

# The rise of Chinese exceptionalism in international relations

European Journal of  
International Relations  
19(2) 305–328

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DOI: 10.1177/1354066111421038

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## Abstract

Although exceptionalism is an important dimension of China's foreign policy, it has not been a subject of serious scholarly research. This article attempts to identify manifestations of exceptionalism in China's long history and explain why and how different types of exceptionalism have arisen in different historical periods. The analytical approach is both historical and theoretical. It explores how international structure has interacted with perceptions of history and culture to produce three distinctive yet related types of exceptionalism in imperial, Maoist, and contemporary China. While resting on an important factual basis, China's exceptionalism is constructed by mixing facts with myths through selective use of the country's vast historical and cultural experiences. The implications of contemporary China's exceptionalism — as characterized by the claims of great power reformism, benevolent pacifism, and harmonious inclusions — are drawn out by a comparison with American exceptionalism. While American exceptionalism has both offensive and defensive faces, Chinese exceptionalism is in general more defensive and even vague. While not determinative, exceptionalism can suggest policy dispositions, and by being an essential part of China's worldview, it can become an important source for policy ideas, offer the ingredients for the supposed construction of Chinese theories of international relations, and provide a lens through which to view emerging Chinese visions of international relations.

## Keywords

American exceptionalism, China's rise, Chinese exceptionalism, culture, history, myth

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## Introduction

Students of Chinese foreign policy have long recognized that China possesses a distinctive set of foreign policy principles derived from the country's long historical experience and its complex political and cultural traditions. Few, however, have ventured to analyze them under the rubric of 'Chinese exceptionalism.' Occasionally the peculiarity of China's exceptionalism is suggested, such as when Barry Buzan (2010: 21) notes 'an inward-looking type of national exceptionalism' and when Samuel Kim (1998: 3) distinguishes between American exceptionalism in terms of Manifest Destiny and Chinese 'exemptionalism' in terms of the so-called Middle Kingdom complex. But such brief asides are inadequate for understanding the nature of China's claim to uniqueness in international relations. More recently, Chris Alden and Daniel Large (2011), in the context of China–Africa relations, posit a form of exceptionalism characterized by the rhetorical claims of mutual respect and political equality. But their analysis is limited to a specific case and ignores other and more general aspects of China's exceptionalism.

If by exceptionalism is meant the unique qualities — from the particular set of political and social values to the special historical trajectory and foreign relations experience — that differentiate one country from another, then China certainly has its own version of exceptionalism. Many other countries, from the United States to Singapore, can also be described as exceptionalist. But because China is a rising great power, the specific character and quality of its exceptionalism matter more than those of most other countries, just as American exceptionalism has long been a prominent topic in the foreign policy literature. This literature, however, has long been written as though exceptionalism were all of the American type or a variant of it.<sup>1</sup> I attempt to show a Chinese version of foreign policy exceptionalism that contrasts with many key dimensions of American exceptionalism while also sharing some important similarities with it. The main purpose is to stimulate discussion on China's exceptionalism by identifying and explaining the exceptionalist assertions that can be found in China's copious historical literature, official documents, and intellectual writings.

These exceptionalist ideals have been in place for a long time, from imperial China through revolutionary PRC (People's Republic of China) on to the present day. Recent scholarly neglect of the subject may be in part due to China's largely defensively oriented foreign policy in the past three decades. China is usually seen as 'free-riding' on the existing international order without clearly articulating its own visions and approaches. While China's foreign policy has been held back by a defensive mind set until recently, Chinese views of international relations, in the official, semi-official, and intellectual circles, are being developed at an accelerating pace and with growing originality. The five years between 2005 and 2010, for example, have marked the appearance of three distinctive sets of literature whose academic and policy influence is likely to grow: neo-Tianxiaism (*tianxia* is a Chinese term usually translated as 'all under heaven') symbolized by the philosopher Zhao Tingyang (2005; 2009), the project on China's pre-Qin thoughts of international relations led by Yan Xuetong (2011; Yan and Xu, 2008; Yan et al., 2009) at Tsinghua University, and the 'China model' literature with inputs from Pan Wei (2009) at Peking University and various other scholars. The Chinese government, meanwhile,

has also produced new concepts such as 'peaceful development' and 'harmonious world,' both of which have been consolidated in the official discourse since 2005. Future historians might look back and identify 2005 as the year of the beginning of China's cultural and ideological rise, not least because the official 'harmonious world' rhetoric, the unofficial 'Tianxia system' thesis, and the Tsinghua project on pre-Qin thoughts were all produced or begun in that year. Although a coherent Chinese vision is still in the making, we can no longer ignore Chinese ideals about international relations and their policy impact. Exceptionalism does not determine policy, but by being an essential part of the worldview of the Chinese government and many intellectuals, it can become an important source for policy ideas. It can also provide the ingredients for the supposed construction of Chinese theories of international relations that both policymakers and analysts inside China see as in dire need. And, as will be detailed below, it creates promises and problems in China's foreign policy.

The identification of China's exceptionalism serves another important purpose, with implications for how we understand China's international behavior. Scholars are increasingly asking the question of what China thinks and wants in international politics: 'The great strategic issue of our times is not just China's rising power but whether its worldview and applied theory will reproduce, converge with, or take a separate path from the world order and ideas produced in the era of trans-Atlantic dominance' (Evans, 2010: 55; see also Legro, 2007; Leonard, 2008). But this cannot be usefully answered in a theoretical and abstract way. Most International Relations (IR) theories offer little guidance as to what China will want, other than a few very general predictions such as the realist one that a rising China will expand its interests abroad (Gilpin, 1981). Constructivists thus focus on the content of policy ideas, believing that what China wants depends on its national ideas about how to achieve foreign policy goals (Legro, 2007). These ideas, however, can only be known through detailed examination of China's foreign policy discourse and behavior.

One aim of this article is to undertake precisely this task from the angle of exceptionalism, and I suggest that this offers an important perspective on the emerging Chinese visions of international relations. It also challenges the widespread perception that China does not have a foreign relations ideology (see Buzan, 2010). Historically China has always had such an ideology, with different manifestations in different periods. One trouble with Chinese foreign policy today is not that it does not have a vision or ideology, but that this vision, still in its inception, is vague, self-centered, and largely defensive. A further implication is that the sources for the ideational construction of China's foreign policy will come in an important part, though not entirely, from its own historical and cultural traditions rather than from the West. As traditions are being revived in China, analysts must also come to grips with the role of history and culture in contemporary Chinese policy thinking.

