



Article

Confucian Foreign Policy Traditions in Chinese History

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Abstract

Can Confucianism enrich Chinese foreign policy? This article seeks to explore major traditions of Confucian foreign policy in imperial Chinese history and suggest their implications for contemporary Chinese foreign policy. The popular notion of Confucian pacifism is not a credible tradition of Confucian foreign policy, but a modern Chinese myth constructed in the early 20th century. Rather, Confucian foreign policy traditions were characterized by the contrasting ideas of inclusivism and exclusivism, neither of which renounced the use of force as a legitimate instrument of foreign policy. Both traditions were underpinned by a traditional Chinese theory of human nature. The adoption of inclusivism or exclusivism in foreign policy was a contingent outcome of relational interactions in China's foreign relations. Confucianism's inclusive humanism, reflected in the inclusive tradition, can provide a major intellectual inspiration for contemporary Chinese foreign policy. It can suggest a Confucian grand strategy of inclusive relationalism that significantly broadens the strategic vision of Chinese foreign policy. Chinese foreign policy discourse under President Xi Jinping already contains an important degree of inclusive relationalism. Putting this strategy more into practice will benefit both China and the world.

Can Confucianism enrich modern Chinese foreign policy? This would have been an unthinkable and certainly 'counterrevolutionary' question in the revolutionary era of Mao Zedong (1949–1976), who took eradicating 'feudal dregs' such as Confucianism as one of the main missions of his continuous revolution. Yet for contemporary China it is no longer an idle or quixotic question. Reform-era (1978–present) Chinese leaders from Jiang Zemin onwards have occasionally invoked Confucian concepts in foreign policy statements. With President Xi Jinping, however, a significant shift has occurred: President Xi has made the use of ancient Chinese classics, including Confucian texts, one of the hallmarks of his

political discourse.¹ In a speech marking 2565 years since Confucius's birth he indeed exhorted the study of Confucianism to gain understanding of the Chinese spiritual world and to promote world peace.² Furthermore, in almost every major foreign policy speech, he has never failed to borrow from classical Chinese (including Confucian) ideas. In some sense, then, Confucianism has already found its way into Chinese foreign policy, although this is far from saying that Confucianism has become a leading or even an important intellectual source of Chinese foreign policy.

It is not clear whether the Chinese leadership's invocation of the classics is merely a rhetorical device conveniently generated on the basis of traditional Chinese culture, or whether it serves a deeper intellectual purpose grounded in traditional Chinese thought. This question can only be answered by establishing the intellectual foundations of Chinese foreign policy under Xi through a study of policy discourse and behaviour. The time is not yet ripe for such a study, since Xi has been in power for scarcely more than two years. This article asks a more fundamental historical and theoretical question about Confucian foreign policy: If there was a Confucian foreign policy in Chinese history, what did it look like? What were its intellectual and theoretical underpinnings? If we can find tentative answers to these questions, we will be able to lay a historical and theoretical foundation for exploring the implications of Confucianism for contemporary Chinese foreign policy and strategy.

Surprisingly, although these are fairly primary questions about Confucianism's role in Chinese foreign policy, they have not received sufficient attention from China's International Relations (IR) scholars. Chinese IR has recently begun to explore the implications of traditional Chinese cultural and historical resources for modern IR studies. The 'Tsinghua approach' to contemporary Chinese foreign policy and IR theory is notable among recent scholarly efforts in its drawing upon ancient Chinese thought for such studies.³ As its protagonists admit, however, their research, limited so far to the task of combing through the vast body of Chinese thought for intellectual inspirations, has yet to make major scholarly innovations.⁴ Moreover, given its almost single-minded focus on ancient China, the Tsinghua approach largely ignores the richness of the imperial Chinese experience.

- 1 For media observations, see Chris Buckley, 'Leader Taps into Chinese Classics in Seeking to Cement Power', *New York Times*, 11 October, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/12/world/leader-taps-into-chinese-classics-in-seeking-to-cement-power.html>; Didi Kirsten Tatlow, 'Xi Jinping on Exceptionalism with Chinese Characteristics', *New York Times*, 14 October, 2014, <http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/14/xi-jinping-on-exceptionalism-with-chinese-characteristics/>.
- 2 Xi Jinping, 'Remarks at the International Academic Conference Commemorating Confucius's 2,565 Birthday', 24 September, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-09/24/c_1112612018.htm.
- 3 Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). See also Feng Zhang, 'The Tsinghua Approach and the Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2012), pp. 73–102.
- 4 Xu Jin and Sun Xuefeng, 'Qinghua lujing yu zhongguo guoji guanxi yanjiu de fazhan fangxiang' ('The Tsinghua Approach and the Direction of Chinese International Relations Study'), *Guoji zhanwang (International Outlook)*, No. 6 (2014), pp. 22–36.

