

Why a critical geopolitics cannot be Confucian

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Abstract

In this commentary, I welcome An et al.'s (2021) commitment to explore the role of Confucian thought in the contemporary practices of statehood in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Nonetheless, I also take issue with the authors' argument that a Confucian geopolitics is needed to replace inadequate 'Western geopolitical frameworks'. Confucian philosophies promote a hierarchical social order based on authority and subordination, and the way in which they are selectively and strategically utilized in contemporary China represents an important subject of analysis. However, they should not be viewed as a framework of analysis, as they obscure rather than shed light on spatial and class struggles – even in the hybridized stylization endorsed by An et al. Critical political economic and critical geopolitical perspectives with a global theoretical orientation and a knowledge of place and culture offer more promise in the disentangling of state practices and social relations in the PRC.

Keywords

China, Confucianism, critical geopolitics, critical political economy, exceptionalism, international relations, nationalism

Introduction

Confucianism has in recent years regained prominence as a rationale for state practices in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Therefore, as An et al. (2021) suggest, it is increasingly important to probe into the ways in which Confucian philosophies mediate power relations across China's geography. Does this imply that the study of geopolitical processes involving the PRC should be situated within a Confucian geopolitics? I do not think so. In what follows, I discuss my three main concerns with the agenda for a Confucian geopolitics: first, the idea of a Confucian geopolitics sets the tone for a normative and potentially culturally apologetic perspective on state practices

in the PRC; second, even in the hybridized stylization endorsed by An et al., a Confucian geopolitics unnecessarily centres the analytical enquiry around Confucian thought, relegating other important dynamics in China's domestic and foreign politics to a secondary position; finally, a Confucian geopolitics risks reifying the exceptionalism often trumpeted by Chinese elites, doing a disservice to the many scholars and activists confronting abusive state practices through China's geography and

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beyond. Critical political economy and critical geopolitics, far from being obsolete ‘Western geopolitical frameworks’, offer adequate analytical tools to explore the complexity of Chinese politics in their full nuance, including the role of Confucian thought among the many ideological and material underpinnings of the PRC’s geopolitical trajectory. My thoughts on Confucian geopolitics go beyond An et al.’s rather balanced intervention, and appraise the prospects for Confucian geopolitics as a sub-branch of political geographic scholarship more broadly.

The normative trap

It is not difficult to agree with An et al.’s argument that a great number of geopolitical analyses of the PRC overlook the cultural values and traditions influencing the choices of the country’s elites. This is not only the case in popular media, where China is typically viewed through the lenses of Western liberal values and presented as a frightening other. It is also a common occurrence in International Relations (IR) scholarship, which tends to transpose its own theoretical assumptions (e.g. realist, liberalist) into non-Western contexts. This literature downplays the role played by discourse and culture in shaping the social relations that lie at the basis of practices of statehood. An et al.’s critique is a fair one even if, as they recognize, noteworthy exceptions abound. This being said, it remains unclear to me what is to be gained by transiting towards a (hybrid) Confucian geopolitics, instead of just incorporating the analysis of culture and norms into the geopolitical enquiry.

Confucian geopolitics may indeed deserve increased attention as an empirical subject of analysis. However, to propose an intellectual transition *towards* Confucian geopolitics seems to be an entirely different thing. Such proposition suggests that a geopolitics of contemporary China must be necessarily understood through the lenses of Confucianism. The idea of a ‘Confucian geopolitics’ connotes in this way something different from a geopolitics of contemporary Confucianism, much in the same way that a racist anthropology is different from an anthropology of racism. Confucianism, with

its normative baggage, becomes the adjective that qualifies the geopolitical enquiry, potentially fomenting culturally apologetic appraisals of Chinese state practices. I am perhaps making too much out of the word order, and I imagine An et al. might be slightly annoyed by my insistence on scrutinizing the phrasing of their proposition. However, I believe that with their iteration An et al. open a door towards culturally predetermined understandings of Chinese politics.

Of course, any academic enquiry is culturally-situated. Nonetheless, there is from my perspective a fundamental incompatibility between free academic enquiry and Confucian philosophies, as the latter preclude critical engagement. Confucianism does not offer effective tools for critique and analysis – or if it does, this is not obvious to me – but instead upholds hierarchical values in support of authority and subordination, and a patriarchal order (Blanchard and Lin, 2016). A geopolitical analysis built upon such doctrines would struggle to grasp the cultural geopolitics of China as a politically imbricated and socially contested phenomenon. To be fair, An et al.’s contribution does not advocate for the type of narrow cultural approach to Chinese geopolitics that I critique here, yet they openly welcome an approach that ‘embeds Confucian philosophies within the explanations of Chinese geopolitics’. My concern is that such an embedding might preclude the critical distance necessary to explore power-laden and culturally contested geopolitical processes.

De-centring Confucian geopolitics

So far, I have accepted the value and timeliness of the research agenda to study how Confucian philosophies are strategically mobilized by state actors in the PRC. However, I am concerned with the centrality conferred to Confucianism in An et al.’s article – and with how this dovetails with Xi Jinping’s neo-traditionalist agenda towards power consolidation (Clayton, 2020).