This article begins with a brief analysis of the historical manifestations of China's exceptionalism before identifying the main elements of the emerging version in contemporary China. It then discusses two questions crucial to understanding any country's exceptionalism: 'Why does it arise?' and 'How is it constructed?' It explores the interactions of structural, historical, and cultural factors underlying the rise of particular types of exceptionalism in different historical periods, and contends that while China's exceptionalism has an undeniable factual basis, it has been constructed partly by mixing facts

with myths through selective use of history. The final section draws out the implications of China's exceptionalism by comparing it with American exceptionalism.

## A historical perspective on China's exceptionalism

It is impossible to understand the rise and significance of contemporary China's exceptionalism without recognizing its historical roots and manifestations. An interesting genealogy exists among its varied expressions in three historical periods, as demonstrated by their historical and intellectual linkages and ruptures. These will be explained in later sections. This section explores manifestations of China's exceptionalism in the imperial era (221BC–AD1911) and the revolutionary PRC (1949–76), before analyzing the currently emerging exceptionalism in the next section.

### Imperial China

Imperial China's exceptionalism was embodied in Chinese rulers' and elites' claim about China's centrality and superiority in the known world as well as the claim about the benevolent and magnanimous nature of its foreign policy. The venerable literature on the so-called 'tribute system' provides a useful entry into this discussion (Fairbank, 1942, 1953, 1968b). Although this literature has many problems (Zhang, 2009), particularly concerning its tendency to idealize an in fact complex set of policy thinking and behavior, it also captures the rhetorical persistence of sinocentrism. That is, the Chinese perceived and, more frequently, presented *Zhongguo* (China, literally 'the central state') as the center of the known world and superior to other polities culturally, morally, and materially. The 'Central Kingdom' therefore was entitled to tribute-payment from foreign rulers, while the latter were required to perform duties as the former's tributary or vassal states. While there was a lot of myth-making in this sinocentric conception, there was also indeed a discursive persistence in sinocentrism across successive imperial regimes (Schwartz, 1968: 281). Rather than being merely discrete or accidental elements, the sinocentric claim represented the most noteworthy, consistent, and important dimension of the imperial discourse. It might also be labeled Tianxiaism, since China claimed Confucian moral authority (and, to varying degrees, administrative control) over the known world (the *tianxia*) and since Chinese rulers identified themselves as the 'Son of Heaven.'

Imperial China, at least for certain dynasties such as the Ming (1368–1644), also professed to offer peace and benevolence in its foreign relations and thus to confer order and stability in its periphery. Many Chinese scholars argue that the basic international purpose of the Ming and of the Chinese empire in general was to 'share the fortune of peace' with other polities by conducting a peaceful foreign policy (He, 2007: 206, 308). This expression — 'share the fortune of peace' — also indicates another exceptionalist element, namely, China would include all other polities in its foreign policy domain and promote their development and prosperity under the influence and constraints of the Chinese civilization.

Imperial China's exceptionalism, as epitomized by sinocentrism and Tianxiaism in world order conception, benevolent pacifism in policy conduct, and magnanimous inclusionism in foreign relations, can be briefly illustrated by the first rescript the first Ming emperor Hongwu (r. 1368–98) sent to Japan in 1369. It read in part:

In the past, when the emperors ruled the tianxia, all who were lit by the sun and moon, whether near or far, were treated with impartiality. Thus with Zhongguo stable and peaceful, [the countries in] all four directions were in their proper places and there was no intention to make them submit (to Zhongguo)... We are bringing mutual peace and calm to all countries far and near so that the good fortunes of peace may be enjoyed by all. (Cheng, 1981: 149)

Hongwu's son the Yongle emperor (r. 1403–24) went beyond the sinocentrism and pacifism of this statement. He was earnest in giving largesse and hospitality to foreign polities in order to 'show nothing left out' or 'show no outer-separation' (*shi wuwai*), thereby implying the admission of all other polities into the family of the Chinese civilization (Wang, 1968: 54). As we shall see, this inclusionism, as well as pacifism, will reappear in contemporary discourse, though under new guises and with a different set of contents.

### Revolutionary PRC

With the decline of the Qing empire (1644–1911) in the 19th century, China entered the so-called 'century of humiliation,' beginning with the Opium War in 1839 until the founding of the PRC in 1949. Clearly, sinocentrism was no more because China was no longer the center of the known world. But although China was now weak and vulnerable, and although the formal communist ideology was used to justify policy choices in ideological terms, a new form of exceptionalism nevertheless emerged with a new policy agenda. In many ways Mao and his comrades still regarded China as a 'special country' in the world, and they sought to re-establish China's central, if not dominant, position in world affairs, informed above all by a palpable sense of China's historical destiny and moral superiority.

This exceptionalism — China's historical entitlement to great power status and moral authority — was based on an interrelated set of assumptions and convictions deeply rooted in a particular understanding of China's history and culture. Mao's central assumptions appeared in the form of historical 'lessons' to be applied to policy formulation, particularly in terms of his strong aspiration to Chinese centrality and autonomy in foreign relations (Kirby, 1994). These were the familiar beliefs that as a great nation, China naturally occupied a central position in world affairs and must be treated as a great power, and that China's special virtue consisted in the fact that its foreign policy was based not on expediency but on immutable principles that expressed universal values such as justice and equality (Levine, 1994: 43–44). China could claim moral superiority because it was thought that as a peaceful great power that had fallen victim to Western imperialism, China knew the plight and aspirations of all the oppressed and weak countries and would strive for the alleviation of their poverty and oppression. China's habitual assault on 'power politics' and 'hegemonism,' for example, was not merely diplomatic ritual but also an integral part of projecting its identity as a moral regime in world politics (Kim, 1994: 408). The conviction, in short, was that China had been and was now again a great power with superior moral qualities and that as such it automatically commanded a moral high ground in world affairs and deserved the respect and in some cases even (as in its relations with junior partners such as Vietnam) deference from other countries. As Steven Levine (1994: 44; emphasis added) notes, such beliefs 'constitute a claim to entitlement by virtue of China's ontological status rather

than its behavioral characteristics. In effect, they are a demand that others recognize and respect China's *exceptional qualities*.

The exceptionalism of Mao's China might be seen as revolutionary sinocentrism or Tianxiaism, as opposed to their imperial precedents. Mao attempted to carve out a unique Chinese way of realizing worldwide communism by rejecting Western modernity and by drawing on China's special historical and cultural tradition — a unique mixture of China's traditional Tianxiaist aspiration and the modern ideology of communism (Xu, 2010: 67). In his later years, Mao practically believed that the center of world revolution had moved to China and that he had become the leader of world revolution (Song, 2009: 19). As a result, China began revolutionary diplomatic offensives on all fronts, promoting a China-centered 'world revolution' by supporting revolutionary movements in Asia and beyond. One may note the subtle influence imperial sinocentrism had exerted on this revolutionary sinocentrism/Tianxiaism. Indeed, Chen Jian has long argued that the imperial 'Central Kingdom' mentality had a profound impact on Mao and his comrades. Mao's revolutionary ambition was to turn China into a land of universal justice and equality, while at the same time reviving China's central position in the world and making it a model for other 'oppressed nations' by supporting worldwide revolutions (Chen, 2001). Chen goes so far as to argue, in the context of Sino-Vietnamese relations, that 'what Beijing intended to create was a modern version of the relationship between the Central Kingdom and its subordinate neighbors' (Chen, 2001: 237).

