogue, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, in

considerable anxiety as to whether it would be forced to choose between China or the US.

⁵⁴³ Lee, Kuan Yew. “How the United States Should Engage Asia in the Post-Cold War period.” *Acceptance speech on receiving the Architect of the New Century Award*, Nixon Centre, Washington, DC, 13 November 1996.

⁵⁴⁴ For discussions on ASEAN’s relations with major powers, see Ganesan, N. “ASEAN’s Relations with Major External Powers.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 22, no. 2 (2000): 258-78; Yoshimatsu, Hidetaka. “ASEAN and Evolving Power Relations in East Asia: Strategies and Constraints.” *Contemporary Politics* 18, no. 4 (2012): 400-15; Katsumata, Hiro. “What Explains ASEAN’s Leadership in East Asian Community Building?” *Pacific Affairs* 87, no. 2 (2014): 247-64;

which the leadership and “centrality” of ASEAN was stressed in the overall conceptualization of the forum.⁵⁴⁵ In 1997, the ASEAN Plus Three dialogues and summit were launched which involved the Southeast Asian countries, China, Japan and South Korea for economic cooperation. Another leaders’ meeting, the East Asia Summit was also inaugurated in 2005 which involves ASEAN Plus Three members, the US, India, Australia, New Zealand and Russia in strategic dialogue and cooperation. From 2010, ASEAN also included these eight countries in a biennial defence dialogue, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus.

According to Shunmugam Jayakumar, who was Singapore’s foreign minister between 1994 and 2004, these efforts in building regional security institutions were seen to help create “political discipline in the way regional countries conduct their relationships” and maintain a “predictable pattern of political relationships” by building

⁵⁴⁵ The ARF presently consists of 27 member countries, namely, the 10 ASEAN member states (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Burma, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam), the 10 ASEAN dialogue partners (Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States), one ASEAN observer (Papua New Guinea), as well as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Timor-Leste, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Information obtained from, <http://dfat.gov.au/international-relations/regional-architecture/Pages/asean-regional-forum-arf.aspx> (April 21, 2018).

confidence and trust especially among the major powers.⁵⁴⁶ To this end, these regional multilateral institutions serve three functions. First, they help to maintain ASEAN's voice in regional affairs by establishing the Association in the "driver's seat" for wider regional cooperation. Second, they provide a means to "socialize" China into regional cooperation and rules, while keeping the US politically and economically engaged in the region. Third, by enmeshing the major powers within the region, ASEAN diversifies the sources of Southeast Asia's strategic and economic stability. For instance, the strategic imperative for deeper engagement with India was both to "supplement China's role...due to its growing economic and military strength" and also because "Singapore needed to find a counterbalance to regional heavyweights such as China and Japan" in case of a US drawdown.⁵⁴⁷ The above suggest that Singapore, notwithstanding its growing engagement of China, remain cautious about Beijing's long term geopolitical intentions, and thus the need to diversify its security ties so as to protect and preserve its independence amidst the growing influence of China in Asia (this will be further discussed in the chapter).

Engaging China: The economic dimension

As a nation that is highly dependent on trade for its economic well-being, Singapore used trade and trade agreements intensively as strategic tools to develop regionalism and diversify relations with multiple economic powerhouses after

⁵⁴⁶ Jayakumar, S. *Diplomacy: A Singapore Experience*. Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2011, p.82,

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.90.

1990.⁵⁴⁸ In this respect, the opening up of Chinese markets to foreign investment was a boon to Singapore as it took advantage of the new economic opportunities proffered. In 1994, then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Chinese Vice President Li Lanqing inked an agreement to develop an industrial park in Suzhou. Following the formation of a Joint Council of Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) in 2003, which institutionalized ties between both countries at the highest levels of government, further projects were birthed, such as the Tianjin Eco-City in 2007, the Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City in 2016 and the Chongqing Connectivity Initiative in 2017. Notwithstanding the mixed success of these initiatives (particularly the Suzhou Industrial Park), both countries have benefitted from economic cooperation. In 2015, Singapore was China's largest foreign investor while Singapore was also China's largest investment destination in Asia and one of the top destinations for Chinese companies investing abroad.⁵⁴⁹ But more than just economic cooperation, Singapore's ability to somehow marry a semi-authoritarian, single-party dominance with economic prosperity presents China with a useful political template with which to reference its own political system after.⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁸ Goh, Evelyn and Chua, Daniel. *Singapore Chronicles: Diplomacy*, p.53.

⁵⁴⁹ Aggarwal, Narendra. S'pore is China's largest investor. *Business Times*, November 6, 2015, <http://www.businesstimes.com.sg/hub/business-china-special/spore-is-chinas-largest-investor> (retrieved April 25, 2018).

⁵⁵⁰ You, Min. *Xinjiapo daxuan: renmin xingdongdang weishenme zong nengying* [Singapore's general elections: Why does the PAP always win]. Beijing: Jingjiguanlichubanshe[Beijing: Economy and Management Publishing House], 2013;

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

Lu, Yuanli, Liu, Yun, Liu, Yuhong and Zeng, Yuanli. Wenzheng Liguangyao: Xinjiaporuheyouxiaozhili? [Asking Lee Kuan Yew: Why does Singapore governs effectively?] Tianjin: Tianjinrenminchubanshe [Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publishing], 2015.

The Realist position: Maintaining balance of power

Among Singaporean advocates of the need to maintain a balance of power – however precarious and difficult it might be – is Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan, a career diplomat with the Singapore’s foreign ministry, and who was its permanent secretary from 2001 to 2013. Following his retirement, Kausikan continued to write and give speeches in a personal capacity, many of them touching on Singapore’s foreign policy, and they have been compiled in a book which I have elected to focus on in my subsequent discussion.⁵⁵¹ The author also had the opportunity to interview him twice, in 2015 and 2017, and his views can be said to be largely one which resonated with a realist reading of international relations, particularly on the importance of power, and thus the need for small states like Singapore to maximize their policy options by ensuring a balance of power is maintained in international politics.

⁵⁵¹ See, Kausikan, Bilahari. *Singapore is not an Island: Views on Singapore Foreign Policy*. Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2017. Given his position with the government establishment, one might also argue that Kausikan’s views reflect the Singapore’s government position, albeit unofficial. This provides an alternative outlet for Singapore’s policy-making, particularly in sensitive areas, such as its bilateral relations with China.

In Kausikan's view, China's size and population creates a "fundamental asymmetry" of the relationship between itself and smaller countries in Southeast Asia, including Singapore.⁵⁵²

"This asymmetry of size and thus of power is an empirical fact that cannot be wished away. Big countries are always going to provoke a degree of anxiety in smaller countries on their periphery. This has nothing to do with the intentions of the big country; it is a reality faced by all big countries in every region throughout history. Big countries have a duty to reassure, a duty that China has only partially fulfilled. Small countries look at the world very differently from big countries."⁵⁵³

Embedded in the above statement, I argue, is a deep and pervasive belief that structure trumps agency in matters of international politics. Regardless of the best intentions of Chinese leaders, its very size and growing strength means that its actions would be read by other countries in a manner that is threat-evoking, unless proven otherwise. Moreover, in Kausikan's mind, Chinese leaders were unable to perceive how smaller states view China. As he puts it, "[t]hroughout my diplomatic career, I have failed to get Chinese friends to understand [how small countries think]; they may intellectually grasp the difference but do not emotionally empathise with small countries. This is probably true of all big countries everywhere. But it may well be particularly difficult for China to empathise because of justifiable pride in its

⁵⁵² Kausikan, Bilahari. *Singapore is not an Island: Views on Singapore Foreign Policy*, p.93.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp.93-94.

achievements, the growing role of nationalism in the Chinese body politic, and, above all, Chinese sense of destiny in reclaiming its historical place in East Asia and the world after a hundred years of humiliation.”⁵⁵⁴

Kausikan’s realist persuasion is further evidenced by his observation that China’s claims in the South China Sea or its military modernization programme is “nothing unusual” given the need to preserve one’s sovereignty.⁵⁵⁵ In this respect China is well within its rights to protect what it sees as its legitimate territory. At the same time, Kausikan expresses the view that “claims of sovereignty [ought to] be pursued within common framework of norms, including procedures to change norms considered obsolete or unjust” instead of resorting to “unilateral actions based on superior force.”⁵⁵⁶ In addition, Kausikan sees China’s increasing reliance on history as problematic as maritime claims are not being covered by such historical arguments; furthermore, such arguments “arouse anxieties among claimants and non-claimants alike.”⁵⁵⁷ Furthermore, it is noted, “history is always subject to multiple interpretations, and interpretations are constantly being revised as new facts come to light and interests change. There is therefore a danger that our own historical narratives will lead us in directions that we do not intend to take.”⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.94.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.97.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.97-98.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

