A Confucian Holistic World Order and China's Vision of a Shared Future

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Abstract: In his article "A Confucian Holistic World Order and China's Vision of a Shared Future," Huiyong Wu traces the differences between the Western world and China, as well as their impact upon politics, economic relations and culture. In particular, Wu focuses on China's political ideal, based on Confucian moral ethics, which emphasizes inter-subjectivity over the individual subjectivity, and which holds a strong vision of communal respect among national citizens. This vision might be somehow in conflict with the Western tradition that places individual freedom above everything else. Through initiatives like "the Belt and Road" China is steadily developing and promoting "A Community with a Shared Future," a holistic world order that directs itself towards the ideal of eliminating conflicts and seeking peace.

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A Confucian Holistic World Order and China's Vision of a Shared Future

With China's rapid development, most of the world believes that the country is about to develop into a new superpower. Although the Chinese government seeks to promote a peaceful discourse, it seems that the Western world inevitably feels doubt and fear. Many people think that even if China does not actively seek conflict, its pursuit of superiority will lead to struggle against other world powers. Thus, China's current strength might affect world peace and harmony. From a cultural point of view, this article examines the potential for China to eliminate such fears and influence the world in a positive way.

Throughout world history, many changes in the power structures of territories and nations have taken place. In the twenty first century, the Internet and media revolution are producing huge shifts in world order patterns, which are becoming less effective. Problems and contradictions are appearing in various countries, including those with a higher GNP, largest populations and biggest territories. In this situation, peaceful development may be challenged.

While facing increasing tension, Western powers might regard China's rising with concern. On December 20th, 2017, in his national security strategy, Trump labelled China as a "rival" and a "revisionist power." On 23rd the same month, the Australian government released its Foreign Policy White Paper, which states: "Like all great powers, China will seek to influence the region to suit its own interests. As it does, a number of factors suggest we will face an increasingly complex and contested Indo–Pacific." (Australian Government n.p) In spite of these negative perceptions, China has been the largest beneficiary to economic globalization in recent years. Finding it impossible to reap the full benefits of globalization, Western countries are beginning a shift toward protectionism; a shift that might cause even more disputes. This paper explains the particularities of Chinese cultural tradition and its impact upon politics, economic patterns, consumer culture, and so on. It also compares it way to the Western tradition from the perspective of a Chinese scholar.

The impact of religion upon Western thought cannot be underestimated. Scholars such as Jacques Derrida have demonstrated that the Western intellectual tradition stems from the idea of a transcendental being who serves as origin of history and guarantor of meaning for human existence, a tradition grounded on Judaism, Hellenism, and later Christian thought. Derrida knew this tradition well, being the son of a Sephardic Jewish family (originally from the city of Toledo in Spain) who lived in Algeria and later became French. This worldview is also characterized by a strong tendency to contemplate the world as made up of antagonist forces with an exclusive role. Although such tradition had a positive impact in enhancing social cohesion in many parts of the world, this dual vision of good against evil has led to unresolved contradictions, some of which were located at the heart of Christianity itself, with its different manifestations, some of which were considered heretic. In a world order established on the basis of such polarities, a leader would inevitably contemplate himself (or herself) in contrast to others; surrounded by friend or by foes. Under such assumptions, President Bush's declaration of making no distinction between terrorism and the nations who harbor them comes as no

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surprise. Even in times of peace, this world order sees a division between different camps; with countries set in groups of allies, sharing the same world views, and against enemies, those not siding with them.