## The emerging exceptionalism

If imperial China's exceptionalism was characterized by sinocentrism, pacifism and inclusionism, and revolutionary exceptionalism by great power entitlement and moral superiority, what might be the components of contemporary exceptionalism during an era of China's power rise? Although the emerging exceptionalism will continue to evolve, three components can be identified at this stage: great power reformism, benevolent pacifism, and harmonious inclusionism. It is immediately obvious that these designations overlap with some of the imperial and revolutionary precedents. This is natural, as a country's exceptionalist thinking is to a large extent history- and culture-bound. Yet, although the labels are similar, they imply new meanings under new circumstances with new significance in the present era of world politics.

### *Great power reformism*

Because the PRC government and elites have inherited the historical understanding of China as a great power, they take it for granted that, though it may be long and hard to realize, being a great power is China's historical destiny and that a rising China will once again become a great power, or even a superpower, at least in economic terms. One commentator attributes China's inveterate 'great power dream' to an implicit sinocentric mentality influenced by the myth of imperial China as the 'heavenly dynasty' (Ren, 2009: 135). But, more importantly, the emerging discourse is more than just a normal claim to China's great power status; it is increasingly animated by a prominent proclamation about the unique qualities of a *Chinese* great power. As Zhao Tingyang, an influential philosopher



at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, declares, China can become a new kind of great power — one that is responsible for the whole world, but in a different way from historical empires (Zhao, 2005).

This attempt to define China as a new great power is part of the larger political and intellectual project to construct China's national identity, create China's worldview, and develop a Chinese diplomatic philosophy for its foreign relations. A necessary task of developing such a philosophy is held to be the need to surpass Western theory and practice, that is, to show that China will not repeat the violent and disastrous paths of rising powers in Western history, that a rising China will strive to build a peaceful and harmonious world rather than playing the zero-sum game of power politics, and that China will provide a new ideal for the common development of all countries in the world (Zhang, 2007: 29). An implicit assumption is that for China — an ancient, proud, and in many ways superior civilizational state — to follow the Western precepts of great power politics is at best inappropriate and at worst self-humiliating. A rising China cannot just be a great power of material strength, which would make it no different from other great powers in history; instead, it must also become a 'knowledge producer' (Wang Z, 2006) by digging deep into China's traditional historical and cultural resources (Wang J, 2006), so as to be able to develop unique qualities for playing its role in the new era.

In short, China's great power reformism is the exceptionalist claim that China as a great power will challenge the historical trajectory of power rise, redefine the meaning of being a great power, and reform world politics through the development and practice of its unique international relations principles and ideals. Such a claim is commonplace in the official and semi-official discourse, particularly in the assertion that China has always conducted a peaceful foreign policy and will not threaten or challenge anyone, and it is intimately connected with the other two components of the emerging exceptionalism.

### *Benevolent pacifism*

The essential claim of contemporary pacifism is no different from its imperial predecessor. However, imperial Chinese foreign policy, having now been mythologized and presented as an alternative to Western models, is utilized as the most important evidential support for pacifism today. It is frequently asserted that imperial China was peaceful and defensive and viewed wars only as a last resort. Chinese culture is usually held to account for China's unique peacefulness. According to a prominent IR scholar in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, traditional culture stabilized China's internal and external relations through assimilation and integration of different peoples and cultures. Contrasting Chinese with Western culture, he claims that the former has contributed to ethnic integration inside China while the latter has given rise to numerous wars and conflicts in the global expansion of capitalism (Li, 1999). China's alternative to the Western model of historical development is thus neatly created.

Having established imperial China's pacifist tradition, emphasized China's agonizing experience in the modern world, and professed China's intention to never inflict similar sufferings on other countries, the PRC claims that it will always adopt a peaceful foreign policy, will never threaten anyone, and will help to maintain world peace through its own development. This discourse pervades official and semi-official statements. A particularly

famous example is China's 'peaceful rise' thesis propagated by the influential scholar-official Zheng Bijian (2005; see also Glaser and Medeiros, 2007). The best official articulations are the government's 2005 and 2011 White Papers on 'China's peaceful development' (PRC State Council, 2005, 2011) and State Councilor Dai Bingguo's (2010) essay on 'Persisting with Taking the Path of Peaceful Development' released in December 2010.

### *Harmonious inclusionism*

The third component of the emerging exceptionalism is what I will call 'harmonious inclusionism.' Again the label bears resemblance to imperial exceptionalism discussed above. However, imperial inclusionism was predicated on sinocentric hierarchy, supposedly relied on the 'rule of virtue' (that is, China's moral quality), and implied China's magnanimous admission of other polities into the family of the Chinese civilization *under* the influence, leadership, or even perhaps domination of the Chinese empire.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, contemporary inclusionism, by adopting accommodationism as a basic policy principle, has little connotation of Chinese leadership or dominance, or at least not yet.

Specifically, the idea consists of a set of interrelated propositions. First, rejecting the legitimacy of the domination of one country, ideology, or approach in world politics, it advocates international cooperation and accommodation by adopting an open, tolerant, and inclusive attitude toward the multiplicity and diversity of political and cultural traditions in the world. China itself will seek further integration with the international system. Second, inclusionism refers not just to the acknowledgment of the legitimacy of different political and cultural traditions and the need to incorporate them into global governance, but also the position that all countries need to be included in a process of achieving common security, development, and prosperity based on open multilateralism and mutually beneficial cooperation. The objective is to realize common and universal security and development for all countries, not just for one or a few great powers. For its part, China offers to share the benefits of its development with other countries, accommodate political and cultural differences, and strive to create a 'harmonious world.'

On the face of it, this seems a rather lackluster — if not overtly vague and vacuous — position, and this may be the reason why we have commonly missed it. But in fact, this new inclusionism is already noteworthy and given that it is still in the early stage of conceptual evolution, it might become the most profound among China's special claims about international relations once the associated ideas are fully developed. At this stage, it can be most effectively examined by tracing three recent discourses in China's intellectual circles: the application of the ancient idea of 'harmony with difference' (*he er butong*), the ongoing official discourse on the 'harmonious world' (*hexie shijie*), and the popular 'neo-Tianxiaism' (*xin tianxia zhuyi*).

