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China in Transition: Culture, Ideology, and Global Affairs

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Abstract

This article argues that to understand twenty-first China, it is crucial to learn about its culture and traditions, modern political evolution, and stance in the international arena. China's cultural values and way of thinking mainly derive from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, known as the three teachings (*san jiao* 三教). Its current political-ideological foundation is grounded to Marxism-Leninism and reforms and ideas of Mao Zedong and his successors. And, its foreign relations are redefining current international relations and global affairs. China is attempting a socialist modernisation through the rejuvenation of the nation. It aims to realise a “moderately well-off society” (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社会) domestically and a “harmonious world” (*hexie shijie* 和谐世界) internationally. Thus, it is important to understand the social ethic and political thinking of the Chinese to have a better perspective of how to deal with the Asian giant in upcoming decades. This study explores the evolution of Confucianism and its effects in China's cultural and socio-political transitions to illustrate the country's current state of affairs.

Keywords: Chinese culture, Confucianism, political ideology, global governance, economic transition

Resumen

Este artículo argumenta que para comprender la China del siglo veintiuno, es indispensable conocer su cultura y tradiciones, evolución política moderna y postura en la arena internacional. Los valores culturales y la forma de pensar de China se derivan principalmente del confucianismo, el budismo y el daoísmo, conocidos como las tres enseñanzas (*san jiao* 三教). Su fundamento político-ideológico actual se basa en el marxismo-leninismo y las reformas e ideas de Mao Zedong y sus sucesores. Y, sus relaciones exteriores están redefiniendo el curso de las relaciones internacionales y los asuntos globales. China está intentando una modernización socialista a través del rejuvenecimiento de la nación. Su objetivo es lograr una “sociedad moderadamente acomodada” (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社会) a nivel nacional y un “mundo armonioso” (*hexie shijie* 和谐世界) a nivel internacional. Por lo tanto, es importante comprender la ética social y el pensamiento político de los chinos para tener una mejor perspectiva de cómo lidiar con el gigante asiático en las próximas décadas. Este estudio explora la evolución del confucianismo y sus efectos en las transiciones culturales y sociopolíticas de China para ilustrar la situación actual del país.

Palabras clave: cultura china, confucianismo, ideología política, gobernanza global, transición económica

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Introduction

Prompted by Western imperialism in Asia, China experienced a “century of humiliation” (*biannian guochi* 百年国耻). It began during the First Opium War (1839-1842) and finalised in 1949 when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established under a communist regime leaded by Mao Zedong (1893-1976). Since then, China, as a new, modern nation-state, has been on the rise and is incessantly working to restore its position as one of the greatest civilisations of the world.² Since the late 1970s, China initiated a set of transformations to comply with international standards, developed most of its diplomatic relations, and employed progressive economic reforms domestically which eventually lead the country to open-up to the world.

China is one of the major developing economies which is producing a series of global transformations. In a few decades, it became a leading actor in various areas such that it is one of the most advanced countries in scientific and technological research, education, high-tech manufacturing, information technology, aerospace engineering, military innovation, and artificial intelligence to name a few. China is consolidating power internationally. It is building strategic collaborations with emerging, developing, and developed economies to serve its own domestic and international interests. Today, Western powers appear to be losing credibility, and arguably, they no longer provide the robust promise to help other nations attain a successful and prosperous rise. This is not to say that the Western world is crumbling down, yet it is facing problems to maintain and continue its legitimacy and global leadership.

Meanwhile, China, the most striking rising economy of the century, is working its way around Western dictates. For example, it claims to concede more power to the public than to the private sector. Its mode of governance restricts itself to follow certain neoliberal dictates, those mainly established by Western political leaders and magnates during the mid-twentieth century. For instance, neoliberalism favours free-market capitalism, deregulation, and hands-off government, yet China has strategically played the game of modern capitalism (i.e. seen in the West as an “ideal” economic and political system) to its advantage. Although capitalism has brought

² There were, however, a couple of dozens of years where China and the Chinese people struggled. China started to implement the Five-Year Plans. Such projects aimed to bolster the economy through land, social, political, educational, and cultural reforms. Nonetheless, some of these plans brought adverse consequences to the nation, particularly the Second Five-Year Plan, commonly known as the Great Leap Forward, followed by the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

numerous benefits to societies and nations worldwide, it seems that, in a larger measure, this system tends to benefit a few elite groups and plutocrats. Capitalism has triggered an inappropriate redistribution of wealth causing imbalances which jeopardise human rights and the wellbeing of the most disadvantaged nations and societies.

China is using exclusive modes of governance (domestically and abroad) to catch up with the demands of the globalised world. Within its strategy, it also applies its own version of market economy, namely a socialist market economy. This approach has allowed China to become the second largest economy after the United States allowing the country to increase its political and economic influence in various regions of the world.