In addition, societies based on Christianity rely on cultures based on the idea of a supreme being who maintains order and moral control. Western traditional Christian cultures believed that humans are born with an original sinful selfish nature, and that social order cannot be maintained outside coercion, and that its absence would surely lead to anarchy or chaos. Political thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) would justify that human reason leads men to establish governments that would maintain God's divine order upon the earth. In *Leviathan,* Hobbes sets out his doctrine of the foundation of states as legitimate keepers of morality. Written during the English Civil War that brought Oliver Cromwell to power, the book seeks to demonstrate the need for a strong central authority to keep control and avoid evils and wars. However, contemporary politics faces a dilemma: the fact that "Even if their domestic politics are legitimate, the rules of the world game that have established are never politically legitimate, because imperialist worldviews take the world as the object of domination and never as a political entity" (Zhao 5).

Although the international order became more and more stable after WW II when most nations focused on domestic politics, the hegemonic powers continued to exercise control by asserting economic and cultural influence. Since 2017, with the arrival of President Donald Trump to power, world order is becoming more fragile. His "America first" policy can be regarded as a preparation for a new hegemonic round, perhaps in conflict with China's 'peaceful rise'. In spite of some concerns with territorial disputes with neighboring countries such as Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia and India, oriental Confucian ethics is responsible for a largely peaceful maintenance of diplomatic traditions in Asia.

For the differences between Confucian and Western ideologies, we can refer to Jürgen Habermas' argument in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, where he discusses George Herbert Mead's ideas on subjectivity and Emile Durkheim's insights on socialization. Habermas seems to agree with both sociologists that prototypical ethical principles stem from religious paradigms of 'totem worship' present in primitive religions. Indeed, early social norms come from moral authority with two fundamental characteristics: a) depersonalization, that is, authority goes beyond the personal utilitarian logic, and b) morality shows dual patterns of pros and cons. In the process of social development, however, people's understanding of the world evolves, and social norms lose their roots in the divine authority of religious societies. For Habermas, religious ideology and its corresponding rituals and social norms are replaced by communicative actions.

Unlike the Greco-Roman world, basis of Western cultures, China entered modern civilization through a different path. In fact, Wailu Hou considers two different paths: first the family, from which private property developed, and then the State, which took the place of the family. The Chinese concept of State, She Ji (社稷), is thus integrated into the family. Although within the State the blood relationship was broken, the domestic relationship between families and international politics, remains. (Chen 40) In such a social model, the development of Confucian political views do not focus on individual private property. The family is more important than the individual, and inter-subjectivity is more important than

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the individual subject. The social group looks after each individual, and the individual complies with family harmony.

While Western society agrees on a 'common sense' that people are social and society is always a group of people, in China human societies are perceived as belonging to a greater entity, an order ruled by nature within holistic world view ruled by the divine Dao. Chinese people follow the enlightenment of 礼 (manners) in social life. Collective rituals express the recognition and approval of such collective integrative world. In ancient China, people even lost their subjective status as individuals. They were always part of a whole. The ideal person in such society complied to 仁 (moral standards) becoming part of a perfect ethical system. The core idea of this thought is the mutual ethical behavior in interaction. Thus, the ethical rationality of ancient Chinese Confucianism is understood as internalized and metaphysical. It is the nature of the subject and, at the same time, the object of conversion; the norm of society and, at the same time, the ultimate pursuit; the means and the ends; Temporality and Faramita (In Buddhism, this concept represents real wisdom and stands for someone who has acquired compassion, generosity, loyalty, reliability and love for domestic life (for more in this, see Xingjian Gao *Bi'an* [*The other shore*]).

In this sense, Confucian moral obligations are far stronger than the Western social commitments. Under the influences of such concept, the ancient Chinese formed an ideal social model which was imagined as a "Land of Peach Blossoms" (Tao) where everything is in a natural and harmonious status and life is perfect. There is no need for external ruling or government. Order is maintained almost in an instinctual manner; it is an internalized morality that rules the entire world of nature and all the beings that are part of it.

Interestingly, such a society cannot end up in anarchy without a government, and a recent realistic proof of this can be found in 2008, after the Wenchuan Ms. 8.0 Earthquake created a disaster area and the local government was completely paralyzed. The area remained totally isolated with no traffic, communication and power supply, and still order remained among the victims, and people began to take care of one another. Traditional Chinese society does not need an external power to maintain the basic order, as the order is always in the collective unconscious. This is also one of the reasons why social security in East Asia is maintained against all odds.