In light of the above, Kausikan cautions against taking China's rise as a given, and for countries to adjust their national interests in acquiescing to Chinese demands, whatever they may be:

“The essential complication confronting all of us as we decide how to position ourselves vis-à-vis the US and China is that neither Washington nor Beijing themselves know what they really want...the US has not yet decided how much help to ask for to maintain order in East Asia, in what areas to ask for help. And what price to pay for help. Beijing has neither strong reason nor the capability to kick over the table even as it seeks arrangements that will better reflect its new status. And so, China on its part does not yet know whether to offer help to maintain order, in which areas to offer help, and what price to ask for its help.”⁵⁵⁹

Given this uncertainty, Kausikan suggests that Singapore's interests are best served in encouraging both the US and China to utilize multilateral forums like ASEAN-led institutions as much as possible as “this gives us and other lesser beings a modicum of influence and helps mitigate the trials and tribulations that inevitably arise when strategic adjustments of this scale are underway between major powers.”⁵⁶⁰ In this respect, Kausikan argues for the need to maintain balance “conceived of as an omnidirectional state of equilibrium that will enable Asean to maintain the best possible relations with all the major powers and thus preserve autonomy.”⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.166-167.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.168.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The above arguments put forth by Kausikan is evidently reflective of a realist thinking in guiding Singapore's foreign policy towards China. Indeed, Leifer's suggestion that Singapore's fundamental approach to its foreign policy that necessitates her in "coping with vulnerability"⁵⁶² means that China's rise is viewed with suspicion, particularly if it results in the challenging of the existing global order and the primacy of US influence within the Asia-Pacific. According to one study of Sino-Singapore relations, the "practical and paradoxical quality of Singapore's foreign policy" meant that no amount of insistence by Chinese leaders over its peaceful development is likely to assure Singapore about Chinese intentions, especially when China's growth might (or, for some, has already) come at the rest of Asia's expense.⁵⁶³ In 2017, Kausikan and his contemporary Kishore Mahbubani (who was then Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and whose views we will examine in detail below), were involved in a protracted public debate on how Singapore ought to position itself internationally given China's renewed strength and rising influence. Kausikan's view was that Singapore should not accept subordination "as a norm of relationship" and that its leaders ought to "stand up for their ideals and principles when they had to" instead of "being meekly compliant to the major powers."⁵⁶⁴ From this perspective, the

⁵⁶² Leifer, Michael. *Singapore's Foreign Policy : Coping with Vulnerability*, 2000.

⁵⁶³ Tan, See Seng. "Faced with the Dragon: Perils and Prospects in Singapore's Ambivalent Relationship with China", 2012.

⁵⁶⁴ Kausikan, Bilahari. *Facebook post* dated July 1, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/bilahari.kausikan/posts/1948237095433710> (retrieved April 28, 2018).

realist position can be stated as such: The rise of China represents a challenge to regional stability and consequently posing problems to Singapore's national interests which historically is tied to a Western-led order, hence concerns over a Chinese-dominated international order that is seen as attempting to revise the accepted rules of international conduct and thus are fundamentally inimical to Singapore's approach to international relations.

Not surprising, the above paradigm eschews any mention of Chinese exceptionalism, and takes the stance that China – like all rising powers – would necessarily want to challenge the existing status quo and in doing so, modify the rules and norms of international order to best suit its priorities and preferences. Interestingly, Kausikan perceives China's attempts to procure political influence internationally as unlike the practices and behaviors of other major powers in three ways. Firstly, China explicitly rejects the norm of not interfering in another state's domestic affairs and believes its interests should be promoted wherever they may be. Second, China uses a range of tactics, from legitimate diplomacy to more covert and often illegal deployment of agents of influence and operations to sway decision makers or public opinion leaders. Third, the aim of China's influence operations is not just to direct behavior, but to condition behavior. As observed, "China doesn't want you to comply with its wishes, it wants you to...do what it wants without being told."⁵⁶⁵ From this, we might say that while China's ultimate goal is un-exceptional (as it is behaving as all

⁵⁶⁵ Yong, Charissa. S'poreans should be aware of China's influence ops: Bilahari.

The Straits Times, June 28, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/sporeans-should-be-aware-of-chinas-influence-ops-bilahari> (retrieved January 21, 2019).

major powers are wont to do), the strategies and tactics that it employs to achieve its objectives are exceptional, in the sense that it does not seek to play by the rules of the international system but instead attempt to subvert existing practices to achieve its goals. For instance, while many Western countries seek to distinguish between political and commercial objectives, however difficult it might be, the Chinese government perceive commercial relations as ultimately an extension of political objectives, and interferes when it perceives these commercial relations as posing challenges to its political rule.⁵⁶⁶ Such a brand of exceptionalism however is seen as lacking in moral quality and runs counter-intuitively to China's goal of being seen as an exceptional power, that is being different and good.

The economic institutionalism position: New rules for changing times

The second position I argue, is that proposed by Kishore Mahbubani, which argues for the need to reconceptualize and rethink what Singapore's fundamental national interests might be so as to best adapt to the changing configuration of power (evidenced by China's rise) and to take advantage of China's global prominence. In an essay entitled "Qatar: Big Lessons From a Small Country" that was published by Singapore's flagship newspaper *The Straits Times*, Mahbubani alluded to the example

⁵⁶⁶ One recent example is the detaining of Canadian citizens in China following the arrest of Huawei's chief finance officer Meng Wanzhou in Canada. As proof that Chinese commercial enterprises are not free of political objectives, the Chinese ambassador to Canada warned of repercussions if Ottawa blocked Huawei from supplying equipment to Canada's 5G networks.

of several Gulf states' decision to break off ties with Qatar to illustrate instructional principles for the conduct of international relations, and more specifically, that "small states must always behave like small states."⁵⁶⁷ According to Mahbubani, Qatar had made the mistake of thinking that because "it sits on mounds of money...that it could act as a middle power and interfere in affairs beyond its borders."⁵⁶⁸ Referring to Singapore, Mahbubani suggested that it should be "very restrained in commenting on matters involving great powers." This was in reference to Singapore's views in the aftermath of the judgment of the international tribunal on the arbitration between the Philippines and China involving the South China Sea disputes. Observing that Singapore diplomatic representatives had insisted that it should take a "consistent and principled" stand on geopolitical issues, Mahbubani criticized such an approach, saying that being consistent and principled cannot be the *only* traits that defines Singapore's diplomacy, and that it would be better for Singapore not to speak up when big powers are in disagreement. As a small state, Mahbubani elaborated, there was the need to be "Machiavellian" in international affairs:

"Being ethical and principled are important in diplomacy. We should be viewed as credible and trustworthy negotiators. But it is an undeniable "hard

⁵⁶⁷ Mahbubani, Kishore. "Qatar: Big Lessons From a Small State", *The Straits Times*, July 1, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/qatar-big-lessons-from-a-small-country> (retrieved April 29, 2018).

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

truth" of geopolitics that sometimes, principle and ethics must take a back seat to the pragmatic path of prudence."⁵⁶⁹

Following this, Mahbubani was roundly criticized by senior members of Singapore's foreign policy establishment, notably Singapore's Law and Home Affairs minister K Shanmugam who commented that the piece was "questionable, intellectually" and that Singapore had "to be clear about our interests, and go about it smartly. But not on bended knees and by kowtowing to others."⁵⁷⁰ While the minister did not mention which country Singapore was compelled to kowtow to, it was generally believed that it referred to China, given Beijing's influence and other circumstantial evidence at that time.⁵⁷¹

To be certain, the above instance should not be viewed in isolation, but within a broader worldview that Mahbubani holds, one which perceives a shift in power

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁰ Mohamad Salleh, Nur Asyiqin and Chew, Hui Min. "Minister Shanmugam, diplomats Bilahari and Ong Keng Yong say Prof Mahbubani's view on Singapore's foreign policy 'flawed'." *Straits Times*, July 2, 2017,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/prof-kishore-mahbubanis-view-on-singapores-foreign-policy-deeply-flawed-ambassador-at> (retrieved April 30, 2018).