It thus seems useful to explore certain fundamental questions about the Confucian foreign policy of imperial China. Confucianism, as an academic subject, a political discourse, and a popular social movement, has been steadily reviving in mainland China since the 1990s.⁵ Yet most academic studies of Confucianism have focused on its implications for political reform or for everyday life. Studying the relevance of Confucian thought for modern international relations, therefore, will be a major scholarly challenge for Chinese IR in the years to come. This article is intended as a small step in this direction. In terms of theory and history, it seeks to uncover the central conceptual foundations of Confucian foreign policy in imperial Chinese history. In terms of contemporary policy implications, it considers whether Confucian traditions retain relevance in the modern world and can thus enrich Chinese foreign policy in the present era.

Before proceeding, two important caveats are in order. First, in exploring Confucian foreign policy traditions, I am not assuming that Confucianism represents the entirety of traditional Chinese thought, or that it was the only intellectual tradition to have influenced imperial Chinese foreign policy. Given the potent existence of other intellectual thought, such as Legalism and Daoism, Confucianism cannot be equated with traditional Chinese political thought. Indeed, although Confucianism was the major intellectual school throughout Chinese history, it was still one among several schools of thought and in many cases had to compete (not always successfully) with others for intellectual and political prominence.

Second, owing to the intellectual and political competition among Confucianism and other political schools of thought, the influence of Confucianism on imperial Chinese foreign policy varied across different historical periods. In using the empirical example of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in this article, I am not implying that Confucianism was the dominant influence on Chinese foreign policy during this period. Rather, in examining areas of Ming China's foreign policy that Confucianism apparently influenced, I attempt to show that there were two widely different, almost opposing Confucian worldviews and approaches in foreign policy—representing, I argue, the Confucian traditions of inclusivism and exclusivism, respectively. No claim is made about whether or not Confucianism was the dominant intellectual guide of Ming foreign policy, or whether or not other political thought, such as Legalism and Daoism, influenced Ming foreign policy in areas not examined in this article. The question of which political thought was more influential under what conditions is an important historical and theoretical question in its own right, but it is beyond the scope of this article.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section evaluates the notion of Confucian pacifism as a myth in the modern Chinese imagination of traditional Chinese foreign policy. Confucian pacifism as understood today is an early 20th-century intellectual construct, not a credible tradition of actual Confucian foreign policy. The second section provides support for this argument by deducing from the discourses of the early Ming dynasty emperors an official neo-Confucian theory of foreign policy that allowed a legitimate place for the use of force. The third and fourth sections then identify exclusivism and inclusivism as two major traditions of Confucian foreign policy. The fifth section further points out the long established Chinese theory of human nature that provided the two traditions' conceptual foundation. The sixth and final section considers the contemporary relevance of these historical

5 For a recent review, see Shufang Wu, 'The Revival of Confucianism and the CCP's Struggle for Cultural Leadership: A Content Analysis of the People's Daily, 2000-2009', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 23, No. 89 (2014), pp. 971–91.

Confucian traditions, and argues that inclusive humanism, reflected in the inclusive tradition, can provide a major intellectual inspiration for contemporary Chinese foreign policy.

The Myth of Confucian Pacifism

Before identifying historical traditions of Confucian foreign policy, however, one must evaluate a profound myth in the modern Chinese imagination of China's foreign policy traditions. It is the myth of Confucian pacifism—the belief that Confucianism determined a defensive or accommodationist Chinese grand strategy and a largely peaceful foreign policy in China's imperial era (221 BC–AD 1911). A great number of scholars, inside and outside China, allege that this was the dominant tradition of Confucian foreign policy and that it was substantially realized in practice. Their core claim is that imperial China, upholding peace as the essence of its foreign policy, maintained a harmonious order in East Asia until the dawn of the modern era, when Confucian statecraft buckled under the onslaught of Western and Japanese imperialism. China is believed to have created a historical trajectory of peaceful and harmonious development fundamentally different from that of any other major power in world history.⁶ This pacifism is attributed to Confucianism because Confucianism's essence is seen to be embodied in the idea of *he he* (和合)—peace, cooperation, and integration.⁷