Divided in three sections, this study features China's cultural, ideological, and diplomatic transitions to better understand contemporary China. First, this work introduces key aspects of Chinese society, culture, and traditions as these have influenced the mindset of the Chinese for centuries and have significant effects in their present socio-political practices and behaviours. Second, it examines China's modern political history. It commences from the founding of the PRC followed by the ideological base and evolution of its political system. Also, this section explores China's approach to modernity and constant refurbishment of its state ideology after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Third, it provides an account of China's modern-day attitude to international relations and global affairs highlighting some of its projects and strategies in and outside its sphere of influence.

Furthermore, the study takes on a unique approach to China's transitions. It parts from the idea that China's socio-cultural adaptations, political structure, public diplomacy, and soft power mechanisms are grounded to a mix of Chinese traditional mores and modern socio-political values system. The former, specifically linked to the Confucian tradition, and the latter, aligned to the Party's ideological foundation (e.g. Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought).³ Using both, China aims to strengthen and improve the Party, the lives of the Chinese people, and its foreign relations.

³ After Mao's death, his successors—in furtherance of leaving behind their own legacy—have established a set of reforms and ideas which are also included in the political-ideological foundation of China, these comprise: Deng Xiaoping Theory, Jiang Zemin's Three Represents, Hu Jintao's Scientific Outlook on Development (involving a Socialist Harmonious Society), and more recently, Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.

Since the 1990s, China has been establishing sets of pragmatic social-political and economic innovations to procure a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) domestically and a “harmonious world” (*hexie shijie* 和谐世界) internationally.⁴ This study offers an overview of China’s existing state of affairs to conclude that a better understanding of this nation can only be attained by examining its cultural values, socio-political developments, and current approach to international relations. This article is a modest yet forthright record of China’s status quo illustrating the country’s current interests, intentions, and advances worldwide.

Chinese Culture, Society, and Traditions

In less than five decades, China shifted the global balance of power thanks to its economic progress and domestic and international policy schemes. China may be considered a friend or a foe; nevertheless, the entire world is gradually becoming aware of its diplomatic and economic influence. China is a competitive actor, and it will continue to expand its political and commercial operations in and out of its sphere of influence. With projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other infrastructure plans in countries and regions distant from its borders, China’s influence is likely to strengthen for decades to come. However, many countries, including some of its closest neighbours, have difficulties to make sense of the Asian giant. China’s is a complex nation, and it is essential to understand its traditional values and modern socio-political system to engage in positive relations with it. Hence, it is important to have a general overview of what makes China the great civilisation it is.

To understand China in its own terms, one must learn about its ancient and modern history, customs, and cultural values. Much of China’s traditional values are based on the Confucian tradition. Confucianism was China’s social and political pillar for over two-thousand years. This tradition experienced a series of ideological shifts, parting from classical Confucianism to Neo-Confucianism and more recently from Neo Confucianism to New Confucianism. Each epoch is divided by about a thousand years. Classical Confucianism emerged as a competing system of thought along with other prominent philosophies (e.g. Legalism and Daoism) during the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BCE); it was later established as China’s official state ideology

⁴ For detailed information on these two concepts, see Dellios 2009; Nordin 2016; Zheng & Tok 2007.

during the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE). Confucianism promoted self-cultivation and righteous governance to enable public stability and spawn social harmony. It was the duty of Confucian erudite to advise the emperors and other political leaders to accomplish the objectives of the Confucian school.

For centuries, Confucianism guided the social and political affairs of the Chinese until it was challenged by Daoism, a domestic philosophy and folk religion, and Buddhism, a foreign religion and philosophical tradition. The challenge originates during the Tang dynasty (618-907) since both Daoism and Buddhism began to have enormous influence on the daily affairs of the Chinese. While Confucianism continued to be the practical system of governance and the people's social ethic, Daoism and Buddhism enjoyed a more prominent position in religious affairs, arts, education, and architecture. Hence, to avoid the demise of Confucianism in those fields, Confucian scholars of the epoch developed a novel approach that would counter the challenges posed by the two other traditions. Their approach was to merge Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist tenets; this amalgamate is known as the "three teachings" (*san jiao* 三教). The three teachings gave birth to Neo-Confucianism, which was developed by Confucian scholars of the time to restore the orthodox transmission of classical Confucianism.⁵ Neo-Confucianism was the continuation of classical Confucianism, but it incorporated several notions of Daoism and Buddhism. It reached a pinnacle during the Song dynasty (960-1279) and endured as the official status quo in imperial China until the emergence of New Confucianism in the late-nineteenth century. Challenged once again, this time with the arrival, occupation, and imperialistic interests of Western powers in Asia, Confucianism—the imperial state ideology—sought to endure through efforts of scholars and other Confucian enthusiasts.