The term 'harmony with difference' is often traced back to a famous passage in the Confucian *Analects*: *junzi he er butong*. In Confucian thought, *he* means harmony (acknowledging differences while harmonizing their relationships) whereas *tong* means sameness. Thus the above passage can be rendered as 'the exemplary person harmonizes with others, but does not necessarily agree with them.' Chinese scholars frequently argue that China's holistic mode of thinking suppresses the assertion of individualism and promotes the harmonious coexistence of differences and is thus tolerant of other cultures and open to the



inclusion of other traditions in a process of harmonizing differences. According to the distinguished sociologist Fei Xiaotong (2001: 5), the 'harmony with difference' idea reflects Chinese respect for mutual understanding, mutual tolerance, and symbiosis of cultural diversity. Another scholar (Hu, 2005) asserts that it is a philosophical pathway to perpetual peace, or in the indigenous Chinese locution, to 'great harmony' (*datong*). Among Western scholars, William Callahan (2004) contends that 'harmony with difference' describes an immanent logic and flexible methodology by an appeal to difference and ambiguity in order to achieve the utopia of 'great harmony.' This can certainly be seen as China's exceptionalist problem-solving approach.

The current Chinese leadership has effectively exploited this idea for policy discourse. According to an official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chinese officials have extended and innovated the meaning of 'harmony with difference' in applying it to the field of international relations. Now *he* refers to a state of harmonious and non-confrontational relationships and *tong* refers to the sameness in viewpoints. Thus *he er butong* can be presented as the principle that countries should conduct harmonious relations with one another while maintaining differences in views; at the same time, these differences should not compromise their harmonious relationship, friendly interaction, or mutually beneficial cooperation (Ding, 2005: 29). To put it differently, it means that while acknowledging the diversity of the world, countries should actively seek the convergence of their interests, enlarge consensus, promote multilateralism, and strive for harmony and progress in international society.

Starting with President Jiang Zemin's 2002 speech (Jiang, 2002), 'harmony with difference' has found its way into major speeches Chinese leaders have made abroad, and has apparently been developed into the more wide-ranging concept of the 'harmonious world' since 2005, heralding, as some observers call it, a new era in Chinese diplomacy (Ruan, 2006). President Hu Jintao's September 2005 speech to the United Nations summit is widely seen as the occasion when China articulated 'harmonious world' as a unique Chinese concept and theory of international relations. His April 2006 speech to Yale University continued this theme and embodied elements of both pacifism and inclusionism (see *Xinhua Yuebao*, 2007: 964–967). Scholars have quickly followed suit and begun to argue that 'harmonious world' represents a new Chinese paradigm for world order (Wang, 2007). In this sense, it can be viewed as an important component of the emerging exceptionalism. Indeed, it is the clearest example yet of China's harmonious inclusionism at this stage. Hu's UN speech, for example, explains the virtue of diversity and difference, emphasizes the importance of dialogue and mutual learning, and promotes common development and the construction of a harmonious world that tolerates and includes different civilizations (see *Xinhua Yuebao*, 2006: 1647–1650).

Almost concomitantly, at the unofficial level a neo-Tianxiaism has emerged with a similar though far more sophisticated proposal for the future world order. I call it 'neo-Tianxiaism' because although its proponents deploy the ancient concept of *tianxia* for theory construction, they have deprived it of the old meaning and tried to renew it within the present realities of world politics.<sup>3</sup> Here harmonious inclusionism is even more prominently asserted. Zhao contends that the *tianxia* ideal has created the most peaceful and inclusive principle by seeking the maximization of cooperation and the minimization of conflict on the basis of acknowledging the world's diversity. The *tianxia* is inclusive of every cultural or spiritual system, acknowledges the independent role of every culture,

**Table 1.** Historical manifestations of China's exceptionalism.

Imperial China	Revolutionary PRC	Contemporary PRC
Imperial sinocentrism	Revolutionary sinocentrism	Great power reformism
Benevolent pacifism	Great power entitlement	Benevolent pacifism
Magnanimous inclusionism	Moralism	Harmonious inclusionism

rejects seeing any other culture as the enemy, and creates universal values on the basis of cultural inclusion (Zhao, 2009: 320–321).

## Why China's exceptionalisms arise

We must now explore why particular versions of exceptionalism arise (see Table 1 for a summary) by examining their sources. Looking back at the history of China's exceptionalism, one can find interesting similarities and differences. Imperial China and the revolutionary PRC share different kinds of sinocentric assumption, while revolutionary PRC and contemporary China share the claim to great power entitlement. As for differences, sinocentrism gradually lost its appeal and legitimate standing after the end of the imperial era; and revolutionary PRC, notwithstanding its professed adherence to the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, did not place great value on peace in its actual behavior. But there is a striking similarity between imperial and contemporary China's claims about pacifism and inclusionism, underpinned by an assumption of China's centrality (imperial China), or at least importance (contemporary China), in world affairs — an assumption that also permeated revolutionary PRC in the form of Mao's revolutionary sinocentrism. This demonstrates the historically and culturally bounded nature of China's exceptionalism: a historical understanding of China as a, if not always *the*, great power, and an allegedly culturally derived holistic mode of thinking which privileges peace and harmony.

But history and culture, while exerting profound and subtle influences, do not by themselves determine the peculiarities of China's exceptionalism. A fuller explanation must also take into account the international structural situations where China finds itself and hence the causal interactions between material structure, history, and culture in producing particular kinds of exceptionalism at different times.<sup>4</sup> Structure establishes permissible and constraining conditions under which particular ideas of exceptionalism emerge.<sup>5</sup> The central theoretical question is how history and culture have been interpreted and used by later generations for their own purposes within the limits established by international structure. In other words, we shall examine how material conditions have worked with perceptions of Chinese history and culture to produce different kinds of exceptionalism.

Imperial China's perception of its superiority and centrality may date back to the Shang period (c. 1600–1100BC), and the notion of a radiating civilization was part of a worldview that existed during the Zhou (c. 1100–256BC) (Di Cosmo, 2002: 94). Two factors were most important in contributing to such a perception: the early development of the Chinese civilization and the absence of any rival civilization in its vicinity. As John Fairbank (1968a: 1–2) put it, 'Age, size, and wealth all made China the natural center of this East Asian world. Geography kept the whole region separate from West and South Asia and made it

the most distinctive of all the great culture areas.' Sinocentrism was thus born of the structural condition that China was historically the only 'great power,' both materially and culturally, in the East Asian system. Sinocentrism endured despite periodic and sometimes dramatic changes of reality, only to be fundamentally shattered by European and Japanese imperialism in the 19th century. An important factor for this remarkable persistence is the myth-making tradition of Chinese historical writing, as well as the perceived utility of exploiting sinocentrism for imperial governance.<sup>6</sup> But a more significant underlying cause is the resilience (which is not to say durability or stability) of Chinese primacy in East Asian history. Historical China can in fact be seen as cycles of multistate systems as much as cycles of unified dynasties, and unification only accounted for about half of the imperial history (Hui, 2008). But it is this privileged half of imperial unification that provided justification and support for sinocentrism and for the dubious claim that the other half of disunion was in perpetual transition to eventual unification (Wang, 2003: 118).