Yet so many historical facts contradict the claim of Confucian pacifism that its century-long popularity appears puzzling.⁸ A cursory historical overview reveals that imperial Chinese foreign policies were not characterized by peace alone. Indeed, how can the foreign policies of any great power be entirely defensive and peaceful, given their necessities as great powers of dealing with issues of war as well as peace, conflict as well as cooperation, competition as well as accommodation? If, as Confucian pacifism asserts, the great expansions of Chinese territories were solely the result of cultural assimilation it would then be difficult to explain the Qin's (221–206 BC) emergence from the crucible of interstate

- 6 See, for example, He Fangchuan, *He fangchuan jiaoshou shixue lunwenji* (A Collection of Professor He Fangchuan's Papers on History) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007); Zhang Yan, 'Chuantong wenhua yu zhongguo waijiao' ('Traditional Culture and Chinese Foreign Policy'), *Guoji guanxi xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of the Institute of International Relations), No. 3 (1998), pp. 7–11; Wang Yi, 'Zhongguo heping fazhan zhanlue de chuantong wenhua genyuan tanxi: cong rujia guojia guanxi lunli sixiang de shijiao' ('On the Traditional Cultural Roots of China's Peaceful Development Strategy: From the Perspective of Inter-state Relation Ethics of the Confucian Thought'), *Guizhou shifan daxue xuebao-shehui kexue ban* (Journal of Guizhou Normal University-Social Science), No. 2 (2006), pp. 12–17; Huiyun Feng, *Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-making: Confucianism, Leadership and War* (London: Routledge, 2007); Shaohua Hu, 'Revisiting Chinese Pacifism', *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2006), pp. 256–78.
- 7 Li Shaojun, 'Lun Zhongguo wenming de heping neihan: cong chuantong dao xianshi—dui 'Zhongguo weixie lun de huida' ('On the Peaceful Orientation of Chinese Civilization: From Tradition to Reality—A Reply to the "China Threat" Theory'), *Guoji jingji pinglun* (International Economic Commentary), No. 1–2 (1999), pp. 30–33.
- 8 For a similar critique, see Ja Ian Chong, 'Popular Narratives Versus Chinese History: Implications for Understanding an Emergent China', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2014), pp. 939–64.

competition in the Warring States period and its creation of the first empire in Chinese history, the Han's (206 BC–AD 220) expansion into the Western Regions and the Korean Peninsula, the Tang's (618–907) greatly augmented empire in Central Asia, the Ming's (1368–1644) recovery of northern territories lost by the Song (960–1279), and the creation of the vast Qing empire (1644–1911) stretching from Manchuria and Mongolia to Tibet and Xinjiang. Thus, Victoria Hui argues that 'War, not Confucian ideals, explains how China expanded from the Yellow River valley in the Warring States era to the continental empire in the Qing dynasty.'⁹ Historians point out that Chinese history 'has in fact been at least as violent as Europe's',¹⁰ a total of 3131 wars having taken place from the first Qin dynasty to the last Qing dynasty, an average of almost 1.5 wars each year.¹¹ Although these data tell us nothing about how violent (or how peaceful) China has been compared with other countries, they serve to demolish the notion of its exclusive or unique peacefulness.

Moreover, expansion and conquest were not alien specialties of the so-called 'conquest dynasties' such as the Yuan and Qing, but also essential skills of Han Chinese dynasties like the Qin, Han, Tang, Song, and Ming. The scale of Han and Tang expansions needs no emphasis. The early Ming also expanded on all fronts, not least to areas north of present-day Beijing that had remained out of the Song's reach. Yet even the Song, as Yuan-kang Wang documents, did not shy away from expansion.¹² Nor were these expansions always defensive responses to foreign threats, as claimed by Confucian pacifism. Many of the early Ming campaigns into Mongolia, particularly those initiated by the founding Hongwu emperor (r. 1368–1398), are better seen as offensive conquests than active defence.¹³ 'Any cursory look at Chinese history', observes Nicola Di Cosmo, 'would readily dispel any notion of "undermilitarized" history, given the omnipresence of wars of all types, from wars of expansion and conquest to civil wars, wars of "unification", and defensive wars.'¹⁴

The claim of the assimilationist power of Chinese culture also needs qualification. No doubt assimilation has been one of the distinctive functions of Chinese culture, contributing to the development of the Chinese civilization and the expansion of the Chinese polity. It was nevertheless far from effective enough to substitute coercion and administrative control as an instrument of expansion. The spread of Chinese civilization was often a cruel process. Powerful Chinese dynasties often had difficulties assimilating peripheral peoples purely through cultural attraction. Dennis Twitchett observes that the Tang, reigning over