⁵⁷¹ See for instance, Jaipragas, Bhavan. "In Post-Lee Kuan Yew era, can Singapore still walk tall on global stage?" *South China Morning Post*, July 8, 2017,

<http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/article/2101756/post-lee-kuan-yew-era-can-singapore-still-walk-tall-global-stage> (retrieved April 30, 2018).

dynamics from the West to the East, and consequently, a far more influential role for countries like China and India in global leadership and the determination of international affairs.⁵⁷² Indeed, Mahbubani had also explicitly made known his belief the era of Western domination (led by the U.S.) was coming to an end, and that the world was moving from a “mono-civilization” led by the West to a “multi-civilizational” world.⁵⁷³ In one sense, we might argue that Mahbubani is highly “realist” in his ideological disposition in that Singapore ought to align itself with China, given the certainty of Beijing’s future prosperity. At the same time, such a view also purports to present the East (and China) as the future of a pan-global society whereby the West is being replaced by an idealized East and where the entire world will witness a “great convergence” akin to globalization except that it is led by the East.⁵⁷⁴ Such an exposition and interpretation is similar to Zhao Tingyang’s Tianxia system (if we recall in Chapter 2) whereby the establishment of a global society under norms derived from the East will ultimately render conflict obsolete, thus ushering in an age of prosperity and political goodwill. This optimism, I argue, lies at the crux of Mahbubani’s worldview, as he perceives the West in decline and thus rise of the East (and China)

⁵⁷² Mahbubani, Kishore. *The New Asian Hemisphere : The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2008.

⁵⁷³ Mahbubani, Kishore. "It's A Problem That America Is Still Unable To Admit It Will Become #2 To China." *New Perspectives Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2017): 34-39.

⁵⁷⁴ See, Mahbubani, Kishore. *The Great Convergence : Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2013.

as an undisputed global reality.⁵⁷⁵ Moreover, China is generally viewed as a non-threat as its fundamental goal is the protection and prosperity of its domestic market. Such a view is also shared by Singapore's former foreign minister George Yeo who said that "China's ambition is not to surpass the United States but to look after its own people."⁵⁷⁶ From this vantage point, the economic institutionalism position is as such: The rise of China is seen as an opportunity to relook the rules of the international system and consequently the need to reexamine Singapore's national interests to ensure they cohere with a new reality whereby Western power is diminished and the East (as represented by China) is in ascendance, particularly in the economic sphere.

From this, I argue that China is seen both as an exceptional power (whose time has come) and that its methods of procuring political influence as largely legitimate as it is mostly for domestic requirements. In other words, China's international behavior is seen as largely unproblematic for its actions are seen as mostly at achieving domestic objectives and are not meant to challenge existing international rules and norms. Even if it does, such a perspective would argue that the global system is fundamentally flawed to begin with (as it is mostly designed to serve Western needs) and that the ascendancy of China would serve as a remedy to the global problems caused by Western rules and practices. Unlike the realist position which sees the rise of China as posing a fundamental challenge to the existing international order given

⁵⁷⁵ For an extended discussion of Mahbubani's ideas, see his interview with Zhang Weiwei during his sabbatical in Fudan University, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RDDL4pNHHA> (retrieved January 21, 2019).

⁵⁷⁶ *Email interview*, June 10, 2015.

the very different political ideologies that both the West and China are founded upon⁵⁷⁷, the economic institutionalism position – I argue - posits economic indicators as the ultimate building blocks of political order. Such a logic thus perceives Chinese economic contribution vis-à-vis its growing share of participation in international institutions (particularly economic ones) to the world in a largely positive light, and that its political behavior is not in violation of any sacrosanct tenets of international diplomatic practices. Furthermore, given that China's ultimate goal was the preservation of its own domestic interests, Beijing is not seen as harboring hegemonic designs towards other countries, except to safeguard and secure what was seen as rightfully belonging to them.⁵⁷⁸ Relating to Chinese exceptionalism, such a perspective is largely optimistic towards China as being good and different and is generally sanguine towards Beijing's global influence, especially in China's ability to contribute to countries' economic fortunes.⁵⁷⁹ Indeed, in the 2019 Davos meeting, Singapore's finance minister Heng Swee Keat (who is also widely tipped to be the country's next

⁵⁷⁷ For an updated discussion on this debate, see Mearsheimer, John J. *The Great Delusion : Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018.

⁵⁷⁸ Such a view does not seek to adjudicate between territorial disputes, but only to caution against the use of force and to seek a peaceful resolution. Interestingly such an approach is taken by the Singapore's foreign ministry in various South China Sea discussions as Singaporean leaders do not – at least in public – state their responses on which countries have a more legitimate claim to these territories.

prime minister) praised China's Belt and Road Initiative and expressed confidence that countries would enjoy the benefits of the BRI in time to come.⁵⁸⁰ Given that much of Singapore's economic success is contingent on trade networks, the institutionalist position would view such initiatives like the BRI as an unmitigated good, contributing overall to the wealth and prosperity of countries by facilitating further opportunities for trade ties and economic development.

The constructivist position: a view from history

A third position which is articulated by the renowned historian Wang Gungwu maintains that what is needed in perceiving the rise of China is an appreciation of its history and culture.⁵⁸¹ Unlike Kausikan and Mahbubani whose views are largely

⁵⁸⁰ Tan, Dawn Wei. WEF panel upbeat on benefits of China's Belt and Road

Initiative. *The Straits Times*, January 23, 2019,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/world/wef-panel-upbeat-on-benefits-of-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative> (retrieved January 23, 2019).

⁵⁸¹ Given this chapter is not an attempt to plumb the vast repository of Wang's scholarly works, I will confine my analysis to a more recent publication, *The Eurasian Core and its Edges*, which comprises a series of interviews conducted by Kee Beng Ooi with Wang. Chapter four of the book, "China's Struggle with the Western Edge" (pp.141-213) is particularly salient to my analysis. In addition, I will also draw on material obtained from a personal interview with Wang conducted in Singapore on January 5, 2018. Two other works by Wang, *Renewal: The Chinese State and the*

circumscribed by the importance on power and economic indicators, Wang – given his historian background – trains his focus on historical and ideational forces to understand modern Chinese political behavior. In an interview with the author, Wang points out that China’s history was intrinsic to its identity as a nation and that Chinese thinking concerning international relations and global order were fundamentally colored by its historical past.⁵⁸² In an opinion piece written in 2013 at the height of Sino-Japan tensions over the East China Sea, Wang argues that “China’s history has warned of dangers when both internal unrest (or neiluan), or external turbulence (waihuan) are present.”⁵⁸³ Cognizant of these dangers, Chinese leaders (particularly Deng Xiaoping) had adroitly used the Western-led international system “to help China’s economic reforms and this has ensured China’s high level of dependence ever since.”⁵⁸⁴ At the same time, observed Wang, the Chinese – in relating to the present international order – “are now discovering that full membership of the system exacts a high price” and yet “Chinese leaders realize they do not have an alternative system

New Global History. HK: Chinese University Press, 2013, and *Ideas Won’t Keep: The Struggle for China’s Future*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003, will also be consulted to provide a sketch of Wang’s thinking insofar as they relate to his understanding and analysis of China’s international relations and political worldview.

⁵⁸² *Personal interview*, January 5, 2018, Singapore.

⁵⁸³ Wang, Gungwu. “Getting China to Play by the Rules”, *Straits Times*, February 12, 2013, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/getting-china-to-play-by-the-rules> (retrieved May 2, 2018).