Europeans reached China around the sixteenth century and gradually got involved in different activities to profit from the vast resources and manpower of China. Western beliefs and impositions were introduced in the Far East, and China was no exception to fall victim of the apparent superiority of Western dictates. Consequently, after the two Opium Wars which took place in the mid-nineteenth century and the fading authority of Qing dynasty (1636–1911), a novel interpretation of Confucianism emerged. This version was later labelled as New Confucianism to distinguish the transition from its predecessor, Neo-Confucianism. The

⁵ For an account of the philosophical developments of Neo-Confucianism, see Ching 1974.

challenges faced by New Confucian erudite were much different than before. Although the Confucian tradition was marginalised by the Chinese political elite throughout most of the twentieth century, Confucian enthusiasts felt it could become a great socio-political tool to withstand the forthcoming challenges of upcoming centuries—as it previously did. One of the most renowned New Confucian scholars, Lui Shu-hsien (1934-2016), claimed that Confucianism had risen like a phoenix reborn from the ashes (Liu 2003: 23). Since Confucianism is a great representation of cultural China, Lui’s claim could be rephrased by exchanging “Confucianism” for “China” and be read as: “China has risen like a phoenix reborn from the ashes.”

Governments worldwide did not expect China to transform so quickly—especially with a Marxist-Leninist system of governance after the fall of the Soviet Union. China was destined to succumb to Western powers and ideas like many other nations, but Mao Zedong and his comrades did not let this happen. The transition from Imperial and Republican China to Communist China, nevertheless, came along at high costs.

China suffered extensively during Western imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century and was outraged by its eastern neighbour Japan during the first half of the twentieth century. This period is known as “the century of humiliation” (*biannian guochi* 百年国耻). China, once one of the greatest civilisations on earth, was smashed and disgraced by foreign powers. At the start of the twentieth century, Chinese leaders blamed Confucianism for not being able to counter modernity judiciously.⁶ In 1921, Chen Duxiu and Li Dachao led a movement to create the Communist Party of China (CPC). There were less than sixty members whose objective was to spread the ideas of Marx amongst the Chinese people (Chen & Kung 2020: 6). Around this period, Marxism and communist ideas began to influence and shape the mindset of the Chinese; this was a turning point for China’s cultural identity. The CPC, nevertheless, had a domestic rival, the Chinese Nationalist Party (*zhongguo guomindang* 中国国民党) which was more inclined towards the ideals of democracy and liberalism.

At this point, Chinese traditions, mainly grounded to the three teachings (i.e. Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism), were placed aside. They were important elements of society and the basis of Chinese identity, but they no longer had a formal say in the mainland’s political, social, cultural, and spiritual life. In the first half of the twentieth century, the battle between the

⁶ For a narrative on the Anti-Confucian Movement, see Weiping 2017; Xianming 2018; Yeong Jin 2013.

Communists and Nationalists to impose a new government system based on Western ideas was at its peak. Once the Communist defeated the Nationalist—who were forced to retreat to Taiwan (along with the three teachings)—a new Chinese identity emerged in the mainland: Communist China. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the conditions of the newly established nation also worsen, particularly during the second Five-Year Plan (discussed in the following section).

The Confucian tradition had little to no representation in China and was marginalised for most of the twentieth century. It was until the late years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) that Confucianism resurfaced but only to be condemned. The Anti-Lin Biao, Anti-Confucius campaign (*pi Lin pi Kong yudong* 批林批孔运动) was a political movement that, according to Roger T. Ames, “ironically got everybody to re-read Confucianists in order to criticise him,” yet it had an opposite effect (Leal 2019: 136). Few years later, Confucianism had an apogee during the “culture fever” (*wenhuare* 文化熱) of the 1980s as post-Mao China was in need of redirecting its cultural identity.

For nearly two and a half millennia, China followed Confucian tenets at many levels of society. Communist China had only experienced a few decades of a different system of governance. After Mao’s death, the CPC reconsidered the importance of Chinese traditional cultures; from taking a hostile attitude towards tradition, the Chinese government gradually allowed traditional values to be restored socially and politically (Kang 2012: 33). For example, in 1987, the “first international academic Conference on Confucianism” was held in Qufu, Confucius birthplace. It gathered Confucian erudite from China and other scholars from different parts of the world. In the opening speech, Zhang Dainian, chief of the Chinese Institute for Confucius, stated that merging Chinese traditional thought with the best views of rationality from foreign cultures was crucial to the development of China (Lee 2006: 54).

Confucianism is back and strong in China and is likely to regain its position as the cultural backbone of the nation. Chinese traditional culture comprises values that promote honesty, loyalty, benevolence, civility, and righteousness, to mention a few. Harmony, for instance, is another core cultural value that encourages stability and balance amongst the people. Even the CPC has been using terms associated to the Confucian tradition such as “moderately well-off society” (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社会) or “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) to foster virtuous behaviours at all levels of society. The overall aim of using such terms is to have the

people and leaders act in moral ways towards the betterment of the majority. In a sense, putting in practice certain Confucian values creates a sense of communitarianism, so rather than placing the individual at the centre, the well-being of the whole nation or society is prioritised.

Much of Chinese traditional and cultural values can be attributed to the Confucian tradition. Thus, having a basic understanding of this system of thought is key for people to generate a comprehensive understanding of contemporary China. The blend of Chinese traditional mores with the government's current attempt of a socialist modernisation reflects China's new direction and identity in the twenty-first century. In a world divided by nations that struggle for social, economic, and political stability and prosperity, China is becoming a new role model.