- 9 Victoria Tin-bor Hui, 'How China Was Ruled', *The American Interest*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2008), p. 58.
- 10 Hans van de Ven, 'War in the Making of Modern China', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (1996), p. 737.
- 11 *Zhongguo junshishi bianxiezhu* (The Compilation Team of 'China's Military History'), *Zhongguo lidai zhanzheng nianbiao*, Vols. I, II (*A Chronology of Wars in Chinese History*)(Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2002).
- 12 Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). See also Peter Lorge, *War, Politics and Society in Early Modern China, 900-1795* (London: Routledge, 2005).
- 13 See Feng Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).
- 14 Nicola Di Cosmo, 'Introduction', in Nicola Di Cosmo, ed., *Military Culture in Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 2.

probably the most intensive period in Chinese history of foreign cultural borrowing, failed to transform neighbouring polities despite their having adopted Chinese as their literary language and administrative lingua franca. With powerful cultural identities and a fierce sense of political independence, these entities adopted from China only what seemed to them useful and appropriate.¹⁵

In fact, the modern interpretation of Confucian pacifism as the essence of traditional Chinese statecraft would bemuse many imperial Chinese rulers. Take the example of Emperor Xuan of the Han dynasty (Xuandi, 73–49 BC). Scolding his son (the future emperor Yuan) for suggesting he employ more Confucian officials in key positions, Emperor Xuan poignantly pointed out that the Han regime had always used a combination of *ba* (霸) and *wang* (王) (i.e., coercion and humaneness) in statecraft.¹⁶ Such eclecticism in political governance was characteristic of imperial statecraft, and could not escape the attention of major thinkers. Zhu Xi (1130–1200), the great synthesizer and founder of Song neo-Confucianism, for example, lamented that the Confucian Sage Way had not ruled the world for a single day since the classical age of Confucius and Mencius.¹⁷

A Neo-Confucian Theory of Foreign Policy

History shows that Confucian pacifism is not a valid description of imperial Chinese foreign policy behaviour. Recent IR scholarship has exposed the enormous discrepancy between this alleged Confucian foreign policy tradition and the frequency and scale of state violence throughout Chinese history.¹⁸ I will, however, further argue not only that Confucian pacifism is a poor characterization of imperial Chinese practice, but that it did not exist, even in the minds of imperial Chinese rulers, if by Confucian pacifism we mean Confucianism's renunciation or neglect of the role of force. Confucianism, in fact, never renounced force as a legitimate instrument of statecraft for waging 'appropriate wars' in the form of punitive expedition. This observation is as damaging to the claim of Confucian pacifism as is the historical counter-evidence sketched in the preceding section, because it challenges the assumed association of Confucianism with pacifism.

The coercive dimension of Confucianism is perceivable in pre-Qin (c.600–200 BC) and Han-Tang (206 BC–AD 907) Confucianism. In the *Analects*, Confucius himself endorsed

- 15 Denis Twitchett, 'Tibet in Tang's Grand Strategy', in Hans van de Ven, ed., *Warfare in Chinese History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 147.
- 16 Ban Gu, *Han shu* (A History of the Han Dynasty)(Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 9.277. In this article, citation of multi-chapter (*juan*) primary Chinese sources such as the *Han shu*, *Ming shi lu*, and *Ming shi* that are available in modern editions generally follows the customary practice among historians of placing a period between the *juan* number and the page range. The page range referred to is that of the pagination of the modern edition.
- 17 See Wang Rongzu, 'Xifang shijia dui zhongguo chuantong shixue de lijie yu wujie' ('Western Historians' Understanding and Misunderstanding of China's Traditional Historiography'), in Kang Le and Peng Minghui, eds., *Shixue fangfa yu lishi jieshi* (Historical Methods and Historical Explanations)(Beijing: Zhongguo dabaik chubanshe, 2005), p. 397.
- 18 Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Wang, *Harmony and War*.

