

CHINA'S EXCEPTIONALISM IN IR
AND SOME PARADIGMS OF "THE NEW WORLD ORDER"

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Abstract. In the western world the actions and political decisions of Beijing are difficult to anticipate and often understand. There is a dose of exceptionalism reserved for China in the future compared to other superpowers. The main question is not whether or not it will be a superpower but what kind of superpower will be in the medium and long term. In an almost exclusively western-centrist IR theory China in the last decade appears as the obvious candidate to produce a non-western-centrist IR theory. The rise of China implies the creation of its own distinct RI doctrine, respectively a development doctrine that further rejects or adapts western models and seeks its roots in Chinese philosophical traditions adapted to new realities.

Keywords: *International Relations; China; Political Sciences*

The predictability of a great power's behaviour in the IR arena depends on the ability to understand its long-term strategies, conceptions of the world order, and its role in it. In recent years, the unprecedented growth of China's role in the world economy and its potential to become the world's largest economy explain the interest in the theories related with the guiding principles of China's rise and place in the new world order, a fascinating endeavour in which speculation seems to be the rule. Can be noticed a growing number of books and articles on the subject of China as a superpower in RI, usually covering areas such: *China as a development model for the developing world, the role of the new China in IR*, and the vast more or less academic literature on the subject *The New World Order*.¹ For the resources consulted, there is a dose of exceptionalism reserved for China in the future compared to other superpowers. The main question is not whether or not it will be a superpower but what kind of superpower will be in the medium and long term.²

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¹ Klaas Dykmann & Ole Bruun, "China's Pledge to Civilise *All Under Heaven*", in *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*. 50, 2021, p. 4.

² Hu Angang, *China in 2020: A New Type of Superpower*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institutions Press, 2011.

In the western world the actions and political decisions of Beijing are difficult to anticipate and often understand. Like in the ancient Chinese *GO* game China with a powerful unique party and a monolithic political class allows itself to think and calculate the effects of a political move long-term, decades in advance. What seems to be irrational in a short-and medium-term perspective can make sense in a long term.

Is tempting to draw parallels in history between Imperial China and various European powers of the time. In methodological terms we should be aware of the limits of *comparatist*. It may be true that despite the perceived Chinese exceptionalism, some ideas in the model of civilizational representation of the imperial court in Beijing did not differ from those of classic Athens or Rome. In both cases the level of *foreign barbarism* is depicted as proportional with the distance from the centre of the known world³ but the *mission civilisatrice* of the colonial European powers has little to do with the *civilizing mission* of the Chinese imperial dynasties.

In an almost exclusively western centrist IR theory China in the last decade appears the obvious candidate to produce a non-western-centric IR theory.⁴ In 2005 Zhao Tingyang from the *Institute of Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences* published in Chinese the book *The Tianxia System: A Philosophy for the World Institution*, the long expected in the Chinese academic community alternative to the Westphalia based IR theory. In 2006 and 2009 two articles published in English offered a synthetic version the book for the non-Chinese audience.⁵ For Zhao Tingyang the Westphalia IR system is not suited to answer the problems of a globalized world at is intrinsic anarchic and not harmonious.⁶ Intrinsic anarchic because at least in principle it involves a community of equal nations which according with the Hobbesian theory are by nature fighting each other for power and resources, until a relative *balance of power* is achieved. For Zhao the *balance of power* as the much sought after Westphalia objective is unstable and non-functional, Tianxia offering instead a well-defined hierarchical system in which the strong states help the weak states with benevolence.⁷ Tianxia, a lax concept from the pre-modern Chinese political philosophy means – *all under the sky* –, in which China and its Imperial court is the centre and guarantor of the harmony in the known world.⁸ It was the very basis of the Chinese political

³ Salvatore Babones, "From tianxia to tianxia: the generalization of a concept", in *Chinese Political Science Review* 5(2), 2020, pp. 131-147.

⁴ Pichamon Yeophantong, "Governing the World: China's Evolving Conceptions of Responsibility", in *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 6, no. 4 (December 1, 2013), pp. 329-64 available on line: <https://academic.oup.com/cjip/article/6/4/329/467530>, accessed on 26.03.2022.