It is then easy to understand the origin of imperial China's magnanimous inclusionism. It was a direct outgrowth of sinocentrism, which perceived the world as a civilizational family — a cultural world of the *tianxia* — presided over by the Chinese Son of Heaven, and informed by Confucian principles of statecraft, which stipulated hierarchical care for members of the *tianxia*. It was thus rooted in the structure of Chinese primacy and the doctrine of Confucianism. Benevolent pacifism was seen as the pathway to the realization of such a world. Clearly it found support in the peaceful side of imperial China. But it is also apparent that this discourse was inherently political and ideological. On the one hand, it was simply a reflection of the penetration of Confucianism as a state ideology since Han times (206BC–AD220) and a continuation of the myth-making tradition in Chinese history. On the other hand, demilitarization was an important part of imperial ideology to hide the value or coercive effectiveness of war as a political, cultural, or social tool (Lorge, 2005: 2), contributing greatly to the myth of a peaceful China governed by Confucian morality.

Moving on to the modern world and Maoist China, the greatest change was the transformation of China's position from the center to the periphery of international politics. This put severe limits on the range and ambition of foreign policy, perhaps best revealed in China's subordinate status in its relationship with the Soviet Union in the 1950s and early 1960s (Chen, 2001; Westad, 1998). Sinocentrism and inclusionism of the imperial sort no longer seemed possible in the new circumstances. Instead, Mao and his comrades were first concerned with gaining China's great power status and restoring its autonomy that had been lost in the previous century. It was the first time in Chinese history that such a task had dawned on Chinese leaders, and this was above all informed by the wrenching contrast between China's past greatness and its recent suffering, as well as a profound sense of China's historical destiny as a great power.

But history also seemed to have had a different and more intriguing sort of influence. Although it may be impossible to demonstrate whether Mao had imperial precedents in mind when devising policies for the new China, his desire for China's centrality in world affairs was often explicit, particularly in his later desire to lead the world proletarian revolution. This quest for centrality when China was materially weak and structurally vulnerable, coupled with revolutionary fervor, produced the peculiarity of revolutionary sinocentrism. Of course history is far from the only or the most important influence, and

foreign policy was frequently used by Mao for domestic political struggle and mass mobilization (Chen, 2001). Yet the particular shape of Mao's revolutionary foreign policy for centrality may be difficult to explain without an appreciation of the imperial background. A number of scholars have taken notice of this. Xu Jilin, a noted student of modern China's intellectual history, observes that Mao bore a Tianxiaist aspiration to pursue a unique Chinese road in world communism (Xu, 2010: 67). It may be added that although this article does not have space to discuss the exceptionalism of the late Qing and Republican China (1912–49), many intellectuals during that tumultuous period also wanted to retain a central place for Chinese history and culture in world history and culture, and the revolutionary sinocentrism of Mao might be interpreted as a new stage in China's drive toward the center of the world, now intensified by revolutionary violence, in the larger process of the radicalization of China in the 20th century, which was itself a result of the loss of China's centrality after the 19th century (Yü, 1993).

Was Mao also influenced by Chinese culture? Surely he was, but the culture he took to heart was primarily a kind of 'struggle culture' useful for waging revolutionary violence and political intrigue, embedded famously in China's traditional historical novels such as *Sanguo yanyi* (*Romance of Three Kingdoms*) and *Shuihu zhuan* (*Outlaws of the Marsh*), rather than anything resembling the Confucian emphasis on peace and harmony. Mao's obsession with 'continuous revolution' may have derived as much from peasant rebellions in Chinese history, with which he was intimately familiar, as from the Soviet orthodoxy, from which he deviated. It is thus not surprising that Mao did not emphasize peace in foreign relations. The discourse on peaceful foreign policy during this period emanated mostly from moderates such as the PRC's first Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai (PRC Foreign Ministry and CCCPC Party Literature Research Office, 1990) and other lower-ranking officials in the foreign affairs bureaucracies who were completely overwhelmed by Mao in decision-making.

Today's China is again facing a changing international structure. Although since the mid- to late 1990s Chinese analysts have characterized the world power configuration as 'one superpower (the United States), many great powers (Europe, Japan, China, and Russia)' (Deng, 2001: 345–346; Foot, 2006: 80), they expect the rise of China and other countries to transform US unipolarity into some sort of multipolarity in which China would play a greater role. Maoist China's quest for great power entitlement is now seen as being fulfilled. During this structural readjustment, an important question as seen by Chinese analysts is how to prepare China intellectually for its new and expanding international role. The new great power reformism is created in part by this structural expectation, while at the same time being informed by an understanding of China's historical status and destiny as a great power. Furthermore, the role of history does not simply lie in reminding Chinese elites of their country's past greatness and future prospects, but also in providing a perceived contrast between China's supposed peaceful foreign policy and the aggressive modern Western one. This has led to a strong desire to proclaim a Chinese development route different from that of the West. And it is why it is claimed that China would *reform* world politics in a more peaceful, cooperative, and harmonious direction by utilizing its own unique historical and cultural resources.

Confucianism is perhaps the most effective cultural resource that can be used to substantiate this claim, and it is only natural that the Chinese government and analysts have uniformly

exploited it in promoting a new benevolent pacifism. We must acknowledge that there is something genuine and noble in China's insistence on the peaceful nature of its foreign policy. In the modern era, this has been a result of the 'century of humiliation' and the visceral psychological impact it has had on generations of Chinese elites: because of what China had suffered in the past, it is said to condemn the evil of hegemony and cherish the value of peace.<sup>7</sup> But at the same time the pacifist discourse also has important political and ideological functions for the current government. In addition to elevating China to the moral high ground, it is also meant to dissipate the fear and suspicion about a rising China and to create a friendly regional and international environment for its re-emergence. For example, the government and many analysts often try to refute the so-called 'China threat theory' by falling back on assertions about China's 'peaceful nature.' Indeed, this desire to present China as a peaceful power so as to create a 'China opportunity' thesis underpins all three components of the emerging exceptionalism. In this sense exceptionalism is in part a product of the ideological discourse to facilitate China's rise — and an example of the use of history and culture to discursively counter structural pressures from the international system.