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

to sustain future development.”⁵⁸⁵ Elsewhere, Wang also shared the view that China was not entirely out to revise the rules of the international system, but were attempting to “interpreting them, or hiding behind them, using them in flexible ways to fit different situations...[The Chinese] don’t want to take the initiative because they don’t want to be seen to be challenging the rules or even questioning them.”⁵⁸⁶ According to Wang, one key difference between China and the West lies in how the law is being perceived:

“The West probably has a much more pious attitude towards the law. I call it piety because it also involves a lot of hypocrisy; piety in the sense that you pay tremendous reverence to something and you treat it as sacred. The Chinese don’t have that kind of piety. They don’t treat the law as sacred. Law is just one of the instruments of the state, of society, of any group of people where you need rules. Law is an extension of rules. It’s a higher order of rule-making perhaps, but it’s no more than a set of rules.”⁵⁸⁷

The above analysis by Wang suggests a deeper, more fundamental cleavage between Western conceptions and Chinese conceptions of international order. Indeed Wang observes that the West and China have “two very different starting points” in terms of how rules are being conceived and adhered. The lack of a transcendental starting point in Chinese culture means that “it’s not part of their tradition to say that

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁶ Ooi, Kee Beng. *The Eurasian Core and its Edges: Dialogues with Wang Gungwu on the History of the World*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015, p.153.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.153-154.

there's something over and above that determines a universal or natural law, and from which you cannot deviate." From this, Wang suggests that "for the Chinese, there are no fundamentals, while the West argues as if there are such things."⁵⁸⁸

From the above, I argue Wang's reading of international politics takes its starting point as that of a culturally and historically conditioned one. This means that political concepts that are used today are not perceived equally in the same way in China as in the West, in particular the idea of a nation-state. According to Wang's the idea of a modern nation-state is problematic to the Chinese mind, as it "exposed [China] to a plethora of concepts, like citizens, nationals, nationalities, ethnicities and minorities."⁵⁸⁹ Furthering, Wang noted that "every country's history has deep roots that cannot be easily ignored. No country can really begin only with the modern. China has its own heritage that serves as valuable social capital. Its people are still attached to their own history. Its historians also know that no narrative is final. Each country's past experiences remained embedded in how its people think and act in the present."⁵⁹⁰ In this respect, one might say that the historical and cultural conditions experienced by China has resulted in a sense of Chinese exceptionalism (we are Chinese and we are different) among the Chinese people.

When posed the question as to whether such a line of argument was an attempt to "essentialize" the differences, Wang responded saying that there are evident

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.156.

⁵⁸⁹ Wang, Gungwu. *Renewal: The Chinese State and the New Global History*. Hong Kong: The China University Press, 2013, p.21.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

differences between Western and Chinese cultures that one cannot avoid differentiating them. As he puts it: “when the social scientists criticize people for essentializing, they want to get rid of it altogether, they think there is no justification at all, that I am not sure. I think there is justification, but whether it extends to the present, that is another question”, adding that the peoples of the West and East “originated in ways that have no connections with each other.”⁵⁹¹ In this respect, I argue that in Wang’s mind, there exists a more foundational chasm between the belief-systems of the West and that of the Chinese, thus rendering their worldviews – at a basic level – fundamentally at odds with each other. This incongruence, as Wang relates, is seen most vividly in the study of international relations whereby the discipline itself is inherently framed by an Anglo-American worldview (given the pervasiveness of the English as the language medium), and together with its associated assumptions. Citing the ideas of Yan Xuetong (whom we have discussed in Chapter 2) as an example of trying to fit Western paradigms within a Chinese worldview, Wang observes that “[Yan] himself realized after a while...what he said just didn’t match what the Chinese were doing and thinking. He fought for a while to persuade them to understand what he was trying to say, but soon realized that it was not a question of them not understanding him. It was because it didn’t fit their understanding of how things were, and because his ideas were based on Western historical experience.”⁵⁹²

⁵⁹¹ Personal interview, Jan 5, 2018, Singapore.

⁵⁹² Ooi, Kee Beng. *The Eurasian Core and its Edges: Dialogues with Wang Gungwu on the History of the World*, pp.188-189.

Indeed, it is China's encounter with modernity, and to some extent Westernization that Wang perceives as being problematic to the Chinese today. In his discussion of China's coming to terms with modernity, Wang argues that three main forces have deeply influenced the modern Chinese mind:

"The first is the strong desire to build the future on the best of the traditional national essence (国粹 guocui). The second is to be open-minded and select from the new ideas that come from the liberal and pluralist world outside. The third is the view that the CCP itself favors: that all ideas and values from past and present be placed within the framework of socialism with Chinese characteristics."⁵⁹³

While Wang does not clearly state his view as to which of the three main forces would eventually prevail, the second option seems to be Wang's preferred option. Observing that "the Chinese people will want their modern civilization to be represented by a much wider spectrum of the most talented, creative and adventurous people that the country can produce...future generations of Chinese leaders will recognize that a new Chinese civilization will not depend on China remaining a party-state or becoming a nation-state. A broad and inclusive Zhongguo will need to go further to establish a civilization that its people all agree will be modern and admirable."⁵⁹⁴

Relating the above to Singapore's perspective of China, I argue that Wang's insights represents a middle ground between Kausikan and Mahbubani in which

⁵⁹³ Wang, Gungwu. *Renewal: The Chinese State and the New Global History*, p.122

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.124.

China's rise is viewed primarily within a comparative framework vis-à-vis the West in which both challenges and opportunities exist as a result of deeper, more foundational differences that exist between Chinese and Western society. In this respect, China is seen as exceptional as compared to the West as a result of the conditions of its own history, but unlike Kausikan and Mahbubani whose views emphasize the role of power and economics in international affairs, Wang perceives China through an ideational prism that is conditioned by Beijing's own history and cultural traditions. As to whether China's rise would be a force for good, Wang is largely agnostic in his assessment (both in his writings and in the interview) as this was contingent upon ongoing political dynamics within China. Such a vantage point, I contend, likewise places Singapore's perspective towards China in a highly fluid framework whereby the need to understand China as it were, becomes paramount. In this respect, cultural ties – not just geopolitical ones – are paramount to the direction of future Sino-Singapore relations.

A contestation of spheres: Geopolitical, economic or cultural

From the above discussion, I argue that at the heart of Singapore's perspective(s) towards China is a contestation over which spheres, namely geopolitical, economic or cultural, matter more in present Sino-Singapore relations as well as the extent to which Singapore perceives China as being exceptional, that is, being different and good. In addition, each of these paradigms also reflect an emphasis or preoccupation among Singaporean Chinese-observers about what Beijing stands for and how best to engage, or benefit as it were, from China's rise and global prominence. If one would to emphasize the importance of geopolitical dynamics in Singapore's relations with China, then issues like territorial sovereignty and Chinese

maritime claims would naturally bring about anxiety and concern for Singapore. Conversely, if economic priorities are seen as fundamental to Singapore's future prosperity, then Beijing recent slew of economic initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiatives would be seen as sources of blessings and good news for Singapore, particularly if perceived Western decline compel Singapore to align its interests with those of Beijing's. At the same time, what China's long-term interests might be are open to question, raising the larger puzzle as to whether Chinese leaders would chose to play by existing global norms, or elect to challenge those norms. One fourth generation Singapore leader in an email interview shared the view that "due to China's sheer size and pace of development, its influence will surely increase. China is growing within the context of a global economic and governing architecture. It is in its strong interest to continue to be an integral part of the global community, as the global community as a strong interest to see it succeed."⁵⁹⁵ Such comments generally reflect the overall *preference* for Singapore's leaders towards China's international actions (in that Beijing continues to abide by the rules of the international system), whether Beijing perceive this to be in China's interests is another question. Finally, if one chooses to emphasize the cultural sphere and the ideological composition behind China's foreign policy practices and political beliefs (as Wang maintains), then such an approach, as it were, would fundamentally call into question the universality of Western beliefs concerning political order and organizing principles behind world politics. At the same time, this calling to question assumes a particular objective reality concerning what an *ideal* political order ought to

⁵⁹⁵ *Email interview*, dated September 14, 2017.

be, thus rendering the Chinese model – influenced by Chinese culture – to be in greater coherence with what is demanded (by the world) as opposed to what is presently provided (by the major powers). In this respect, Wang sees Chinese culture as being more flexible given its emphasis on “The Middle Way”, thus avoiding the extreme positions that a Western worldview might bring about.⁵⁹⁶ This flexibility is most saliently perceived in the issue of human rights practices whereby Singapore and other Southeast Asian neighbors have been historically antagonistic towards Western standards and expectations of what these rights ought to entail . For instance, Lee Kuan Yew was one of the proponents of “Asian values” in the 90s, choosing to emphasize the importance of collective responsibilities over individual rights.⁵⁹⁷ From this vantage point, Singapore – notwithstanding its Western orientation in its legal sphere – can be said to be traditionally conservative, and that its own political model presents striking parallels to the Chinese communist model.⁵⁹⁸ The above discussion also suggests that at present , Singapore leaders remain generally ambivalent towards Beijing’s overall brand of global leadership, preferring to adopt a wait-and-see position,

⁵⁹⁶ Ooi, Kee Beng. *The Eurasian Core and its Edges: Dialogues with Wang Gungwu on the History of the World*, p.210.

⁵⁹⁷ Barr, Michael D. "Lee Kuan Yew and the “Asian Values” Debate." *Asian Studies Review* 24, no. 3 (2000): 309-34.