The Communist Party of China has been in power for over seventy years and is here to stay for decades—even centuries—to come. This distinctive one-party system with nearly 100 million members has outperformed many other government systems worldwide. The CPC conducts short, middle, and long-term planning aiming to enhance the livelihoods of its citizenry. Because China is one of the most populous nations of the world, its domestic and international affairs often have greater multilateral consequences and effects. Looking at Chinese society, culture, and traditions through its Confucian past is a wise way to make sense of modern China. Anyone dealing with Chinese enterprises, corporations, financial institutions, or the government will find it useful to have knowledge of its conventional mores—much of which originate from the Confucian tradition.

Political Transition and Ideological Evolution

Following up on China's modern national identity, Communist China can be divided into two periods: 1949-1976 and 1976-present.⁷ The former was formalised during Mao Zedong's rule, usually referred to as the Mao era or Mao's China. The latter is the post-Mao era, which begins with the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) along with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.

⁷ To ease this division, the post-Mao era will include all the presidencies that followed after Mao Zedong's death. Other scholars may use different division schemes to include the rule, thought, or reforms of specific Chinese leaders after 1976 as well as defining events, such as the Tiananmen Square protest of 1989 or the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

The first period is recognised for the so-called “Five-Year Plans” launched by the CPC commencing in the mid-1950s. These plans aimed at setting off social, cultural, educational, economic, and political reforms to improve the socio-economic conditions of the country through a Marxist-Leninist approach. It was China’s first attempt to “modernise” the country. Although there were a series of successful advancements in various areas (e.g. education, agriculture, industrialisation), the plans also triggered dreadful famines, corruption, and socio-political unrest.

The second period, the post-Mao era, is notorious for a renovated set of economic reforms known as the “Reform and Opening-up”. Introduced in 1978, the reforms were launched by Mao’s prominent successor, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997). After Mao’s death, the often-forgotten Hua Guofeng (1921-2008) occupied the position as China’s second paramount leader of China for a short period between 1978 and 1981 and was later succeeded by Deng Xiaoping (Weatherley 2010: 141-167). Hao Li-Ogawa points out that “In the early years of the post-Mao era, it was Hua, not Deng, who initiated China’s transformation. After Hua’s fall, Deng succeeded his vision and cranked it into high gear” (Li-Ogawa 2022: 135). Subsequently, Deng became China’s “capitalist roader” as he allowed foreign direct investment (capital) to be injected in the country. This series of reforms ultimately opened-up the country to the outside world, and a string of social and economic transformations unfolded. With Mao no longer in the picture, it was an ideal opportunity for Confucianism to resurge. It was too soon, however, for Confucian enthusiasts in the mainland to seek a re-emergence of the tradition as a pragmatic political philosophy. Hence, the best and only way for it to re-surface was within academic discussions. Meanwhile, the Confucian tradition was being advanced by Confucian scholars outside of China, mainly in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Since the political system and social ethic of imperial China were grounded to Confucian tenets, the re-emergence of Confucian ideals was not foreign for the Chinese. In the past, ruling through Confucianism meant to have the state act as “the moral guardian of the people” with its rulers practicing the qualities of an exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) (Bloom n.d.). With the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911-1912, China’s political system changed along with its state ideology. China transitioned from an empire to a republic. During the Republican Era (1912-1949), the “Three Principles of the People” (*sanmin zhuyi* 三民主义) were established as China’s state ideology. Introduced by Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), these principles focused on *nationalism* (national independence), *democracy* (rights of the people), and *socialism* (people’s livelihood).

Moreover, Mao Zedong Thought (or Maoism) emerged around the same time in the 1920s and 1930s. It is considered a pragmatic version of Marxism–Leninism in China which grew into China’s state ideology in 1949 and remained vibrant until the late 1970s. Currently, in post-Mao China, the CPC claims that its ideological foundation is grounded to Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, Jiang Zemin’s Three Represents, Hu Jintao’s Scientific Outlook on Development, and more recently, Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.

China’s domestic and foreign policy schemes are constantly shaping its political system and ideology. Yan Xuetong, Professor and Dean of Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University, discusses “three powerful ideologies” that are responsible for China’s attitude towards international order: Marxism, economic pragmatism, and traditionalism (Yan 2018: 7-8). First, China adapted a version of Marxism to its own conditions which functions as the official ideology of the Communist Party of China, it is only employed domestically. Second, economic pragmatism is the basis for China’s economic prosperity and national strength, it has allowed the country to achieve a continued economic growth in the few past decades. Third, traditionalism (or Chinese traditional values)—although not considered an official ideology—serves as the basis for the establishment of a humane authority promoting a just and benevolent political leadership (Yan 2018: 7-8). The aim of Yan is to provide an assessment of competing ideologies in the international world order. Chinese values are being promoted in and outside the country by the CPC as an alternative to Western liberalism. A modernised version of “humane authority”—which is an inherent Confucian principle—can change the direction of the current paradigmatic model of geopolitical order and stability.