The sources of the new harmonious inclusionism are the most intriguing. The Confucian influence is easy to see, but what is striking is that this principle is completely silent on China's own position in a 'harmonious world' other than that it would work with other countries according to a set of accommodationist and inclusionist principles in creating such a world. The contrast with the more activist imperial and revolutionary sinocentrism of the past is self-evident. One is tempted to suppose that harmonious inclusionism is developed for a China that wants to claim some moral authority and discourse power in modern international relations but is unclear about its fundamental position, value, and purpose in world politics. It is an ambiguous discourse structured materially by China's current status as a rising power facing the potential danger of a balancing coalition against it. This makes one wonder how this principle might evolve when China's international position improves in the future. Contemporary PRC professes no sinocentrism of either the imperial or the revolutionary kind, but it is well worth asking whether a new sort of sinocentrism might emerge when China is in a more privileged structural condition. Might not history and culture be used differently in a different structural context to serve a new purpose, as seems to be the case historically?

Having explored why different types and manifestations of China's exceptionalism arise, we must also briefly consider how they arise. The current exceptionalism arises in great part from Beijing's desire to provide a strategic discourse, ideological justification, and intellectual support for China's re-emergence as a great power in the modern world. But how has it been constructed?

In examining this question, one is struck by how the government and some intellectuals have taken an undifferentiated West as the Other in constructing the uniqueness of the Self, producing a discourse about the West as exploitative and aggressive and China as benevolent and peaceful. This is a process of essentializing both the Western and Chinese traditions through selective use of historical narratives. China's exceptionalism is partly constructed through this key mechanism of essentialization by selection: certain aspects of history and culture are selected to fit exceptionalist narratives, and in the process create myths. This is no surprise: the power of history lies in its rich offerings to myth-making, and the Chinese are particularly noted for their use of traditions in the present (Wang, 2003: vi).

However, this argument should not imply that China's exceptionalism is all mythical or that it is all constructed through essentialization by selection. Exceptionalist ideas, because they are noteworthy and durable, must have some important factual basis. But that basis need not be complete or even solid. Indeed, many claims about China's exceptionalism are based on myths as well as facts. Take the key claim of pacifism as an example. The latest research has shown that instead of one Confucian pacifist-defensive approach, China in fact possessed multiple strategic traditions, including *realpolitik* (Hunt, 1984: 4–11; Johnston, 1995; Waldron, 1994: 88, 113). The pacifist claim is a vast underestimate of the complexity of Chinese history accomplishable only through heroic reductionism and essentialism.

## Implications of China's exceptionalism

We shall now consider what the emerging exceptionalism might mean for China's foreign relations. This may be best accomplished by comparing China's exceptionalism with the much-noted American exceptionalism. Comparing the foreign policy approaches of two of the world's most powerful countries is in itself an interesting exercise. Moreover, just as 'American exceptionalism cannot be understood without well-chosen comparisons' (Jervis, 2011: 46), so the significance of Chinese exceptionalism cannot be grasped without comparison with other prominent examples.

American exceptionalism is the idea that, being morally and politically exceptional, the United States has a destiny and a duty to expand its institutions and beliefs — freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and capitalism (Hodgson, 2009: 10). Its origins can be traced to at least four sources. The first is the religious idea of America as 'the redeemer nation' chosen by God to spread the blessings of liberty, democracy, and equality to others, and to defeat, if necessary by force, the sinister powers of darkness (Tuveson, 1968). The second source is the perceived superiority of its liberal ideology and institutions. In fact, it is the peculiar fusion of religious and political ideologies that has provided the American vision and sustained American exceptionalism. 'America' is seen as a sacred-secular project, a unique mission of world-historical significance in a designated continental setting of no determinate limits (Stephanson, 1995: 5–6, 28). The other two sources are more material-contextual. Of great importance is America's 'geographically privileged position: far enough away from Europe and Asia to be able to be safe and uninvolved, yet capable of extending into contiguous territories easily and without much of a contest' (Hoffmann, 2005: 226). A related source is the so-called 'American frontier' and the material and social 'plenty' afforded by the country's abundance of free land and the opportunity to settle and expand (Gutfeld, 2002: 23; McEvoy-Levy, 2001: 25). These four sources — religion, liberty, geography, and material abundance — combined to produce American exceptionalism.

Barry Buzan (2004: 156–164) identifies four key characteristics of American exceptionalism: liberalism, moralism, isolationism/unilateralism, and anti-statism. Among these characteristics, the most interesting and important are perhaps the two contradictory forms that American exceptionalism has taken: a tendency to 'unfold into an exemplary state *separate* from the corrupt and fallen world, letting others emulate it as best they can,' and a competing one to 'push the world along by means of regenerative *intervention*' (Stephanson, 1995: xii see also Hoffmann, 2005: 226; Hunt, 1987: 191; Nordlinger, 1995: 185; Ruggie, 2005: 305). The first tendency is often characterized as passive or defensive exemplarist



isolationism, and the second, active or offensive crusading militarism. Exemplarist isolationism has characterized the early history of US foreign policy. Since the 20th century, however, militaristic interventionism has often prevailed and even led to a new unilateral and militaristic exceptionalism under the George W. Bush administration (Hoffmann, 2005).

When one focuses attention on the offensive side of American exceptionalism, its contrast with Chinese exceptionalism is glaring. While America claims the superiority of its ideals about democracy and freedom, China professes respect for and tolerance of all political values and systems without putting its own doctrines at the center. While America's sense of mission and self-righteousness induces it to cast foreign policy in moralistic and Manichean terms, China claims to have a foreign policy of peace and accommodation with all countries. While the missionary aspect of American foreign policy induces it to promote American values and remake the world in its image, China professes to strive for a world of harmony and diversity. While America would not shy away from spreading its institutions and values to the world, and to impose them by force if necessary (as in the case of the Iraq War), China claims to be satisfied with national defense and pursue its unique brand of benevolent pacifism. While America at times seeks to revolutionize world politics by blunt unilateralism, China claims only to reform world politics by developing itself into a new kind of great power.

The key ideals of China's emerging exceptionalism are peace and accommodation, and in themselves they are indeed very noble. They suggest, as various Chinese scholars are quick to assert, the pacifist and cooperative nature of China's foreign policy. China is said to be able to become a new kind of great power different from the Western model. It would allegedly see other countries as the object of varying degrees of cooperation rather than that of conquest and domination as in Western history (Zhao, 2009: 89). It claims to reject the imposition of a particular ideology or value system to the exclusion of others, and such respect for diversity is said to derive from China's traditional cultural principle of '*li bu wang jiao*' (The Chinese do not go to foreign lands to teach ritual) (Zhao, 2009: 124). This principle is said to have further developed into the doctrine of '*hua bu zhi yi*' (The Chinese do not govern foreign peoples), thus giving rise to a further claim that China has historically renounced expansion and conquest as a foreign policy objective (Pan, 2007).