⁵⁹⁸ To use a case in point, members of its People’s Action Party are called cadres (or tongzhimen 同志们), which is similar to that adopted by the Chinese Communist Party. More crucially, both the PAP and the CCP possess shared views of the necessity of a strong party-state towards political governance.

particularly if it concerns national security issues.⁵⁹⁹ The case for Chinese exceptionalism, as it were, remains a divided issue with some like Kausikan highly unpersuaded by Beijing's political actions and electing to resist it; others like Mahbubani, in perceiving a golden moment in global history whereby the East – led by China, and to some extent India – will surpass the West, express exuberance over China's growing involvement in international institutions. Others like Wang – while are more reserved (or agnostic) about China's ultimate geopolitical objectives – would reiterate on the need to take into account ideas gleaned from Chinese culture and history in order to understand and best engage with China.

Sino-Singapore international relations and the differences that matter

Returning to the field of international relations, how then does Singapore's understanding of its place in the world relate to China's own analysis of its global position? In this respect, I argue that there exists a deep cleavage in the fundamental aspects of how Singapore perceives its own national interests vis-à-vis China. In the case of Singapore, I argue that an innate sense of vulnerability has consistently shaped the manner as to how its leaders thought about Singapore's place in the world and consequently, how they applied the tools of foreign policy to achieve Singapore's

⁵⁹⁹ A case in point can be made for the eventual preference of the Singapore airforce to purchase Western made F35s for its new generation of aircraft instead of Chinese J20s.

national interests.⁶⁰⁰ In the case of China, I argue it is a sense of victimhood which pervades the thinking of Chinese leaders thus shaping the manner of its foreign policy and the conduct of its international relations.⁶⁰¹ This foundational difference behind national self-identity is reflected in their respective approaches towards diplomacy. In Singapore's case, the argument is often advanced that as a small state, it needs "to be friends with everyone" and that it supports "a rule-based global community" whereby the rights and sovereignty of states are being upheld regardless of their size.⁶⁰² In Beijing's case, I argue that what is maintained is an acknowledgement of

⁶⁰⁰ For a detailed exposition, see Leifer, Michael. *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability*, 2000.

⁶⁰¹ See for instance, Callahan, William A. "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (2004): 199-218; Renwick, Neil, and Qing Cao. "China's Political Discourse towards the 21st Century: Victimhood, Identity, and Political Power." *East Asia* 17, no. 4 (1999): 111-43; Gries, Peter Hays, Qingmin Zhang, H. Michael Crowson, and Huajian Cai. "Patriotism, Nationalism and China's US Policy: Structures and Consequences of Chinese National Identity." *The China Quarterly*, no. 205 (2011): 1-17; Gries, Peter Hays. *China's New Nationalism : Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

⁶⁰² Cheong, Danson. "As a small country, Singapore has to be friends with everyone, but at times it needs to advance its own interests", *The Straits Times*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/as-a-small-country-singapore-has-to-be-friends-with-everyone-but-at-times-it-needs-to> (retrieved February 27, 2019).

the inherent inequality that exists among states and that the practice of international politics is but a reflection of that disparity.⁶⁰³ Such a line of thinking is most vividly illustrated during a international meeting among Southeast Asian countries and China in 2010 in which its then foreign minister Yang Jiechi was reported to have said (in response to Southeast Asia's countries' concerns over Beijing's South China Sea claims) that, "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact."⁶⁰⁴ Furthermore Singapore, being a small state, sees itself as a "pricetaker" in international affairs, and that it has to take the world as it is, not as it wishes the world to be.⁶⁰⁵ This is not the case of China whereby the existing international system

⁶⁰³ See for instance, Kang, David C. "Hierarchy and Legitimacy in International Systems: The Tribute System in Early Modern East Asia." *Security Studies* 19, no. 4 (2010): 591-622; Sun, Xuefeng. "Rethinking East Asian Regional Order and China's Rise." *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 14, no. 1 (2013): 9-30; Zheng, Yongnian, and Wen Xin Lim. "The Changing Geopolitical Landscape, China and the World Order in the 21st Century." *China: An International Journal* 15, no. 1 (2017): 4-23.

⁶⁰⁴ Pomfret, John. "U.S. takes a tougher tone with China." *Washington Post*, July 30, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/29/AR2010072906416.html> (Retrieved March 12, 2018).

⁶⁰⁵ Chong, Zi Liang. "Singapore's view of the world: Singapore's foreign policy in a changing world." *The Straits Times*, October 16, 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/spores-foreign-policyin-a-changing-world>

is seen to be fundamentally antagonistic to Chinese interests and thus the need for change in the rules governing global order to better reflect China's preferences.⁶⁰⁶ In this respect, one could make the case that Singapore's claim to exceptionalism – in the dominant narrative – is due to its ability to turn its limited resources into strength, in which the roots of Singapore's foreign policy was established not from a position of power but from a position of weakness. Given that its statehood could not be taken for granted following its separation with Malaysia in 1965, its subsequent success was due to the ingenuity of Lee Kuan Yew and first generation leaders to nurture and sustain it.⁶⁰⁷ In China's instance however, the claim to exceptionalism – as I earlier

(retrieved March 11, 2018); see also, Kausikan, Bilahari. *Singapore is not an island: Views on Singapore Foreign Policy*. Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2017.

⁶⁰⁶ See for instance, Breslin, Shaun. "China and the Global Order: Signalling Threat or Friendship?" *International Affairs* 89, no. 3 (2013): 615-34; Foot, Rosemary, and Walter, Andrew. *China, the United States, and Global Order*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2011; Brown, Kerry. "Xi Jinping and China's Role in the Asian and Global Order." *Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 18, no. 1 (2017): 7-14; Callahan, William A. "China's 'Asia Dream.'" *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 1, no. 3 (2016): 226-43.

⁶⁰⁷ This is not to say that Singapore was handed a "bad hand" in the early years of its statehood. Recent scholarship have attempted to challenge the mainstream thinking behind Singapore's nation-building. See, Low, Donald, Vadaketh, Sudhir Thomas, Lim, Linda., and Thum, Pingtjin. *Hard Choices : Challenging the Singapore Consensus*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2014.

alluded – is premised on the view that China is presently powerful, and thus is entitled to a greater share, and say, to the rules of the international system. Hence, one might argue that China sees itself as a “price-setter” and is attempting to negotiate from a position of strength whereby its interests and rights are being respected by others. In this way, Singapore’s vision of global order can be said to be significantly very different from that envisaged by Beijing. While Singapore perceives its interests to be best aligned with the present US-led international system (problems notwithstanding), China sees the problems in the international system as evidence that such an order is indeed unravelling, thus presenting it with an opportunity to shape the rules of the game, particularly through economic means (as we shall see in the next chapter on the Belt and Road Initiative).

Conclusion:

As the chapter has shown, Singapore’s perceptions of China, and consequently, China’s role in the world is highly ambiguous, paralleling historical relations between both countries and across their leadership administrations. In terms of their international relations, both countries also differ significantly, with Singapore being much more embracing of Western norms and practices which China continues to harbor strong suspicions towards. A more fundamental problem, especially in China-Singapore relations, is due to China’s political system and consequently, the lack of trust it generates among Singapore’s leaders towards Beijing. Indeed, Lee Kuan Yew’s anti-communist stance in the early days of Singapore’s statehood left a

deep and lasting impact among subsequent Singaporean leaders and provided the ideological lens which framed Singapore's foreign policy dispositions. To be certain, official Sino-Singapore relations – following the commencement of diplomatic relations in 1990 – have been generally positive, with both countries sharing strong economic relations. At the same time, strong economic interdependence cannot ameliorate the existence of deeper concerns towards Beijing's long-term territorial ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region, similar to what Vietnam and Indonesia share (as discussed in Chapter 6).