In a report by MERICS titled “Ideas and Ideologies Competing for China’s Political Future,” the authors engage in a fashionable approach towards China’s state ideology. This study looks at virtual (online) spaces that challenge the official orthodoxy of the Party. Overall, through observing and analysing Chinese public social media platforms and opinions of surveyed Chinese netizens, the study assesses the competition between the “China path” and “Western values”. In other words, it explores whether the constant progression of China’s political system (or the “China model”) may become more attractive to future generations and cherished as a progressive alternative to Western dictates and normative socio-political ideas (Shi-Kupfer, Ohlberg, Lang, & Lang 2017). In Table 2.1 of the report, the authors also present specific “Key

components of CCP ideology” naming six concepts used by the Chinese government where they list the years of their widespread promotion though not necessarily when they were introduced or launched. The following is a reproduction of Table 2.1 complemented with the names of the concepts in *pinyin*:

Year	Concept	<i>pinyin</i>	Definition
2012	Four Confidences 四个自信	<i>sige zixin</i>	Confidence in China’s overall path of development, the Chinese system, Chinese theory, and Chinese culture
2013	China Dream 中国梦	<i>zhongguo meng</i>	Achieving strong but balanced economic development while restoring China to a respected place in the world
2014	Community of Shared Destiny 人类命运共同体	<i>renlei mingyun gongtongti</i>	China’s official foreign policy propaganda slogan; the world faces many of the same problems, so it needs to work together to solve them
2014	Socialist Core Values 社会主义核心价值观	<i>shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan</i>	Set of twelve values drawn from pre-modern sources, the Chinese socialist tradition, and reinterpretations of concepts such as democracy and freedom
2014	Four Comprehensives 四个全面	<i>sige quanmian</i>	Policy goals in four areas: development, overall reforms, judicial reforms, and party discipline
2014	Consultative Democracy 协商民主	<i>xieshang minzhu</i>	Incorporation of different political organizations and societal forces under single-party rule

Source: MERICS research (Shi-Kupfer et al. 2017: 29).

From this list, it can be observed that the CPC is constantly reframing policies to adapt to the rapid changes the country experiences. For example, every five years the party convenes the National Congress of the Communist Party of China to set and reframe major domestic and international policies. On October 16, 2022, the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was celebrated. This gathering was a decisive moment in the history of modern China as Xi Jinping successfully continued his leadership for an unprecedented third term. In 2018, Chinese authorities approved the removal of two-term limit on the Chinese presidency. Xi is now the first Chinese leader after Mao Zedong to be in power for more than two consecutive five-year terms and is on a mission to pursue (and continue) a socialist modernisation in China.

Marxism has been China’s guiding ideology since the founding of the nation. Although many consider China as the most capitalist country in the world (see Dirlik 1997; Galtung 1989; Pearson, Rithmire, & Tsai 2021; Yeung 2004), Xi Jinping reiterated the Party’s compromise to adhere to Marxism as the guiding ideology of the Communist Party of China during the 20th National Congress. He stated that it was the “solemn historic responsibility” of the members of

the CPC to continue to adapt Marxism to the Chinese context (Yang 2022). Eleven months earlier, in his speech at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee, Xi declared,

We need to revisit the Party's century-long history in which the Party has advanced Marxism in the Chinese context by adapting the basic tenets of Marxism to China's realities and fine traditional culture, and we need to gain a deeper understanding of the Party's innovative theories for the new era (Xi 2021).

The discourse and narrative of the Chinese government is to constantly accommodate to present circumstances, adapt to changes, act accordingly, and be flexible in different situations. This is precisely what the ancient Chinese philosophical concept *biantong* 变通 (or *tongbian* 通变) connotes. As Chenshan Tian points out, "Tradition played an important role in the understanding and representing of Marxist philosophy in China" (Tian 2019: 18). He explains that "Mao's appeal to many classical Chinese expressions when reading Marxist dialectical materialism was a result of his deep roots in *tongbian*" (Tian 2019: 20). China constantly reframes its policies to adapt them to their current and distinctive situation. It is the "correlative thinking" or "correlative way of thinking" of the Chinese that uniquely captures the mentality of the people ever since classical Confucian times and even earlier as mentions of this *biantong* can be found in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易经), Daoist texts, and the Yin-Yang School (Hall & Ames 1998).⁸

The gradual rise of China is expected to continue. China's ideological evolution aims at recognising its achievements and maintain a path towards political and socio-economic prosperity. The CPC will persist on using the Five-Year Plans scheme as a short-term way to achieve its long-term goals. The latest approach is directed at the rejuvenation of the nation, which stands for the reposition of China as one of the world's greatest civilisations. This shall be achieved through a series of reforms and advancements (e.g. in education and science and technology) similar to the opening up and reform policy of the late 1970s.

The CPC will strive to maintain Marxism-Leninism as the basis of its political ideology. It will, nevertheless, continue to incorporate, in a reinvigorating manner, Mao Zedong Thought and all his successors' ideological initiatives to build a modern socialist country. Finally, there is a

⁸ For a detailed account on "correlative thinking" from various Western sinologists and philosophers, see Fung 2010.

high probability that political leaders will persist on integrating pre-modern Chinese political views—particularly those associated to Confucian political philosophy—to its current ideological foundation. If so, this will form a unique Chinese political system based on ancient principles and modern practices.