For a world based on Confucian ethics, the relations between nations should follow after family relations, not hegemonic grounds. As with the family, members should show respect to the group and have small humble 'egos'. Countries should suppress their own selfish desires and follow the concept and ideal of "和 (harmony)," so that the international community could eventually reach a state of peace. To the Western world, this morality-based world-order might sound like a utopian ideal. However, it has formed a stable structure in the history of East Asia for a long time. In the Tang, Ming and early Qing dynasties in China, Confucian ethics created such international relationships of self-restraint, mutual respect and mutual accommodation with almost all the neighbors. The termination of this harmonious state was often caused by the invasion of non-Confucian nations and imperialist pursuits, with invaders holding a belief in their superior culture and morality. Thus, the 19th and 20th centuries saw signs of failure in international relations, and the original Eastern style world order utterly collapsed. The world

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entered modernity in accordance with the logic of the West's development, and this Confucian international order, along with the original mode of agricultural production in the East, was seen as a manifestation of obsolescence and gradually abandoned by the Asian countries.

A number of successive security crises in the west, along with the financial collapse of the late capitalist system, as Fredric Jameson would call it, have created the conditions for the rise of other emerging countries. The rise of the People's Republic of China is taking its impetus from traditional Confucianism. A number of theories of international relations are based on this model. Among them Tingyang Zhao's *Tian Xia* (天下, all-under-heaven). The "Tian Xia" system is founded on the basis of the holistic view of subjectivity.

> Confucian philosophy chooses to regard families as the basic units of commonality and hopes to extend this commonality of families to all larger commonalities in common. Thus there will be an all-inclusive Tian Xia. The internalization of the world is to make the world to be an "all-inclusive" Tian Xia, so that the world has only internality, and there will be no more insurmountable externalities, then we will no longer look for incompatible enemies, no longer identify the others as aliens that cannot coexist with "us," and no longer define different values as unacceptable paganism. (Zhao 14)

This concept of "Tian Xia" has been borrowed from the ancient Confucianism in a clear-cut manner and proposed to re-construct the political logic in the descending order from the world to the states and then to the families, so as to create a holistic entity. Zhao also pointed out that after the development of modern politics, it is impossible to go back to completely follow the classic Confucian ideal and establish a family-based social system. The reason is that, since the core of traditional Chinese society is the family, there would be the distinction between insiders and outsiders that would be applicable to ethnic minorities or contemporary migrant cultures.

In the past, such obstacles was overcome by looking at the difference of intimacy levels and status inside the family in the ancient Chinese tradition. In other words, it was understood that as the level of intimacy in the family system decreased, the effectiveness of family ethics and norms also diminished. Thus, when communicating with ethnic minorities in ancient China, the central empire followed moral traditions with courtesy, even if they were still regarded as uncivilized barbarians. This logic is completely unsuitable for the modern international community, so that the Confucian idea of the world-family needs improvement and updating. Nevertheless, it would be unrealistic to count on such a system in helping build a new world order and moral utopia. The realization of *Tian Xia* would require a modern political ideal of worldness and corresponding political systems and institutions.

On the basis of such theoretical exploration, the Chinese Communist Party has recently proposed the Chinese-style ideal of global order officially at the governmental level. President Jinping Xi presented the plan and the path to peaceful development to the 19th CPC National Congress, using the terms "A Community with a Shared Future." The concept was first proposed in 2013, shortly after Xi became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. It was initially used to emphasize the importance of the bilateral relations between China and Russia. Xi then repeatedly used it on diplomatic occasions. In most cases this concept remained at a regional level, referring to the relations with the neighboring

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countries around China. In March 2015, at the annual meeting of the Boao Forum for Asia/BFA, the idea began to break through regional barriers and expanded into the phrase "community of human destinies" in its official English translation. The latest version of the concept is "A Community with a Shared Future," used not only for diplomatic purposes, but also as a slogan in all kinds of important meetings of the CCP. Its meaning has gradually developed and enriched, being widely accepted by many other countries. In February 2017, "A Community with a Shared Future" was included in the resolution of the UN Human Rights Council and became an international consensus.