⁵ Tingyang Zhao, "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-Under-Heaven' (Tian-Xia)", in *Social Identities* 12, no. 1 (January 2006), pp. 29-41; Tingyang Zhao, "A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-Under-Heaven (Tian-Xia)", in *Diogenes* 56, no. 1 (February 1, 2009), pp. 5-18.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Stephen N. Smith, "World Order with Chinese Characteristics: The Development of Chinese International Relations Theory and Implications for China's Foreign Policy", Carleton University Ottawa, Ontario, 2020, p. 98, available on line: https://curve.carleton.ca/system/files/etd/a94322d8-0a4c-44b2-9fc8-47b995211701/etd_pdf/461988d52f84d236cb90fd0d5ed0ae60/smith-worldorderwithchinesecharacteristics/thedevelopment.pdf, accessed on 23.03.2022.

⁸ Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, New York: Penguin Press, 2014, pp. 213-225.

philosophy until the mid-19th. Since then Imperial China has struggled to adapt to Western political thinking as the Westphalia system of nation-states.⁹ The old *Tianxia* – *all under the sky* –, in which China is the centre and guarantor of the harmony in the world at Zhao Tingyang is adapted to suite ideological and geopolitical contemporary realities with adaptations from the European classic *Pax Romana* and Kantian *Eternal Peace* to *Marxist-Leninist and Maoist* philosophy adapted by a *New Confucianism* transposed into a gradually new adapted CCP political-economic doctrine by Deng Xiao, Hu Jintao, Xi Jiping. For Zhao, *Tianxia* thinking is the quintessence of Chinese exceptionalism, a solution for a better world continuing a global effort initiated by Immanuel Kant in his *Essay on Eternal Peace*.¹⁰ Western liberal democracy for Zhao is unsuited for a Globalized World at it involve that individuals pursue their own egocentric interest instead of the collective interest supposed by *Tianxia*.¹¹ Also the individuals are easy to manipulate and unstable the access to quality information on which western democracies are theoretically based being an illusion.¹² The role of political elites is essential in both the Imperial *Tianxia* and the contemporary *Tianxia* supposed to be guided by Marxist-Leninist with Chinese characteristics principles, idea which accommodate just well the single party and its political elite.¹³

From *Tianxia all under heaven* to a *Westphalian* political reality in which China was just a state alongside other states the Chinese imperial court was awaking up to the new reality too slow and too late to avoid a century of humiliation which still hurts the Chinese collective memory. That memory probably explains the willingness among the Chinese to sacrifice their individual interests for the common goods and the importance of a strong state. The 2000-year-old *Tianxia* concept of Han and Quin dynasties may have evolved in time across generations of Chinese political thinkers as much as the ancient *Pax Romana* versus today's *Pax Americana*, but it retained fundamental articulations such as the importance of hierarchy and centralism, obedience to authority and submission of individual interests. for the public ones. The concept of *Tianxia* as an alternative to the *Westphalia* system as described by Zhao has another advantage. Is vague enough and utopian enough to accommodate a large spectrum of contemporary possible IR evolutions¹⁴. Astrid Nordin considers that although highly theoretic the concept of *Tianxia* is important in China which just like any great power has an "ideology" that feels responsible for spreading its own culture abroad.¹⁵ As a great power and civilization it is expected that China will keep a *mission civilisatrice* type

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Stephen N. Smith, "World Order with Chinese Characteristics: The Development of Chinese International Relations Theory and Implications for China's Foreign Policy", Carleton University Ottawa, Ontario, 2020, p. 74, available on line at: https://curve.carleton.ca/system/files/etd/a94322d8-0a4c-44b2-9fc8-47b995211701/etd_pdf/461988d52f84d236cb90fd0d5ed0ae60/smith-worldorderwithchinesecharacteristicsthedevelopment.pdf, accessed 23.03.2022.

¹¹ *Ibidem*. p. 80.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Tingyang Zhao, *art. cit*, 2006, p. 32.

¹⁴ Astrid H. M. Nordin, *China's International Relations and Harmonious World: Time, Space and Multiplicity in World Politics*, London: Routledge, 2016.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

discourse in particular for the developing world and also equally addressed to the domestic public as a measure of mobilization and justification of forceful policies.¹⁶ Some analysts have noticed an intrinsic functional contradiction. On the one hand we have a discourse from a part of the Chinese academic environment that favours an insufficiently defined alternative to the Westphalia system, on the other hand we have a Chinese state for which Westphalia principles such as *national sovereignty* and *non-interference* in internal affairs are sacrosanct.¹⁷ In other words for now the *Tianxia* concept is insufficiently outlined to provide a viable alternative to the current Westphalia based international order.¹⁸