Given Singapore's majority Chinese demographic composition, the ethnic-cultural dimension of its relations with China cannot be ruled out, and indeed, would continue to be a key factor in framing Sino-Singapore relations. For instance, the Business China initiative launched by Lee Kuan Yew in 2007 speaks of its mission as to “nurture an inclusive bilingual and bicultural group of Singaporeans through extensive use of the Chinese language as the medium of communication, so as to sustain our multi-cultural heritage, and to develop a cultural and economic bridge linking the world and China.”⁶⁰⁸ Indeed, Lee himself exhorted Singaporeans on the need to possess traits such as “fluency in the Chinese language, knowledge of China's traditional culture and an understanding of the on-going changes in the social, economic and political conditions [of China]” as essential in conducting business in China, thus suggesting the ongoing relevance of cultural linkages in Singapore's

⁶⁰⁸ <https://www.businesschina.org.sg/en/about-us/mission-and-vision/> (retrieved May 10, 2018).

relations with Beijing.⁶⁰⁹ To this end, recent attempts by the Chinese state in trying to cultivate influence among the overseas Chinese community to promote its international influence might render Singapore highly susceptible to China's actions, notwithstanding its leaders frequent characterization of its multicultural, multilingual national identity.⁶¹⁰ In this respect, Callahan suggests for the need to question and problematize the notion of *civilization* in our understanding to political questions and consequently to "resist the temptation of coherent and singular definitions of civilization as a substance [and instead] to suggest that civilization and barbarism are best understood as a contingent relation: each continually produces the other."⁶¹¹ With this in mind, I argue that Singapore's relations with China can be then seen as a complex relationship whereby leaders of both countries attempt to simultaneously "attract and resist" one another in order to meet their political objectives. Nevertheless, given Singapore's historical alignment with the West, particularly in the area of meeting its security needs, it is difficult to foresee its leaders altering their worldviews to accommodate, let alone embrace, Chinese preferences. In this respect, a number of Chinese scholars have also expressed pessimism towards long-term Sino-Singapore

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁰ For a recent study into China's extraterritorial diaspora policies, see To, James Jiann Hua. *Qiaowu: Extra-territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese*. Leiden: Brill, 2014.

⁶¹¹ Callahan, William A. *Contingent States : Greater China and Transnational Relations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p.27.

relations as they perceive Singapore's fundamental reading and preferences of the international system to be at odds with Beijing's national interests.⁶¹²

Finally, Singapore's perspective of China is instructional to our understanding of broader China relations with the world. The three perspectives I offer, which are premised on the contestation of geopolitical, economic and cultural spheres, and the degree to which of these spheres matter, likewise provide a useful lens to examine other countries' relations with China, especially those in East Asia in which Chinese influence can be most keenly felt. More crucially, I argue that such an approach would necessarily problematize the notion of how national interests are defined, and also highlight how the influence of China is not necessarily a one-way-street in spite of Beijing's might: national leaders also make use of international ties with China to serve their own political agendas, and in some cases, to strengthen their domestic legitimacy through tapping on China's economic wealth.⁶¹³ To this end, I argue that at the heart of China's quest for global influence is the goal to "proselytize" other countries in accepting and acknowledging its way of seeing the world, and where possible, to seek

⁶¹² Interviews in Beijing and Guangzhou, 2017 and 2018.

⁶¹³ This was in the case of Malaysia under Prime Minister Najib Razak's administration between 2009 and 2018. However, a new government was voted into power during the 2018 general elections and made changes to Kuala Lumpur's relations with Beijing. See, Heydarian, Richard J. "Malaysia's bold play against China." *The Washington Post*, November 14, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/theworldpost/wp/2018/11/14/malaysia/?utm_term=.f38fb86561cd (retrived March 25, 2019).

common ground (particularly through economic initiatives) with those countries it seeks to “convert” to its camp. Nevertheless as my study has shown, there exists some resistance to Chinese’s attempts to propagate its worldview outside of China, even to countries which share ethnic similarities with Beijing. As the responses of Singapore’s public intellectuals indicate, China’s political worldview and its claims to exceptionalism are being understood in ways that can run counter to China’s own claims and preferences of global order. While countries within Beijing’s geopolitical orbit will continue to be particularly susceptible to China’s attempts to project its political influences, the outcome of these political interactions may not always be that which Beijing desires.

Chapter 8

Conclusion: From Chinese exceptionalism to Chinese universality

The central claim of this thesis is that China's political worldview is deeply influenced by a sense of exceptionalism, that is, China sees itself as being good and different, and that such a perception is fundamental to shaping the way it sees the world and consequently influencing its approach to the practice of international politics. While exceptionalism is by no means the only way to consider China's international relations and foreign policy, nevertheless, it represents a vital lens with which to look through in order to make sense of the Chinese political worldview. Such exceptionalism dynamics – I argue – provide us with a better understanding and a more comprehensive interpretation to China's international relations as compared to mainstream IR theories. By taking seriously material, ideational and structural factors, this thesis seeks to locate the key driver behind China's international politics as the sense of exceptionalism within the Chinese Communist Party – led by President Xi Jinping – while simultaneously perceiving the existing international order as ripe for change, with China playing a more influential role whilst having its interests acknowledged by others.

This chapter concludes the study of Chinese exceptionalism as a framework for examining the Chinese worldview to international relations. It proceeds as follows. First I summarize my main arguments and findings. Second, I go on to discuss the implications of Chinese exceptionalism and the extent to which such thinking

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

Main findings

As discussed in Chapter 1, all countries – big or small – are wont to perceive themselves in ways that are exceptional so as to distinguish themselves from others and to also provide a means of social and cultural identity, so as to facilitate the work of political governance. In this respect, China is no different. What makes Chinese exceptionalism the subject of my sustained enquiry lies in the fact that China is a global power, and the sense that it seeks to pursue its international objectives outside or at the very least, apart from the existing norms and rules of the international system. Unlike small or even medium size states whose exceptionalist claims (if any) may be said to be of limited significance and relevance to the wider world, Chinese exceptionalism– as a result of China’s size and magnitude of its global reach – is far more consequential, impacting many countries that Beijing comes into relations with. Indeed I argue that ever since Xi Jinping came into power in 2012, China’s international mindset is such that it not only seeks global parity with the West (and the United States), but it also seeks to surpass the West. Through Chinese exceptionalism discourse, Chinese leaders are able to articulate a sense of difference (“we are unlike the West”) while also accentuate its claim to superiority (“we are better than the West”). Through a study of various themes germane to China’s international relations, this thesis has examined the pervasiveness of Chinese exceptionalism prevalent in various themes germane to Chinese international relations.

In Chapter 2, I looked at how China's political worldview and sense of exceptionalism was being fleshed out in the study of the discipline of international relations. I examined the ideas promulgated by four Chinese IR scholars in recent years and how they attempt to engage the analysis of international relations through the use of Chinese indigenous ideas. These ideas at their core seek to relate the practice of international politics with Chinese self-identity while simultaneously challenge the universal validity of Western social and cultural systems. Seen this way, mainstream international relations theories such as realism, constructivism and liberal institutionalism are all subjected to a Sinicization process whereby Chinese scholars translate their insights within a Chinese identity framework in the hope of uncovering certain unique traits that lend themselves better within Chinese social and political life. The ensuing analysis however suggests that Chinese IR theories contain little universal traction and are mostly used to lend legitimacy to Chinese political actions, both internally and externally. More than that, Chinese IR theories also purport to relativize the universal insights claimed by Western IR paradigms and while attempting to accentuate, even universalize the insights proffered by Chinese IR ideas. Hence, we might say that Chinese political thought is heavily infused with Occidentalism in which the West is perceived as the wholly Other and is often blamed for the ills plaguing Chinese society. I also argue that Chinese IR scholarship remains largely Sino-centric, anti-Western, they assume benevolence in Chinese leaders as well as premised on a simplistic and essentialised view of the East and West that is linked to a deeper identity dilemma present in Chinese society.

Chapter 3 elaborates further on this identity issue and the contradictions that have arose as a result of China's opening up and coming to terms with modernity and

globalization. In this chapter, I focused mostly at the domestic aspect of exceptionalism and how the CCP uses Chinese exceptionalism to provide a “unified identity” so as to legitimize its authority to govern China. I also argued that the question of identity represents a key starting point with which to understand the Chinese worldview. Using the concept of liquid modernity, I argued that Chinese national identity – under the conditions of liquid modernity – is vulnerable to heightened stress. The deep cleavage between what is formally demanded by the state and what is being practiced by Chinese citizens in their private lives has generated incongruities that could challenge the fragility of the social contract between the Chinese state and its citizens. To preserve the stability of the country, the Chinese government has chosen to promote a unified sense of Chinese identity through the idea of Chinese-ness, it has also utilized nationalism to foster cohesiveness among its citizens, and projected the idea of the goodness of the Chinese state while vilifying the outside world (especially the West) so as to generate mistrust and suspicion from the Chinese people. To illustrate further the political narratives that China intends to convey to the world, I also looked at the high-profile Beijing Olympics in 2008, and in particular the theme song associated with the event. I argued that notwithstanding the all-out-efforts made by the Chinese government to promote itself to the global community, there remained concerns as to the degree to which the outside world was being persuaded by Beijing’s outreach and gestures of goodwill. Likewise, the Chinese state’s attempt to generate feelings of patriotism and nationalism may not always result in the intended outcomes due to how individual citizens have appropriated nationalism for their own respective ends. Finally, I discuss how the act of scapegoating of the West provides a conduit for the Communist Party to transfer blame to others so as to

maintain its claim to infallible truth as well as ultimately preserve its moral standing among the people. Taken together, I argue China faces social and political dilemma which is accentuated given its closed political system. While it seeks to be exceptional from the West in its international politics, at the same time it faces problems domestically that sharply mitigates against these exceptionalist claims. Put simply, can the Chinese government and its political institutions survive the challenge of modernity?