At the 19th NPC National Congress on October 18, 2017, the latest interpretation of "A Community with a Shared Future" is, in the words of Xi, the following:

We call on the people of all countries to work together to build a community with a shared future for mankind, to build an open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity. We should respect each other, discuss issues as equals, resolutely reject the Cold War mentality and power politics, and take a new approach to developing state-to-state relations with communication, not confrontation, and with partnership, not alliance. We should commit to dialogue, and resolving differences through discussion, coordinate responses to traditional and non-traditional threats, and oppose terrorism in all its forms. We should stick together through thick and thin, promote trade and investment liberalization and facilitation, and make economic globalization more open, inclusive, and balanced so that its benefits are shared by all. We should respect the diversity of civilizations. In handling relations among civilizations, let us replace estrangement with exchange, clashes with mutual learning, and superiority with coexistence. We should be good friends to the environment, cooperate to tackle climate change, and protect our planet for the sake of human survival. (Xi n.p)

Thus, the idea includes three aspects: "The connotation of 'A Community with a Shared Future' is deepened and refined continuously with the enrichment of China's diplomatic experience, covering three facets of shared interest, shared value and shared responsibility, and stressing that every country should give due consideration to the legitimate concerns of other countries while seeking the development of themselves" (Hu and Li 5).

The idea of "A Community with a Shared Future" requires nations to restrain the pursuit of self-interest, focusing on common goals and benefits for the whole of humankind. In essence, this is a holistic international order that differs from previous Western world order models.

As the establishment of an international order naturally adheres to the process working constructively from bilateral to regional relations, and also to international relations, China's program of developing "A Community with a Shared Future" is progressively carried out through a number of concrete steps. First, in the field of bilateral relations, China's reform and opening up is increasingly emphasizing its own responsibility in diplomatic activities. Such duty is based on the need to assert self-control and self-

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restraint in the process of intersubjective communication with other world actors. Thus, in the 19th NPC report, Xi declared that

> China remains firm in pursuing an independent foreign policy of peace. We respect the right of the people of all countries to choose their own development path. We endeavor to uphold international fairness and justice, and oppose acts that impose one's will on others or interfere in the internal affairs of others as well as the practice of the strong bullying the weak. China will never pursue development at the expense of others' interests, but nor will China ever give up its legitimate rights and interests. No one should expect us to swallow anything that undermines our interests. China pursues a national defense policy that is in nature defensive. China's development does not pose a threat to any other country. No matter what stage of development it reaches China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion. (Xi n.p)

Whether in the initial stage of the reform and opening up, or in the current period of rapid rise, China's ideal of "A Community with a Shared Future" persist, and for this reason the country seldom sets political conditions in international political and economic activities, as some Western countries do. This approach is often regarded as irresponsible by the Western, but it follows Confucian moral courtesies such as self-discipline and self-restraint.

At a regional and international level, actions are being carried out to extend the idea of "A Community with a Shared Future." For example, in the last few years, President Xi put forth the "The Belt and Road Initiative," meant to recover cultural and creative industries in China's ethnic areas as well as promoting connections with other Asian countries, Europe and Africa. The concept was originally proposed by the president between September and October 2013. On March 28, 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of China jointly released the program *Vision and Action Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*. This document provided a specific promotion plan for the project, whose objective is to take the historical symbol of the ancient Silk Road, highlighting the concept of peaceful development, actively strengthening the economic partnership among countries along the road, and jointly creating a community of shared interest, destiny and responsibility through mutual trust, economic integration and cultural tolerance.