The already mentioned difficulties in understanding the articulations of *Tianxia* or the *New Confucianism* and so on, are amplified by the absence of quality translations from Chinese and the difficulty in translating Chinese concepts into other languages. For this reason, Western academia's access to Chinese debates (including Taiwan and Hong Kong) remains limited. There are opinions that articles or books written in a particular field for a Western audience do not capture the complexity of the debate and the totality of its meanings as expressed in Mandarin.¹⁹ In the absence of in-depth knowledge of the Chinese language, Western analysts, find difficult to *navigate* a mix of ideas from classical Chinese philosophy whose cosmology places China at the centre of the world with segments of internationalism of Marxist-Maoist origin which place China in the position of leader and model of the developing world.²⁰

In the Chinese media the contemporary Chinese exceptionalism is motivated both by a cultural specificity with deep historic roots but also by a sustained economic development of PR China often depicted in contrast with the weaknesses of the world economy and in particular the US and Japan. President Xi's speeches contain references to the historical stage of Chinese socialism, which is *still in an early stage*²¹, a continuity through adaptation of Marxism, Leninism, Maoism and Deng Xiaoping's theories. The same discourses emphasize the idea of opening up, avoiding isolation and offering additional roles to market mechanisms in state resource allocation decisions.²² Surprisingly the continuous appeal to Chinese specificity and traditions goes hand in hand with recommendations to *avoid isolation*.²³ On this sense another old Chinese metaphor is sometimes used: *The*

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Allen Carlson, "Moving beyond sovereignty? A brief consideration of recent changes in China's approach to international order and the emergence of the *Tianxia* concept", in *Journal of Contemporary China* 20(68), 2011, pp. 89-102.

¹⁸ Hongying Wang and James N. Rosenau, "China and global governance", in *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 21-24, 2009 available on line: <https://sta.uwi.edu/iir/normangirvanlibrary/sites/default/files/normangirvanlibrary/documents/China%20and%20Global%20Governance.pdf>, accessed on 23.03.2022.

¹⁹ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 27-34.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Xi Jinping, *Obținerea unui succes total în construirea unei societăți moderat prospere și lupta pentru marea victorie a socialismului cu specific chinez din noua eră*, Discourse at the 19th Congress of CCP 19, 2017 published on line at the Embassy of People Republic of China in Romania: <http://www.chinaembassy.org.ro/rom/wjbfyrnew/S1/t1516409.html>, accessed on 9 September 2021.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*.

great rebirth of the Chinese people involves according to Michael Paul overcoming the internal horizon represented by the Yellow River to the “external horizon” represented by the Ocean, which in turn is a metaphor for the World Map.²⁴ China’s external openness to EU for example in various official discourses is depicted as consistent with the prospect of economic cooperation aimed at dethroning the US technological hegemony.

In 2017, at the 19th CCP Congress, President Xi spoke of *China’s entry into a new era of development*, which can be interpreted as a new stage in the evolution of Chinese communism following the “rise” of Mao Zedong, the period of Deng Xiaoping. (1979-2017) a stage when China became “rich”, towards a new stage whose basic stone is the 19th Congress a stage in which China must become “strong”.²⁵ A sign of confidence implies a return to some segments of the *ideological orthodoxy*. In this case, “ideological orthodoxy” may involve state intervention in the market mechanisms to re-establish “relations of production” where the development of “forces of production” produced imbalances and excessive inequalities. This implies in the current ideology of the CCP once again to strengthen the leading role and authority of the party. It is also argued that the liberal model of government would be opposed to the *Confucian model* which involves loyalty to the family and authority. To this are added the adapted Marxist-Leninist principles of the leading role of the single party and party discipline and above everything the specific conditions in this country with more than 1,3 billion inhabitants in which stability equals physical survival. The new policy of *co-prosperity* that encourages (or obliges) corporations to make donations for social or educational projects is illustrative for an economy in which market mechanisms operate but differ from Western liberalism. The *Co-prosperity policy* includes recent antitrust actions in China leading to multi-billion-dollar fines for monopolist practices in particular targeting some internet giants. In China the internet giants of today have developed in a regulation vacuum in a time when in general the development of small businesses was encouraged. The evolution from start-ups to online giants has been unexpected and faster than regularization. Unfair practices are investigated all over the World, however while in the Western world corporations have various *counterattack* instruments in China they must submit unconditionally. The intervention was to be expected given that the technological giants in the field of e-commerce, social media or finance have access to a large volume of socio-demographic data, consuming and social behaviour, data on key sectors of Chinese economy which can be processed, stored, used.²⁶ The ability to influence and control markets and consumers which those companies have if in the US or the EU *raise concerns* in the specific context of China trigger tougher measures.