Chapters 4 and 5 shift the focus of the study of Chinese exceptionalism from the domestic to the theatre of international politics, particularly on the issue of Chinese national image and its claim to global leadership. In Chapter 4, I establish the link between a country's national image and its claim to exceptionalism. I argue that for a country to be seen as exceptional, a positive national image is necessary. To see how the Chinese government seeks to project a favorable image of itself, I look at the speeches made by Xi Jinping – which are helpfully compiled in two volumes comprising more than 150 speeches made in his first term in office (Nov 2012 – Oct 2017). In my analysis, I found three themes which constitute key narratives in China's image promotion efforts, namely, the Chinese Dream and the image of China as a flourishing civilization, an image of a peaceful and progressive nation, and China as a moral example for international emulation. Notwithstanding the glowing rhetoric in which Xi has painted China to be like, all three images suffer from deeper and fundamental flaws. The need to preserve party centrality and control *at all costs* sharply limits the ability of the Chinese government to respond to the deeper moral and existential aspects of the Chinese dream. Similarly institutional reforms (gaige 改革) are often conceptualized to strengthen government rule, thus being limited in their

scope and contingent upon broader political exigencies. The emphasis by Chinese leaders on its peaceful rise have not been matched by actions on the ground, particularly in East Asia where territorial disputes with its neighbors have placed a dent on Chinese national image. Consequently, the heavy use of moral undertones in policy making – I argue – remains largely for symbolic purpose for the Party to utilize in order to claim credit for its success in ruling China. In sum, one might surmise that efforts by Chinese leaders to improve its national image remains at present unconvincing, not least because its actions – both domestically and internationally – do not match up to the lofty promises it claims to promote. Ironically, its insistence on its uniqueness (or Chinese characteristics) mean that such peculiarities governing its behavior are less likely to be emulated by other countries who do not share similar set of sociocultural assumptions and political values. In other words, a less Sino-centric way of seeing the world might be necessary if China is to achieve its goal of improving its national image and to be considered by others as being exceptional, that is good and different.

In Chapter 5, I continue my study of China's political worldview and its claim to exceptionalism by analyzing the discourse surrounding the high profile Belt and Road Initiative. I contend that the Belt and Road Initiative – notwithstanding its emphasis on fostering economic linkages between China and other countries – represents a grand strategy through economic means whereby economic tools are used primarily to generate soft power and to bring target countries into the orbit of Beijing's geopolitical influence. Through analyzing the existing body of work by Chinese IR scholars on the Belt and Road Initiative, I argue that three key themes stand out: one, challenging the rules of the international system, two, competing with the United States for regional

influence, and three, China's domestic environment and the need to generate economic growth to legitimize the Chinese Communist Party rule. Taken together, these three areas provide the key impetus for how the Belt and Road Initiative is being conceptualized and talked about by Chinese scholars. While the Belt and Road Initiative does confer China with opportunities to highlight its political model and project its influence to the rest of the world, I argue that whether such influence can be translated into the Chinese model being seen as truly good and different from that of the West remains highly suspect. Likewise, the notion that countries would necessarily buy in into Beijing's global vision – as a result of economic cooperation - is overly deterministic: economic power alone does not constitute sufficient grounds for generating political affinity. Last but not least, Chinese economic resources are not infinite and the possibility of China suffering an economic slowdown or even a crisis cannot be ruled out. More crucially, this would call into question the legitimacy of the Communist Party to rule China domestically as well as the ability of the Chinese government to meet its international obligations.

In Chapter 6 and 7, I go on to investigate how China's international image, its political worldview and its claim to exceptionalism is being understood by three of its Southeast Asian neighbors, namely Vietnam, Indonesia and Singapore. In chapter 6, I undertook fieldwork in Vietnam and Indonesia, two Southeast Asia countries that have possessed long and ambivalent political relationships with China. By asking scholars and a number of senior policy makers in both countries on their perceptions of China, I was able to obtain a highly contextualized and textured picture of how Chinese diplomatic actions and international behavior was being interpreted by regional interlocutors. While territorial disputes feature substantially in the overall

perception my interviewees had towards China, domestic politics remain equally at the forefront of their respective countries' relations with Beijing. In the case of Vietnam, maintaining domestic and party stability was crucial and Vietnamese policy makers were careful about ensuring that their ambivalent relationship with China do not threaten its legitimacy to rule domestically. On the other hand, Indonesia – given its ambitions to be a regional leader – was more concerned with how China's growing geopolitical might change the configuration of power in the Asia-Pacific theater. In addition, the issue of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia has also generated considerable ambivalence concerning how Jakarta perceives Chinese influence – via the overseas Chinese – within its own shores. From this chapter, I argue that Chinese national image promotion is met with considerable suspicion, thus mitigating the extent of its claim to exceptionalism, particularly as to whether it would be a force for greater good.

This issue of Chinese overseas influence and the pursuit of global leadership was being further discussed in Chapter 7 in which I examined how Singapore – a city-state with a majority ethnic Chinese population – perceived China's global ambitions. By analyzing the thinking of three prominent Singaporean public intellectuals, I uncover contending discourses surrounding Singapore's reading of China's international relations, and consequently the manner prescribing how Singapore ought to relate with Beijing. Through the conduct of primary interviews and analyzing secondary sources of Singapore's discourse towards China, I propose that Singapore's position towards China can be broadly divided into three main schools, paralleling mainstream IR theoretical frameworks, and having varying perceptions of whether China is exceptional. The realist position sees the global ascension of China as a fundamental challenge to the rules and norms of global order. It also views China

as being unexceptional and its political influence as being problematic for other countries. The economic institutionalist view interprets China's global prominence and its growing economic footprints as prima facie case of a shift of global power from West to East. Hence, it advocates the need to reexamine foundational national interests as well as greater participation in Chinese global institutions. More importantly, it sees China as an exceptional power and celebrates Chinese global influence as a good thing. Finally, the constructivist approach – with its emphasis on ideas brought about by history and culture – seeks to interpret Chinese political behavior on Chinese terms and to take seriously the ideational roots behind China's political worldview. By comparing and contrasting ideas gleaned from Western and Asian traditions, the constructivist school is less concerned with universal explanations, but instead emphasize particularities insofar as they exist within those traditions and to find ways to negotiate those differences. As of writing, there remains an ongoing and lively debate over how Singapore ought to posture itself vis-à-vis Beijing in order to best secure its own national interests. Relating to the broader study of Chinese exceptionalism, I argue that such debates are reflective of more foundational differences between Singapore and China – in their respective political ideologies – that mitigate against the extent to which common ground can be found between both countries. From this, I adduce claims to Chinese exceptionalism and benevolent global leadership do not find sympathetic ground among Singaporean observers. Instead the city-state remained more closely aligned with global leadership norms associated with the West (and the United States).