Remodelling Global Affairs

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, China transitioned from an agricultural society to an industrial one. It became one of the strongest economies of the globe and a world-class leader in science, research, and technology. But what is China's position in global politics? Can China be trusted as a new geopolitical power and influencer? While Western media tends to portray China as a the “bad guy”, Chinese sources (mainly state-controlled) depict China as a “good guy”.

China's opening to the world begins in 1978 with the set of social and economic reforms launched under Deng Xiaoping. For the following two decades, the government persistently sought to decrease poverty and provide more commodities and opportunities to its citizens. China held a centrally planned economy yet transitioned to a socialist market economy. With reduced intervention, the CPC permitted foreign direct investment (FDI) in the country and allowed its economic system to be partially guided by the forces of supply and demand in key territories of the country, namely the Special Economic Zones (SEZ). As a result, China joined the international community, and its modern economic transition took place.

By 2001, China was admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO). As reported by the Permanent Mission of China to the WTO, “From China's request to resume its status as a contracting party to the GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade] to its final accession to the WTO, it took China 15 years to go through the arduous and prolonged negotiations” (WTO 2011). Ten years after its accession to the WTO, China outperformed most, if not all, developing economies. Internationally, it became the second largest economy in terms of GDP, the first and second largest merchandise exporter and importer, the fourth and third largest commercial services exporter and importer, and the first destination for both inward and outward FDI among developing countries (WTO 2011). China's economic activities in the first three decades after

the opening up and reform policy gave way for the country to become the first, second, and third largest trading partner for many developed and developing nations.⁹

Because of the CPC's performance, determination, and short, middle, and long-term planning, China achieved and surpassed many of its social, economic, political, scientific, technological, and industrial objectives. The communist state had established legitimate diplomatic relations with most countries by the turn of the century, and as predicted by the French emperor and military commander Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), the sleeping dragon had awakened!¹⁰

It took the Western world by surprise that within ten years after the end of the Cold War (1947-1991)—an event known for the ideological competition between capitalism and communism as political and economic systems—a communist state was excelling in different areas domestically and abroad. China was, however, dealing with national struggles such as keeping up with rapid urbanisation, rising commercial demands, and the need of resources and raw materials (Coates & Luu 2012). In the eyes of the West, especially because of China's communist standing, the CPC was (and still is) often portrayed as an oppressive, authoritarian, sole ruling party predatorial government. Nonetheless, despite its economic system or political framework, China has emerged as a new economic and geopolitical power.

China's rise can be attributed to two main factors: its system of governance and globalisation. On the one hand, the Communist Party of China is the founding political party and sole governing body of China with 96.7 million members. Apart from the CPC, China's leading political institutions include the People's Liberation Army, the State Council, the Politburo, and the National People's Congress. China's political system has a distinctive structure and organisation. Besides, as one of the most ancient civilisations on earth, it has a unique cosmovision of its place and duty in the world. In Chinese, China is referred as *zhongguo* 中国, which translates to "middle kingdom" or "central state". China's idiosyncratic political and economic model is producing unprecedented changes in contemporary world politics and has helped the nation to advance in many ways.

On the other hand, globalisation has enabled China to connect with the rest of the world. By means of international trade and scientific and technological advancements, countries worldwide

⁹ For a list of countries, see WTO 2011.

¹⁰ The phrase "Let China sleep, for when China awakens the whole world will tremble" is attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte.

are now able to profit from globalisation and interact with each other—often commercially and politically but not limited to cultural or social affairs. Some factors that can make a country achieve prosperity include access to education, healthcare system, individual freedoms, affordable housing, and economic security. Though, for societies to benefit from the aforementioned factors, regulated government spending and competent wealth distribution is required. The demands of China and its people have exponentially increased in the past decades; therefore, the Chinese government, institutions, and state-led enterprises are seeking strategic partnerships around the world. Globalisation has permitted China to engage in collaborative efforts with other nations to fulfil its own political and economic objectives. The CPC's rhetoric is that whatever they do in or outside the Chinese borders is to fulfil the demands of its nearly 1.5 billion citizens. In addition, the Chinese government has expressed its intention to contribute to a more peaceful and harmonious world.

China's current economic performance has driven the country to attain international power. Global political economy is altered by public and private sectors worldwide, but China's interference is particularly relevant to geoeconomics. China is now a major actor in influencing international organisations and institutions whereas in the past, Western powers had a hold of them. Also, it has expanded its operations outside its spheres of influence by creating new alliances and signing treaties and agreements with multiple countries to establish constructive relationships to its favour—and allegedly to convene win-win situations with such nations.