²⁴ Michael Paul, *Kriegsgefahr im Pazifik? Die maritime Bedeutung der sino-amerikanischen Rivalität*, NOMOS-SWP, 2018, pp. 49-72.

²⁵ Xi Jinping, *Discourse*, 2017.

²⁶ The giant *Tencent* is the owner of the *WeChat* application that brings together in a single application similar to popular western application like *WhatsApp*, *Facebook*, *PayPal*, *Uber* (phone calls, social media, online payments, transportation etc.).

Arguments like “specific conditions” or “Chinese characteristics” attached to locally adapted imported economic or politic concepts are justified not only with survivalist arguments related to the size and the number of inhabitants but also with the need to *burn stages* or to make a *great leap further*. The economic and political liberalism works in traditional Chinese society such as Taiwan or Hong Kong but both have a limited time horizon (four decades for Taiwan) and incomparable socio-economic conditions.

The coexistence of market economy and state control has so far worked for Beijing leaders. They were showing creativity and flexibility to ensure that the unlikely binome *market – state control* may coexist in the specific context of China. In this sense, in the recent CCP documents the *Socialism with Chinese characteristics* is presented as five integrated spheres of modernization (*the Integrated Plan of the “Five Systems”*) consisting on: *economic modernization, social modernization, cultural modernization, ecological modernization, military modernization*.²⁷ References to China’s industrial development in recent CCP documents depict a wanted *post-industrial stage* focused on a predominance of services in the structure of GDP and a reduction in the share of agriculture to 4% of GDP.²⁸ It is an ambitious goal considering that this percentage of agriculture to the GDP characterizes developed countries with a high level of urbanization.²⁹ Can be also noticed a transition from an emphasis on *sustained growth* or growth regardless of costs (including the ecological cost) to *sustainable economic development*. Remarkably *the plan of the four comprehensive strategies* as a strategy of the *socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics* includes calls for environmental protection as an essential dimension of the aimed *moderately prosperous society*.³⁰ In many respects this market economy with Chinese characteristics is transposed into what they call a form of *Socialist Market Economy*.³¹ In CCP documents, the creation of the *Socialist Market Economy* is part of the so called *Long-term strategy for National Rejuvenation*.³² According to the CCP, the *Rejuvenation Strategy* is a continuation of three other strategies from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to the present: *the Revolution* of 1949-1977, *the Restoration* of 1978-1989 and the *Building of a Strong National Capacity* 1990-2003.³³ Ideologically it implies as an objective that by 2049 (the 100th anniversary of the creation of the PRC) *the country should be well-governed, socially stable, economically prosperous, technologically*

²⁷ A. Hu, Y. Yan, X. Tang, S. Liu, *Integrated Plan of Modernization*. In: *2050 China. Understanding Xi Jinping’s Governance*, Springer, Singapore 2021.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Rachel E. Stern, “The Political Logic of China’s New Environmental Courts”, in *The China Journal* 72, July 2014, pp. 53-74.

³¹ Wan-Sze Hui, *Socialist market economy and industrial reform in China during the Dengist era from 1978 to 1997. Economics and Finance*, École Nationale Supérieure des Mines de Paris, 2001, p. 21.

³² Xi Jinping, Discourse, 2017.

³³ A. Hu, Y. Yan, X. Tang, S. Liu, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

advanced and militarily strong.³⁴ Concepts such as *prosperity*, *good governance*, *technologically advanced* exposed in general, without setting quantifiable/measurable data leave ample room for interpretation. US analysts characterize these targets as *difficult to achieve by 2049 a rising China* even if it will not achieve all its goals being the most plausible scenario.³⁵

Opinions that the Chinese economy has become more capitalist than Western capitalism have no basis as long as the Chinese state power has all the mechanisms for intervention, for defining and regulating the economy and do not hesitate to use them to the full extent.³⁶ Interesting in Xi Jinping's speeches the *Chinese socialist market economy* and a *moderately prosperous society* are set for 2049 without reference to a *post-socialist market economy* stage as in the case of the predecessors Deng Xiaoping or Hu Jintao. Deng Xiaoping period is not ideologically criticized by the new presidency, it appears as a necessary step that created the economic foundation for the "new era" opened by the 19th Congress of the CCP.³⁷ From the quoted documents and official speeches the "new era" may involve increased statist intervention for coordination, adjustment and control to address the problem of "unfair development"³⁸ and in parallel the problem of "inadequate development" (unsustainable, non-ecological).³⁹ President Xi's ideological speeches can be interpreted as an intention to readjust the ideological compromises created in the "production relations" of Chinese society during the period of "unleashing the forces of production" of the Deng stage.