Moreover, China would allegedly have no messianism of exporting one ultimate value or system to the outside world, and such general passivity — the absence of any missionary impulse to export and impose — is also held to be rooted in China's cultural precept of 'leading by example' ultimately traceable to Confucius's idea of exemplification (Yü, 2004: 251), in contrast to the Western one of 'domination by spiritual or military conquest.' Whereas Western powers claimed a *mission civilisatrice* in terms of a mission to spread their ideas to the rest of the world, traditional China, it is argued, did not consider its responsibility, let alone mission, to actively transform the *yi* (culturally inferior foreign peoples) into the *hua* (cultural Chinese).<sup>8</sup> If the transformation occurred, it was not because of China's forceful imposition but because of China's serving as a model and others' emulation of it (Shih, 2010: 548). With an understanding of this historical and intellectual background, contemporary China asserts that, having inherited this noble legacy, it would reject missionary universalism and prefer the harmonious coexistence of all political and cultural systems. Indeed, some observers see a direct lineage between the old precept of 'leading by example' and the new principle of harmonious inclusionism. The 'harmonious

world' discourse is seen to embody China's effort to develop itself into a sort of self-sacrificing great power for world harmony: the purpose is not to transform the world, but to create an attractive model through self-improvement so that others may be moved by China's call for harmony and emulate it (Shih, 2010).

However, while this comparison dramatizes the implications of Chinese exceptionalism and captures some of the most important characteristics of American and Chinese exceptionalism, the contrast should not be overdrawn, because it risks overemphasizing America's 'offensiveness' and China's 'defensiveness' while overlooking important aspects of America's 'defensiveness' and China's 'offensiveness.' As pointed out above, in the defensive side of American exceptionalism there is the important exemplarist idea that American ideals are only to be advanced by America's serving as a model to be emulated that is very similar to the traditional Chinese notion of 'leading by example.' Similar ideas may also be found in other countries. The European Union, for example, identifies itself as a 'normative power,' in effect claiming its model of leading by example. And the Chinese notion, if carried to the extreme, might create an isolationist mentality too, which occurred historically. It may also be possible to find another side of Chinese exceptionalism resembling the aggressive or proselytizing side of American exceptionalism (occasionally manifested in imperial China's approach toward the northern nomads)<sup>9</sup> that is usually overlooked. Furthermore, China's exceptionalism can also be moralistic in its assault on 'hegemonism' and the professed desire to uphold peace and justice in the world, though this moralism, having its source in perceptions of history rather than religion, is different from American moralism that tends to see world politics in dualistic terms. Finally, both American and Chinese exceptionalism, by their very nature, are self-centered and self-referential. The comparison between American and Chinese exceptionalism should therefore not be read to suggest that the former is negative and the latter positive: both have their own promises and problems.

We can strengthen this comparison by returning to the sources of American and Chinese exceptionalism. The fact that America has a strong missionary purpose and clear international vision while contemporary China is far less clear about such a vision can in part be explained by the fact that American exceptionalism has a strong religious background and a solid political foundation rooted in liberal constitutionalism while China has almost nothing in the former and is weak in the latter. This guards against the danger of China's messianism but may engender a purposeless and overly utilitarian foreign policy reducing its moral appeal in the world. The fact that American exceptionalism has offensive as well as defensive aspects while China's is in general more defensive can in part be explained by America's historical geopolitical advantage and its power ascent since the late 19th century and China's vulnerable geopolitical setting and weak power position in modern Asia. This offensiveness vis-a-vis defensiveness is of course also rooted in the two countries' different religious and political ideologies, but American power and geopolitical position have afforded it the options of both offensive intervention and defensive separation while China's vulnerability and weakness required a more cautious and restrained policy. Another noteworthy aspect of comparison is that America has now formed some core elements of its national identity and developed a more or less stable set of exceptionalist ideas, leading to a clear and coherent vision of the world and the American place in it (Hunt, 1987: 18). The construction of China's national identity in the modern world is still an unfinished project, and the rise of contemporary exceptionalism described here can be appropriately

seen as one of its manifestations and is therefore also an ongoing project. As a result, although China has proposed developing views of international relations at various times, it has yet to develop a coherent vision of the world and its place in it.

This leads to a further comparison on the stability and change of American and Chinese exceptionalism. American exceptionalism seemed to have had a stable foundation since the first century of the country's existence. Each of the four main sources identified above — religion, liberty, geography, and material abundance — has a reasonable or even high degree of stability. Of course, in the course of ideological construction America also needed to create historical myths and go through several stages of national debates (Hunt, 1987), but by now the central ideas of American exceptionalism have become more or less stable. Structural or contextual factors may occasionally give American exceptionalism a different face, such as the blunt unilateralism and militarism under the George W. Bush administration, without, however, producing fundamental divergence from its core tenets represented by the historical offensive or defensive character.

The sources of Chinese exceptionalism seem far less stable. For example, China has never had the good fortune of America's geopolitical advantage, not even during the imperial age when most dynasties had to confront nomadic threats from the northern and western frontiers. The apparently stable factors of history and culture have influenced the exceptionalism of imperial, revolutionary, and contemporary China, but that does not mean that they have produced the same sort of exceptionalism. The richness and vastness of China's historical and cultural experiences have created ample space for later generations to interpret their significance and relevance according to the needs of the time. And as has been shown, perceptions of history and culture have combined with international structure to produce related yet distinctive types of exceptionalism in different historical periods. This indicates the changing and fluid nature of China's exceptionalism, which is also an ongoing project structured domestically by political development and national identity construction.

It is important to point out a different sort of implication by way of this discussion: the value of exceptionalist ideas for the construction of Chinese theories of foreign policy and international relations, which is a rising intellectual trend in China.<sup>10</sup> The ideas of peace, harmony, and 'leading by example' that are part and parcel of contemporary China's exceptionalism derive from a very powerful intellectual tradition in Chinese history.<sup>11</sup> Because they command this kind of discursive structural power and because they are factual as well as mythical, they are resistant to challenge and may persist for a very long time. This would especially be the case when the continuing success of China's rise enhances the confidence of Chinese elites, increases their belief in the virtue of China's own traditions, and thus strengthens their determination to search further for indigenous ideas. Exceptionalist ideas would be particularly attractive to them precisely because they may be seen as the most authentically 'Chinese.' And Chinese theories, if developed with policy impact, will be suggestive of how China will seek to distinguish itself from the Western-centric international order.