China has a unique political and economic model that no other country is or will be able to reproduce as it is essentially designed to meet China's own conditions. Other nations may adopt certain aspects of the China model yet adapt it to their own context. China's socialist market economy—which basically refers to a state-led market economy—could be implemented in other countries. Many of China's involvements abroad usually account for infrastructure investments which may include railroads, dams, schools, highways, power plants, and so on. For the Chinese government to facilitate such assets, the projects must comply with and abide by Chinese standards. Hence, these developments are often operated, administered, and regulated by Chinese enterprises or the Chinese government before, during, and after their completion. This triggers fear for both the emerging and developing countries opening to China as well as the developed nations that see China as an international competitor. The more involvement China has in other countries, the more influence it will secure globally. In such cases, countries that accept Chinese

aid to build infrastructure projects, for example, may as well implement or emulate Chinese standards within their own operations to transform their economies.

Furthermore, the CPC is firmly aiming to establish a so-called socialist modernisation by 2035 and for it to continue through the rest of the century. During the 20th CPC National Congress of 2022, Xi Jinping stated that “The next five years will be crucial for getting the efforts to build a modern socialist country in all respects off to a good start” (“20th CPC National Congress” 2022). A Xinhua News article opened with the following line: “Chinese modernization, a key term defining China’s journey to rejuvenation, has for the first time been written into a report to the national congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the world’s largest Marxist governing party” ((CPC Congress) Xinhua Headlines 2022). It does not come by surprise that the terms “socialist modernisation” and “Chinese modernisation” are now part of the CPC’s official discourse. Similarly, the narrative of “rejuvenating” the country has become part of the CPC’s rhetoric and a crucial element of China’s modernisation process.

During the 1990s, the Western versus Asian values debate had its heyday. One of the main discussions entailed that modernisation was often equated to Westernisation and vice versa. Thus, China is now seeking to establish its own, non-Western version of modernisation. In fact, former prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kwan Yew, claimed that “Confucian values” were key to the development and modernisation of Singapore and other Confucian civilisations (e.g. Taiwan or South Korea) (de Bary 1998: 4). China’s modernisation process, although aimed at developing China and improving the livelihoods of the Chinese people, has features that are common to and benefit other nations’ road to modernisation. Major Chinese sources in English cited Xinhua News quoting Xi Jinping speech at the 20th CPC National Congress who stressed that “Chinese modernization contains elements that are common to the modernization processes of all countries, but it is more characterized by features that are unique to the Chinese context.”¹¹ One month prior to the National Congress, an article on the People’s Daily highlighted that “China’s modernization is not only for its own development, but also for the wellbeing of the whole world. [...] The Chinese path to modernization is based on China’s conditions, and reflects the evolution of human society as a whole” (Yin 2022). The article also sustained that other developing

¹¹ See, China’s Modernization Path Offers Inspiration for Global Peace and Development 2022; China’s Wisdom to Drive Global Modernization 2022; ‘Chinese Modernization’ Written into Key CPC Congress Report 2022; Chinese Modernization: Socialist Modernization Pursued under CPC Leadership 2022; (CPC Congress) Xinhua Headlines: “Chinese Modernization” Written into Key CPC Congress Report 2022).

countries may equally modernise in a matter of decades as China did—unlike most developed nations which took them centuries. It criticises the “old path” towards modernisation based on Western measures and praises the Chinese path that allegedly pursues genuine multilateralism through open and extensive international discussions (Yin 2022).

Chinese authorities claim that China’s modernisation advances common prosperity, peaceful development, democracy, and harmony for its people and the masses. China wishes to achieve these through a novel course, one that opposes any sort of outcomes like those that came along with Western modernisation, namely expansionism, hegemony, invasions, racism, class divisions, economic instability, etc. Nevertheless, China’s domestic issues—especially in some of its autonomous regions—and soft power practices overseas are often regarded in the Western world as insolent behaviours comparable to the outcomes of Western modernisation.

China has opened to new world perspectives, and its socialist modernisation aims to deviate from the normative practices Western powers implemented during their colonisation processes and imperialistic endeavours. In fact, it is the first time in modern history that a communist government has achieved such amount of political power and economic success. The CPC has worked thoroughly to develop prosperous international relations with other nations. In recent decades, they have built efficient synergistic collaborations internationally to succeed in accomplishing their national objectives. Nonetheless, countries worldwide are wary about China’s true objectives for several reasons. According to John J. Mearsheimer, “China is likely to try to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere” (Mearsheimer 2006: 162). With China’s current commercial expansion and economic and resource interests worldwide, it is likely that it will not only try to dominate Asia, but also other regions around the world.

Furthermore, China scholars and political theorists have investigated the development of China’s approach to international relations to make better sense of which direction this country is taking geopolitically. For example, Yaqing Qin states that, since the late 1970s, there have been two processes regarding China’s approach to international relations. The first is the “learning process” and the second the “developing process” (Yaqing 2009). According to Qin, “During the initial stage of theory-learning phase, liberalism and realism dominated the scene and guided theory-related research in China” (Yaqing 2009: 193). Moreover, for China’s particular “deepening stage” or development stage of international relations theories, Qin claims

that Chinese scholars have produced a theoretical paradigm based on “Marxism, traditional Chinese philosophy, and the confluence of Western and Chinese intellectual traditions” where much has been directed to the revival of classical Chinese thought, predominantly Confucianism (Yaqing 2009: 195-196). He mentions Zhao Tingyang’s “*Tianxia* System” addressing how the Confucian *tianxia* institutions could produce a system aimed at solving global problems (Yaqing 2009: 197).