First, I am not convinced of the need to subsume the study of geopolitics in China to cultural analysis. An et al. suggest this much when arguing, for example, that ‘the most important part of the Belt and Road Initiative is the cultural purpose’, or that ‘the

Confucian geopolitical tradition [is] . . . the foundation for current Chinese geopolitics’, even if they also concede that there is a difference between ‘the Confucian geopolitical narrative and China’s geopolitical practice’. Lost in this characterization are many of the insights advanced by China scholars in recent decades, who suggest, for example, that China’s foreign and domestic policies are to a large extent fragmented and driven by the interests of different and at times competing actors, that material interests play a pivotal role shaping state-society relations and foreign policy, or that phenomena such as state transformation, nationalism, and developmentalism have complex genealogies involving both ideational and material factors (Callahan, 2017; Gonzalez-Vicente, 2011; Hughes, 2006; Jones and Zeng, 2019). While Confucian thought may play a role in all these issues, I am not persuaded that it represents the main geopolitical driver in contemporary China. Indeed, if one considers issues such as the territorialization of state power in China, it becomes obvious that the PRC has long outgrown the crude spatial civilizational logics prevalent in traditional Confucian thought or the Hua-Yi division discussed by An et al. Instead, state sovereignty is a much messier affair that is principally driven by a post-colonial nation-state logic, and mediated by securitization concerns as well as by ‘graduated sovereignties’ that respond often to commercial and nationalist rationales (Anand, 2009; Ong, 2004).

Even if we were adamant to put culture at the front and centre of the analysis of geopolitics, subsuming all other cultural processes within contemporary China to Confucianism would do a disservice to our analysis. I could refer here again to the complex cultural lineage of nationalism in contemporary China. We could also point to the rhetorical vestiges of egalitarianism – which even lead An et al. to refer to the contemporary period in China as one of ‘socialist geopolitics’, reflecting an official rhetoric that would not stand the test of any serious investigation of the regime’s political orientation. Other questions to consider would be the cultural power of neoliberalism and consumerism (Wang, 2006), or the prevalence of racist understandings of citizenship and territory

(Gonzalez-Vicente, 2017). Very importantly too, I believe it is necessary to de-centre official Confucian rhetoric in order to make space for the many contestations of state power that rely on different geopolitical logics and cultural understandings of state-society relations. We could think, for example, of civil rights lawyers that uphold constitutionalism and the rule of law in their battles against abuses of state power, religious groups with divergent understandings of authority, student associations that draw upon Marxist thought to defend workers’ rights, the millions of people who recently fought for democracy in the streets of Hong Kong, or the Tibetans who insist on resisting ‘the gift of Chinese development’ (see Yeh, 2013).

Against nationalism

My last point of contention focuses on nationalism and brings together academic and political concerns. Academically, the development of a distinctively ‘Confucian’ geopolitics seems to run counter to various agendas to ‘globalize’ the humanities and social sciences. These agendas have at their basis the appraisal of non-Western theory and experiences, but propose also to ‘eschew exceptionalism’ (Acharya, 2014: 649). From this perspective, the explicit development of a Confucian geopolitics could instigate what we might call ‘theoretical nationalism’: the suggestion that particular phenomena occur at an unequivocally national scale and theories should be developed to suit such national peculiarities. This tendency, promoted by some area studies gatekeepers, is deeply problematic. As Sinan Chu (2020: 3–4) suggests, transcending Western ethnocentrism in the social sciences requires that we remain wary of tendencies to ‘re-nationalize instead of internationalize’, and that we critically appraise ‘the ideological inclination and the politics of knowledge production in the non-West, especially the historical relationship between center and periphery in [a given] country or region’.

This type of ‘theoretical nationalism’ is also problematic from the perspective of social activism. Too often, Chinese elites have shielded themselves in the purported exceptionalism of China. This is

exemplified in the official cries of ‘Western interference’ in response to Hong Kong’s pro-democracy protests or to critiques of human rights abuses in Xinjiang. In this way, Chinese authorities attempt to shape the geopolitical discourse, and regulate and police what George Lamming calls the ‘sovereignty of the imagination’, the very last space where individuals and collectives exercise their freedom to make, remake, and discover themselves and to develop their own hybrid understanding of the world (Scott, 2002). Geopolitical exceptionalism can become a powerful ideological weapon in the hands of Chinese authorities adamant to deprive citizens of the PRC of intellectual references such as democracy or human rights. Unfortunately, the agenda towards a Confucian geopolitics, and the suggestion to place Confucianism at the centre of Chinese geopolitics, could reify a discourse of inherent geopolitical difference that gets in the way of critical enquiry and emancipatory struggles, even if I believe this is far from what An et al. seek to achieve.

Conclusion

In this contribution, I have welcomed An et al.’s agenda to study Confucianism as an important geopolitical discourse in contemporary China. I have nonetheless presented my serious doubts about an agenda ‘towards a Confucian geopolitics’, a turn that I characterize as potentially enabling culturally deterministic and culturally apologetic positions. Critical political economic and critical geopolitical perspectives with a global theoretical orientation and a knowledge of place and culture offer more promise in the disentangling of state practices and social relations in the PRC. I am very inclined to agree that non-Western thought should gain a more prominent position in the study of geopolitics, and that cultural geopolitical differences deserve closer consideration. In my own work with Annita Montoute, we have for example revisited critical Caribbean development thought to study the Belt and Road Initiative (Gonzalez-Vicente and Montoute, 2021). Others have studied development through the lenses of Buen Vivir or Ubuntu philosophies. Confucian thought, in its more ancient normative

tradition, and in its contemporary utilitarian usage by PRC political elites, does not offer a comparable conceptual tool for analysis or a similarly stimulating emancipatory normative approach. A critical geopolitics cannot be Confucian.

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