The "Belt and Road" runs through Asia, Europe and Africa, connecting highly developed Europe directly to the rising East Asia. Some of the major routes "brings together China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltic); linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia; and connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

On land, the initiative focuses on jointly building a new Eurasian Land Bridge and developing China-Mongolia-Russia, China-Central Asia-West Asia and China-Indochina Peninsula economic corridors by taking advantage of international transport routes, relying on core cities along the Belt and Road and using key economic industrial parks as cooperation platforms.

The twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road is designed to go from China's coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in one route, and from China's coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific in the other. At sea, the initiative focuses on jointly building smooth, secure and efficient transport routes connecting major sea ports along the Belt and Road. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor are closely related to the Belt and Road Initiative, and therefore require closer cooperation and greater progress. The scope of cooperation covers regional infrastructures improvement, a secure and efficient network of land, sea and air passages, closer economic ties, political trust, cultural exchanges, and so on.

Ideologically, the historical orientation of the "Belt and Road" has avoided the Western modern international political framework from the very beginning. The ancient Silk Road originated in the Han dynasty in China. It began in Chang'an city and ended in Rome. In the beginning it was just a traffic corridor dominated by the silk trade, but it gradually developed into a political, economic and cultural exchange channel, making a great contribution in economic and culture prosperity to all countries along the route. By inheriting the concept of the classic case of an ancient diplomatic activity, the "Belt and Road" initiative implies the construction of a non-Western regional diplomatic approach. It is by far the most complete and comprehensive manifestation of China's ideal of "a Community with a Shared Future," and it can be seen as a large-scale trial of the international social model developed on the basis of Confucianism.

Although similar initiatives are being developed with the support on international institutions such as the United Nations, the Association of South-East Asian Nations ASEAN, NATO countries or the One Asia Foundation, "The Belt and Road" initiative has its own particularities. Participating countries have great differences in ideologies, level of economy, political systems, geographical locations, cultural traditions, historical lineages and major ethnic groups. The integration of these vastly different countries depends on the goal of jointly creating an open, inclusive and balanced regional economic cooperation architecture that benefits all in a goal oriented only towards economic development, even if the development of cultural and creative industries in the areas of the project is also envisioned. The connectivity projects of the initiative will help align and coordinate the development strategies of the countries along the Belt and Road, tap market potential in this region, promote investment and consumption, create demands and job opportunities, enhance people-to-people and cultural exchanges, and mutual learning among the peoples of the relevant countries, and enable them to understand, trust and respect each other and live in harmony, peace and prosperity.

To put it simply, the Belt and Road initiative unites different countries through common interest and the wish to jointly seek greater benefits. This is the beginning of a community of shared interest for the initiative is open to cooperation. It covers, but is not limited to, the area of the ancient Silk Road. It is open to all countries, and international and regional organizations for engagement, so that the results of the concerted efforts will benefit wider areas. The Initiative is harmonious and inclusive. It advocates tolerance among civilizations, respects the paths and modes of development chosen by different countries, and supports dialogue among different civilizations on the principles of seeking common

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ground while shelving differences and drawing on each other's strengths, so that all countries can coexist in peace for common prosperity.

At the 2015 Boao Forum for Asia, President Xi stressed that "The programs of development will be open and inclusive, not exclusive. They will be a real chorus comprising all countries along the routes, not a solo for China itself" (Xi n.p). As the chief advocate of this initiative, the People's Republic of China declared that the country is committed to shouldering more responsibilities and obligations within its capabilities and making greater contributions to the peace and development of mankind.

China has avoided the definition of dominant thought or leading force in the Belt and Road initiative, and there is no definition of responsibility or duty for other countries. "China is but one member of many cooperation frameworks in the cooperation mechanism of the strategic concept of 'the Belt and Road'. There are no so-called 'center countries' and 'marginal countries' or the 'donor' and 'the recipient' in their cooperation, instead there will be a many-to-many model of equal cooperation" (Hu and Xing 20).