China’s cosmovision is unique, and it adapts to the circumstances of different epochs. In the post-Mao era, it gradually moved from isolation to integration with the rest of the world. Its approach to international relations changed along with its economic system. It adopted capitalist designs to compete in the globalised world, and by gaining accession to the WTO in 2001, it became more interlinked to global economics (Coase & Wang 2016). Despite the CPC’s assertion that China is a communist state, it now co-exists with capitalism and neoliberal inclinations as to develop its economy and abide by international guidelines and standards. From Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping, China’s socialist modernisation is a fundamental factor to develop and continue to liberalise the Chinese economy. Also, this process is a tool for China to strengthen its relations with other nations, not only because it is beneficial to its national interests but also because it will be incapable to perform the way it does without the support of other nations.

China is among the fastest growing economies of the world. It is considered the global factory due to its exclusive business ecosystem making the country one of the largest exporters (Lardy 1994). This, nevertheless, raises concerns among the international community since the rise of China is often regarded with negative connotations by Western powers. A study jointly conducted by the Chatham House and the Royal United Services Institute shows that “the European Commission on EU–China relations identified China as a ‘systemic rival’, followed two years later by the UK’s Integrated Review, which referred to China as a ‘systemic competitor’” (Bergsen, Froggatt, Nouwens, & Pantucci 2022: 3). China is generally depicted as a rival and competitor by major Western powers and institutions encouraging feelings of fear and distrust. The opening statement of the study claims that “The rise of China is one of the greatest challenges for the transatlantic relationship” (Bergsen et al. 2022: 1). If the United States and European countries continue to have averse sentiments towards China, it will become more difficult to build constructive relationships and generate closer and healthier cooperation

mechanisms with the Asian giant. In a globalised world, nations depend on each other, yet it seems that the Western world is not ready to accept a new geopolitical player—at least not in the way China is realising it.

The rise of China, and its current path towards securing its stance as one of the strongest economies of the world, promises an interesting power transition in the future of international politics. It can be expected that the global economy will be moulded by China in upcoming decades; hopefully, where developed, developing, and particularly emerging economies can also benefit. China's recent socio-political and economic transformation has taken the world by surprise. Due to its unique model and approach to domestic and international affairs, the People's Republic of China is gradually attaining a quasi-hegemonic geopolitical status.

Once considered as one of the most closed nations of the world, China has opened in numerous ways. Nowadays, nations worldwide want to build or strengthen their relations with the Asian giant and vice versa. Essentially, China needs other countries and other countries need China to successfully achieve a more prosperous economic situation for all. No matter if China is seen as the “good” or the “bad” guy, this nation will continue to influence global policy making and impose itself as the major geopolitical power it has become using its own mixture of Western and Chinese (traditional and modern) socio-political frameworks.

Concluding Remarks

This article introduced key aspects of Chinese culture, modern political history, and current approach to global affairs. Having a basic understanding of Chinese traditional and cultural values can give us a better perspective of how to deal with China in a comprehensive manner. China's ideological foundation and distinctive road to modernisation are generating enormous social, political, and economic transformations in the country; these not only have effects domestically but such changes also have a great impact internationally. With China as a new global political power, new bilateral and multilateral relations are being created or strengthened such that a multipolar world—led by China and other Western and non-Western allies—has arisen.

Since 1979, China has been remodelling its domestic policy to keep up with the fast-changing international environment. The Chinese government is striving to turn China into a great modern socialist country and aspires to become a role model for other nations. Moreover, Confucian concepts such as “moderately well-off society” (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社会) or those associated to the Confucian philosophy of harmony—e.g. “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) and “harmonious world” (*hexie shijie* 和谐世界)—are constantly verbalised in the political speeches of CPC officials. These aim to eradicate social inequalities domestically and promote a fairer and more peaceful and equitable international environment.

China has outperformed some of the most powerful nations generating, in some circles, antipathy, particularly amid Western powers, since the global balance of power is shifting eastwards. China is securing its position as a new global political, economic, military, technological, and scientific leader through investment schemes, infrastructure projects, and economic interactions in and outside its borders whilst solidifying its diplomatic ties and commercial relations with emerging, developing, and developed nations worldwide. Such exchanges are unlikely to decline in the near future; thus, promising relationships between China and other nations are expected to continue on the rise.

This study aimed at delivering a brief synopsis of China’s existing state of affairs claiming that a better understanding of this nation can surely be attained by considering and examining its cultural traditions (esp. Confucianism), economic and socio-political developments, and approach to international relations. China is not alone in this world and needs other countries to successfully continue its systematic rise whilst abiding by international standards. China’s national objectives and present encounter with other nations has created a new global order, one where China has attained a quasi-hegemonic status that will have significant effects in international affairs and global governance for decades, or even centuries, to come.

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