From Chinese exceptionalism to the quest for universality

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

But might this not be said of all countries without exception, and should we not expect states to engage in international diplomacy without some level of concern for

their own domestic political priorities? Perhaps, but what makes the Chinese case particularly problematic is the lack of institutional oversight or what is more commonly called “checks and balance” to political power such as the rule of law, open elections and an independent media. Without these, it is difficult to ascertain the extent of one’s political legitimacy and the extent to which “the will of the masses” are being respected and taken sufficiently into account. To this end, the issue of human rights remains China’s Achilles Heel: a country that does not take sufficiently into account the needs of its citizens (which it governs directly) is less likely to respect the rights and interests of the citizens of other countries which it comes into contact with (indirectly). Moreover, if China’s global influence is said to be for the better good, then it raises the question as to how such a “global good” is to be defined. Unless Beijing is able to convince the international community that it is prepared to *act sacrificially* (sometimes at a cost to its domestic prerogatives) in defending the interests of others, suspicions that it is free-riding on Western initiatives would continue to persist and limit the extent of its claim to be a force for good.⁶¹⁴ With the above in mind, I argue that for China to be seen by

⁶¹⁴ One current line that some Chinese scholars take is that Confucian ideology is a self-limiting force which seeks harmony rather than conquest. This of course, is highly debatable. For further studies, see Kang, David C. *East Asia before the West : Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010; Kelly, Robert E. "A ‘Confucian Long Peace’ in Pre-Western East Asia?" *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 3 (2012): 407-30; Phillips, Andrew. "Contesting the Confucian Peace: Civilization, Barbarism and International Hierarchy in East Asia." *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 4 (2018): 740-64.

the rest of the world as a force for universal good, it needs to go beyond vague policy slogans (such as the China model) to delivering actual results on the ground, and benefitting the common good. While China's growing involvement in peace-keeping operations and infrastructure building in third-world countries have provided some measure of legitimacy concerning its global responsibilities, Beijing's intentions and long-term commitments to these activities remain debatable.⁶¹⁵ Moreover, how different is China's solutions to global problems different from existing initiatives proposed by the West? While China's policy makers often criticize Western countries for interference into other countries domestic affairs, Beijing is equally culpable as evidenced by its growing extraterritorial activities in many Western societies. Furthermore, as my study of the Belt and Road Initiative (in chapter 7) show, there is a lively debate within China as to the extent of China's overseas involvement (given domestic needs) not unlike what countries in the West face. All these developments suggest that Beijing's quest for universality would not be easy and given its ideological commitments, more complicated than what its leaders might admit.

Last but not least, it must be said that unlike many Western countries whose political systems are premised on certain claimed universal ideals (i.e. democracy, free trade, human rights) which can then be used to analyze these countries. In China, these universals are not available for the Chinese or others to evaluate. Indeed, this basic difference has profound consequences for the conduct of politics. It can be

⁶¹⁵ See Hoo, Tiang Boon. *China's Global Identity: Considering the Global Responsibilities of Great Power*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018.

argued that the very sustainability of Western political model lies in the fact that it possesses certain built-in mechanisms – that are premised on universal standards – which can subsequently be used to call individuals or institutions to *account* for their actions and political behavior thus providing the roots of its own renewal and vitality.⁶¹⁶ On the contrary, the Marxist-Leninist system of Communist rule is designed to *maximize* the party's grip on power. To this end, universal ideals do not stand apart from political objectives (i.e. speaking truth to power), but are used to support political prerogatives where they may already exist. As a case in point, the practice of religion in China (which is typically concerned with ultimate beliefs and loyalties) is being subjected to increasing CCP control. As such, we might say that the quest for ever-greater power means that the party is ultimately accountable only to itself. Indeed, President Xi Jinping's decision to remove term limits for his presidency reflects a deeper political mindset at work: the party – and its leader – is *utterly indispensable* to China's future.⁶¹⁷

Relating to Chinese exceptionalism, it would seem that China's pursuit to global greatness rests on highly fragile foundations. To this end, I argue that the Chinese

⁶¹⁶ See Fukuyama, Francis. *The Origins of Political Order from Prehuman times to the French Revolution*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011. For a critique of how such a political model is unraveling in the West, see Guinness, Os. *A Free People's Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.

⁶¹⁷ Zhao, Suisheng. "Xi Jinping's Maoist Revival." *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (2016): 83-97.

political worldview reflects a narrow vision of what international political order ought to be like and is largely developed with mostly China's national interests in mind. While Chinese-led initiatives such as the BRI does provide China with opportunities to contribute internationally, a closer reading of the Chinese discourse suggests a more limited, and less generous vision of what global order entails. Indeed, one common theme that runs through my study of China's political worldview and its claims to exceptionalism is that it is largely couched in anti-Western discourse and is geared to present all that China does as good and all the West done as bad. This binary worldview is problematic for it absolves China (and its government) of any blame while attributing all that is wrong with the world to the actions of the West (particularly the United States and its allies).

Furthermore, as my dissertation has highlighted, the more China proclaims its exceptionalism, that it is different and good, the more it would have to live up to these claims – both in its international and domestic actions – which could then pose challenges to the Chinese government legitimacy to rule. To the extent that it is able to fulfill these claims, it would have to revisit the roots of its political model including the possibility of forging a new social contract with its people, one that is not premised on a monolithic narrative that is party-centric (be it the Chinese dream, socialism with Chinese characteristics, a new type of major power relations et cetera.), but rather a plurality of narratives which take into account the aspirations and ambitions of its

citizens – which are not defined solely by the political concerns of the party.⁶¹⁸ As such, these ongoing tensions would likely underscore the bulk of social and political discourse about China’s present and future place in the world, this dissertation seeks to unravel what Chinese exceptionalism entails, and how it frames Beijing’s worldview towards international politics.

Areas for further study

There are three areas relating to this dissertation that can be further studied. First, it would be worthwhile to examine in greater detail the extent to which other non-material factors continue to play a part in the Chinese political worldview. Indeed there is a growing corpus of scholarly literature suggesting that non-material factors such as prestige, pride, status and identity all play significant roles in the conceptualization of China’s political behavior.⁶¹⁹ In some ways, my utilization of an exceptionalist framework does not negate some of these non-material factors (for instance, the study of China’s national image in Chapter 3 is closely related to Chinese pride and prestige

⁶¹⁸ For a popular account of what some of these narratives might be, see Osnos, Evan. *Age of Ambition : Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

⁶¹⁹ See for instance, Pu, Xiaoyu. *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signalling in the Changing Global Order*. California: Stanford University Press, 2019; Hoo, Tiang Boon. *China’s Global Identity: Considering the Responsibilities of Great Power*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018.

while Chapter 6 deals with Chinese ethnic identity), but it would be interesting to see the extent to which these factors become more pronounced as China's international status grows.

Second, the relationship between Chinese political behavior and leadership personality should be analyzed in closer detail.⁶²⁰ This is especially so given President Xi Jinping's consolidation of power which suggests that much of what portends as Chinese foreign policy since 2013 can be traced to Xi's own worldview and political priorities. In this respect, I argue that Xi's speeches - as analyzed in Chapter 3 – can be seen providing some basic clues to Xi's vision of China's future. At the same time, further work can be done to mine in greater depth the extent to which Xi's personality traits - as well as those of his closest advisors, for instance Wang Qishan – are being reflected in China's international practices. Questions such as Xi's own personal ideology, his level of affiliation with Maoist ideas, his view towards the United States as well as his sense of security within the Party should be further posed within the field of Chinese international relations studies.

Third, the issue of Chinese information operations and its modes of political influence is worth studying. Given the sensitivity of this area of research, and the relative paucity of scholarly research conducted in English into this topic, scholars in the West are thus unable to conduct a sustained enquiry into the deeper considerations behind Chinese political thought including obtaining more multi-faceted

⁶²⁰ See, Brown, Kerry. *The New Emperors: Power and the Princes in China*.

London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2014.

insights into China's decision-making process.⁶²¹ Indeed, if we maintain – as I do – that Chinese exceptionalism is fundamental to how Chinese political elites perceive China, then the question of how Chinese exceptionalism is being used, not just as a rhetorical device, but also as a political tool to generate political interference abroad is of crucial importance. Indeed, it has been observed by To that China's information operations – through United Front tactics – have intensified over the years, particularly among target countries with which to cultivate more positive impressions of China with the aim of ultimately effecting policy choices made.⁶²² To this end, several questions are worth asking: how have Chinese political elites – through information operations – seek to frame the argument concerning China's rise and thus seek to gain legitimacy in the global arena of public opinion? To what extent has Chinese information

⁶²¹ Some existing studies include, Eftimiades, Nicholas. *Chinese Intelligence Operations*. Ilford, Essex: Frank Cass, 1994; To, James Jiann Hua. *Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese*. Leiden: Brill, 2014; Schoenhals, Michael. *Spying for the People : Mao's Secret Agents, 1949-1967*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013; Brady, Anne-Marie. "New Zealand and the CCP'S 'Magic Weapons.'" *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 68-75.

⁶²² To, James Jiann Hua. *Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese*, see pp.48-52, 65-68. This point was also made emphatically by Singapore's former top diplomat Bilahari Kausikan. See Yong, Charissa. S'poreans should be aware of China's influence ops: Bilahari. *The Straits Times*, June 28, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/sporeans-should-be-aware-of-chinas-influence-ops-bilahari> (retrieved January 21, 2019).

operations sought to discredit the West and how has it done so? While I have tried to provide some answers to these questions in my dissertation, further scrutiny into this topic will be of great importance in the coming years, particularly if one believes that China's global influence will continue to grow.

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