From the statement above, we can see that China's "the Belt and Road" initiative basically follows a Confucian tradition of harmonious holistic world view, defining some basic characteristics of the ideal international order: abandoning the original concept of binary oppositions, imaginary opponents, and the system of confronted power structures. This new international order seeks self-restraint rather than external control to achieve harmonious relationships. In the cooperation, under the framework of shared interest, there are no conditions so that unprecedented inclusiveness and openness can be achieved. As main advocate of such an approach, China is not promoting its traditional Confucian values in order to seek dominance. As the success of "the Belt and Road" initiative becomes more evident, the ideal of "a Community with a Shared Future" will also become accepted by more countries, becoming an important cornerstone of the future world order. However, in spite of the many positive aspects of the "Belt and Road" project, the construction of a world model based on the vision of "a Community with a Shared Future" still faces many challenges. The final lines of this paper attempt to summarize some of these.

First is the question of how the countries of the world can create a universal ethical code. Such a "Community of a Shared Future" would need a holistic code of ethics. Although the Confucian world peace model has been accepted by Asian countries, it would require that other non-Asian nations accept some of its principles. For example, a precondition would be to minimize individualist approaches and asserting self-restraint, a position which is alien to Western world view, for instance. In order to reach the highest possible number of peoples and countries, China is planning to promote the concept of "a Community with a Shared Future" across the world, reaching cultures as different as the Christian and Islamic cultures.

The second important issue that the ideal of a "Community with a Shared Future" faces is the question of how to make its inter-subjective holistic approach as concrete and efficient as possible.

The self-restrained world order practiced in the People's Republic of China as a result of Confucian culture is the result of historical development of thousands of years. It is based on the core value and internalized in every sphere of Chinese society. As indicated at the beginning of this paper, Western cultures are based on strong principles of individual freedom and individual rights, emphasizing the subject-citizen rather than the community. In order to promote the inter-subjectivity, it would be

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necessary to convince the Western world that a focus on individual desires and benefits is not effective, and that cooperative and collaborative approaches require a perception of the person as part of a group, and as part of a wider natural entity which is the entire world. In recent years, some Western scholars are also struggling to show the relevance of inter-subjective cooperation (for an extended discussion of the evolution of the concept in the Western world, see López-Varela).

Finally, another issue is the question of China's role in the promotion of the "Community with a Shared Future." As ardent promoter of the initiative and its associated projects, as well as the concept of inter-subjectivity across the world, China is facing a paradox in its international relations. If China shows a strong sense of subjectivity in asserting the Confucian tradition behind the ideal of such a world community, it would be a violation to Confucian rules. However, if it does not assert such subjectivity, the world might doubt the ideal being promoted, something that it is also becoming increasingly difficult in view of China's growing economic and cultural success.

To conclude, this paper has provided a cultural background to the idea put for the by President Xi of "a Community with a Shared Future." The paper has shown how establishment of cross-cultural ties across the world concerns a collectivist approach which surpasses geographical and spatial national boundaries, demolishing barriers and walls, fostering inter-subjective approaches and inter-culturalism, promoting tolerance amid differences, and a culture of dialogue and peace. China's efforts to seek a new model to international world order passes by a number of concrete strategies, such as the creation and support to the "Belt and Road" initiative, reinventing the cultural impact of the ancient Silk Road in order to enhance tourism and revitalize cultural and creative industries (see other papers in this thematic issue).

However, the goal to create "a Community with a Shared Future" goes beyond cultural and economic forms of cooperation. It requires the establishment of confidence and trust, as well as a global framework that allows to focus on a common future modelled on an ideal of harmony and inclusiveness for all cultures. The people in China and their political representatives feel the responsibility to be pioneers and advocators of this new world order.

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