As for the question of the effect of exceptionalism on actual policy, no perfect prediction is possible. Certainly American exceptionalism and ideology are not determinative of its foreign policy (Hunt, 1987). Exceptionalism suggests one possible influence on policy while actual behavior is determined by a host of other factors. We may hope that China's foreign policy will follow the noble principles of exceptionalism, but historically that has not been the case. The mythical quality of China's exceptionalism may further reduce our

confidence in the match between behavior and principle. But again, that does not mean that myth will not have an impact on policy thinking. Myths are always given a special meaning and significance for some present purpose (Tudor, 1972). The effect of myth on policy, as with the influence of ideas on behavior, can go in multiple directions and it is impossible to pin down without the specification of further conditions. In fact, if Beijing can uphold the ideals and consistently translate the themes of peace and harmony into behavior, then the myth might have beneficial consequences for world order.

Finally, while American exceptionalism has created contradictions and complexities in American foreign policy (Hoffmann, 2005: 226; Nau, 2002: 1), Chinese exceptionalism, due to its developing nature, seems to be more reflective of the problems and tensions internal to China's foreign policy. One problem is its overall defensiveness and self-righteousness, indicative of a self-centered view of how China's foreign policy should be conducted and how the outside world should view it. The exceptionalist discourse betrays a persistent desire to present a particular view of how China has been in the past and why the outside world should accept such a view as the true representation of Chinese history and culture. There is a palpable sense of self-protection against perceived foreign misunderstanding, prejudice, and misapprehension.

Exceptionalism is also reflective of an important internal contradiction within China's worldview. Specifically, China's strong desire to regain its historical great power status, underpinned by a fundamentally statist and nationalist logic, contradicts the inclusionist rhetoric. In other words, China's 'great power mentality' may ironically compromise its proclaimed reformism, pacifism, and inclusionism, as it has professed that it would take whatever measures necessary to fulfill its historical destiny, regardless of 'Western obstructionism.' The conflict between statism based on perceived national interests and inclusionism based on cultural principles is a key contradiction underlying current Chinese foreign policy. And one may note that this tension has existed in China's worldview since at least the late Qing, when China had to choose or strike a balance between traditional cultural principles and the modern nationalist statecraft (see Luo, 2010: 90–112).

## Conclusion

This article has explored a set of interrelated questions about China's exceptionalism in international relations: 'What are its historical manifestations?', 'Why and how do they arise?', and 'What might be the implications for China's foreign relations?' I argue that historically China has not displayed a consistent type of exceptionalism. Rather, imperial, Maoist, and today's China each displays its own type of exceptionalism, related in certain principles but distinctive in form. A historical-theoretical approach has enabled me to explore how international structure has interacted with perceptions of history and culture to produce distinctive forms of exceptionalism in different historical eras. While China's exceptionalism has an important factual basis, it is constructed through selective use of China's rich traditions by mixing facts and myths.

By identifying China's exceptionalism, this article challenges the notion that Beijing, after the disappearance of the formal ideology of communism from its foreign policy, does not have a new ideology to justify its policy. It is often asserted that China is an ideologically bankrupt great power without political ideals to guide the use of power

(Pei, 2009). From the perspective of this article, this view is partial. China does have an ideal and ideology: it professes to become a unique kind of great power by acting peacefully and harmoniously. No longer a derivative of the formal political ideology of Marxism–Leninism whose legitimacy appears in doubt, it is a creation of the complex interplay between contemporary political needs, international structural constraints, and the exploitability of China’s vast historical and cultural resources.

Exceptionalism reveals a prominent aspect of China’s foreign policy traditions and provides a first window into the historical and emerging Chinese international relations ideals. By being an essential part of China’s worldview, exceptionalism can become an important source for policy ideas, offer the ingredients for the supposed construction of Chinese theories of international relations, and provide a lens through which to view emerging Chinese visions of international relations. In fact, we can see exceptionalism as one among several competing intellectual schools for the ideational construction of China’s foreign policy, one that may become increasingly influential as a result of the continuing revival of tradition in today’s China. From the perspective of exceptionalism, a not-so-fanciful question about the future of China’s foreign policy is: since China is already positioning itself as a sort of ‘Confucian great power,’ are we going to see, with the further success of China’s rise, a new and different sort of sinocentric Confucian China practicing benevolent hegemony in East Asia? It is of more than theoretical interest to note that prominent Chinese scholars are already drawing on ancient Chinese thought to promote a future policy resembling hegemony, and, even better, humane authority in ancient China (Yan, 2011).

### Acknowledgements

For helpful suggestions and comments on this project during its various stages, I wish to thank Barry Buzan, Chen Jian, Jia Ian Chong, Paul Evans, Rosemary Foot, Shahar Hameiri, Peter Katzenstein, Yuen Foong Khong, Rana Mitter, Garry Rodan, Vivienne Shue, Wang Gungwu, Yuan-kang Wang, and Odd Arne Westad. I also wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments that helped to greatly improve the paper. This paper was presented in the seminar series ‘Border Crossings: Explaining China’s International Behaviour Through a Domestic Lens’ organized by Professor Rosemary Foot in the Asian Studies Centre, St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford in January 2011, at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore in June 2011 through the kind arrangement of Professor Zheng Yongnian, at the 12th Biennial Conference of the Chinese Studies Association of Australia at the Australian National University in July 2011, and at the 2011 Australian Political Studies Association Conference hosted by the Australian National University in September 2011. An early presentation on this topic was given at the British Inter-University China Centre Conference ‘The Global Politics of China’ held in London and Manchester in November 2009 at the kind invitation of Professor William Callahan. I thank the participants at these various gatherings for their reactions. Any remaining errors are my own responsibility.

### Notes

1. A recent example is Holsti (2011).
2. James Hevia (1995), for example, defines the worldview of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) as ‘hierarchical inclusion.’
3. For reviews, see Callahan (2008) and Zhang (2010).

4. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this important suggestion.
5. The two foundational theoretical works in this regard are Waltz (1979) and Wendt (1999).
6. For a masterful study that shows how successive Chinese historians managed to perpetuate the myth of Chinese superiority under changing and sometimes transformational circumstances, see Wang (1968).
7. See Zheng (2006: 263). For a good example, see Zhou Enlai's remarks to this effect (PRC Foreign Ministry and CCCPC Party Literature Research Office, 1990: 92).
8. See Luo (2006: 15; 2010: 7) and Ren (2010: 102–116). This view is also endorsed by some Western scholars; see, for example, Kang (2010).
9. See Johnston (1995). Chin (2010: 346–347) argues that the Han dynasty tried to proselytize Chinese ritual amongst the Xiongnu.
10. For prominent calls for the construction of Chinese theories or the 'China school' in international relations, see Qin (2005, 2006, 2007) and Zhu (2009).
11. A classic exposition is Qian (1994).

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