The ambitions of the new Beijing administration are high, and in addition to the traditional challenges it has to deal with unforeseen situations such as the "trade war" with US, which involved tariffs and blocking access to technology and the major crisis caused by COVID. Trump administration initiated in 2018 *The Foreign Investment Risk Review Modernization Act (FIRRMA)*⁴⁰ and one year later the *Executive Order on Information and Communications Technology and Services (ICTS)*⁴¹ whose main aim was to restrict the access of Chinese companies to advanced semiconductors technologies with potential use in the military sector. Chinese investments in US (and European) technologies and sensitive infrastructure like 5G networks were also targeted. Due to the intense US pressures European companies like the Dutch ASML producing the most

³⁴ Andrew Scobel, Edmund J. Burke, Cortez A. Cooper, Sale Lilly, Chad J. R. Ohlandt, Eric Warner, J.D. Williams, *China's Grand Strategy – Trends, Strategies and Long-Term Competition*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif, 2020, "Summary, p. ix" available on line: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2700/RR2798/RAND_RR2798.pdf, accessed on 15 September 2021.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

³⁶ Zhou Xin, "Why the socialist element of China's market economy is important", in *China Macro Economy*, 26 April 2021, available on line: <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3131151/why-socialist-element-chinas-market-economy-important>, accessed on 15 September 2021.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Xi Jinping, "Chinese President Xi Jinping Delivers 2018 New Year Speech", 2018, available on line at: http://www.china.org.cn/china/2017-12/31/content_50181054.htm, accessed on 26 Oct. 2021.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ US Congress, available on line at: <https://www.congress.gov/bills/115th-congress/house-bill/5841/text>, accessed on 25 March 2022.

⁴¹ <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-securing-information-communications-technology-services-supply-chain/>, accessed on 25 March 2022.

advanced technologies for microchips manufacturing was persuaded to restrict its exports to RP China. The Chinese state-owned technology giant Huawei was pushed aside from developing 5G networks in EU and (by restricting access to latest generation microchips and software) from the leading league of the mobile phone market although it succeeded to maintain a reasonable position based on domestic soft and hardware applications. Other major challenges apart from the already mentioned challenge of decoupling from the world economy and latest technology inputs is the demographic challenge caused by the aging population that will put pressure on the pension system and the projected economic growth. The economic and political issues with US may be solved through dialogue and compromises and/or increased investments in domestic research capabilities and further acquisition of European or Japanese companies' owners of technological patents although not the most advanced but still valuable. The demographic issue is more complicated. Demographic decline and work force ageing may affect the badly needed economic grow and endanger social stability. Unsurprisingly in 2016 the "one child policy" was abandoned for a "two child policy" and then in September 2021 for a "three child policy".⁴² However the "three child policy" may not have spectacular effects in a Chinese society which changed in the last three decades in terms of living standards and expectations. The contemporary urban Chinese expects for his offspring access to quality education, decent wages and living conditions which push even further the need for sustained economic grow. Within these topics it is also debated the extent the economic challenges and in particular the new generation of Chinese western educated political elite may reform from the inside the CCP and with what results.

I can conclude that for Beijing, the rise of China implies the creation of its own distinct RI doctrine, respectively a development doctrine that further rejects or adapt western models and seeks its roots in Chinese philosophical traditions adapted to new realities. China as an alternative model of development will remain an attractive model for the developing world. Is hard to imagine the ruling elite in a developing country rejecting a model of accelerated development, investments and development aid which does not involve political concessions. Becoming a global power involve global interests and responsibilities as well but there are no signs in the Chinese narrative (politic or academic) to suggest that Beijing in the medium term would be willing to replace US as a "global gendarme." The "Belt & Road" initiative remind political analysts about the perceived permanence in the intentions of the political power in Beijing to offer the world an alternative to the mainstream world political order of the time, be it liberal, communist or post-industrial, which it justifies as superior to existing models. So far, the "Belt & Road" initiative although interesting it is still in its infancy and far from generating a *New World Order*.

⁴² Nicholas Eberstadt, "The China Challenge: A Demographic Predicament Will Plague the Mainland for Decades", in *Discourse*, June 9, 2021, Mercatus Center at George Mason University, available on line at: <https://www.discoursemagazine.com/culture-and-society/2021/06/09/the-china-challenge-a-demographic-predicament-will-plague-the-mainland-for-decades/?msclkid=7b185375ab4e11ec8ce026887b14c900>, accessed on 24 March 2022.

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