Guan Zhong's aggressive and militaristic foreign policy by virtue of its having saved the Chinese from foreign subjugation.¹⁹ In this context, Di Cosmo notes that 'The protection of China's cultural heritage from menacing loose-haired hordes justified the use of force'.²⁰ He further points out that 'A clear association between foreign policies and philosophical doctrines, in particular the linkage of "Confucianism" and pacifism on the one hand and "legalism" and interventionism on the other, cannot be established before the Qin-Han period', because these philosophies produced a succession of practical doctrines, from peaceful coexistence to exploitation and conquest.²¹ Han-Tang Confucianism was also more bellicose than commonly understood,²² influenced as it was by heterogeneous intellectual sources, and acquired a strong utilitarian dimension.²³

Rather than focusing on the 'easy case' of pre-Qin and Han-Tang Confucianism, however, in this section I deduce an official *neo-Confucian* theory of foreign policy from the discourses of early Ming rulers, and examine whether or not such an official theory included a legitimate place for the use of force. Developed after the Song, neo-Confucianism became the state ideology and the dominant intellectual influence during the Ming-Qing period (1368–1911). Although still containing a utilitarian aspect, it was in general more peaceful or conciliatory than earlier Confucian thought due to its insistence on moral self-cultivation.²⁴ Thus, this coercive dimension of the more dovish version of Confucianism, if it can be shown, will call strongly into question the general claim of Confucian pacifism. I draw empirical examples from the early Ming period spanning the reigns of the Hongwu and Yongle emperors (1368–1424) because the Ming dynasty constituted 'the first full "neo-Confucian" period' in Chinese history.²⁵ Even so, the theory deduced below is but a particular version of neo-Confucian theory reflective of the perspectives of early Ming rulers. It should not be construed as a general neo-Confucian theory of foreign policy (one may well wonder whether such a unifying theory could have existed in Chinese history).

The early Ming neo-Confucian theory of foreign policy would be: the Chinese emperor, as the patriarch and ultimate authority of the world, should treat his subjects—internal ministers and peoples of the empire as well as outer vassals and peoples beyond his administrative realm—with moral excellence (*de* 德) expressed as humaneness (*ren* 仁) and grace (*en* 恩).²⁶ Humaneness is practically manifested in China's nurturing and fostering

- 19 *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), p. 175.
- 20 Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 105.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 105–06.
- 22 I am grateful to Tsai Mon-han for this observation.
- 23 On the latter point, see Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, *Utilitarian Confucianism: Ch'en Liang's Challenge to Chu His* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- 24 For overviews of neo-Confucianism, see Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Centre, 2008).
- 25 Wm. Theodore de Bary, *The Trouble with Confucianism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 54 (emphasis in original).
- 26 See Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, *Ming shi lu* (*Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty*)(hereafter MSL)(Nangang: Hongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo,

(*fu yu* 抚育) of foreign peoples,²⁷ while grace is expressed as its munificent care for their needs, both embodied in the term *rou yuan* (柔远) or *huai rou yuan ren* (怀柔远人 win the admiration of people from afar through kindness). The emperor should be humane by loving and nurturing the lives of all peoples with sympathy and compassion, and be gracious by being generous and tolerant towards them, so acting in accordance with the Confucian *li* (礼 propriety) and *yi* (义 appropriateness). He should try to develop integrity (*cheng* 诚) and trustworthiness (*xin* 信) in fulfilling these principles.²⁸ Most important of all, he should always strive to cultivate his moral excellence as the ultimate means to attract the emulative submission of peoples from afar.

Acting in accordance with these principles, the emperor can expect subordinate foreign rulers to appreciate his moral excellence and be grateful for his humaneness and grace by observing their subordinate integrity of loyalty (*zhong* 忠), obedience (*shun* 顺), and trustworthiness.²⁹ If they lack these qualities, the emperor should in the first instance allow them to improve moral excellence and change behaviour (*xiu de gai xing* 修德改行).³⁰ If they fail further, they may be asked to improve reputation and cultivation (*zi wei sheng jiao* 自为声教) within their own domains before resuming relationships with China.³¹ Even if their failings are serious, they should still be given an opportunity to start anew and demonstrate improvements. If they not only resist this but also continue to display no propriety or integrity towards China, to the point of creating disturbances, then punitive expeditions (*zheng tao zhi shi* 征讨之师) might be launched.³² Punitive expeditions are responses to serious 'crimes' (*zui* 罪) such as threatening Chinese security and killing Chinese envoys, and not tolerable failings such as the cessation of tribute alone. They serve to demonstrate the emperor's awesomeness (*wei* 威) when needed, although, in principle, awesomeness is less preferable than moral excellence.³³ Their purpose is punishment and rectification only, not conquest, exploitation, or colonization, and Chinese forces should withdraw after military operations. Throughout, the key principle is cherishing the loyal with moral excellence and punishing the disobedient by withholding humaneness and grace and, in the extreme, applying military force.³⁴

Clearly, this is a moral and normative theory, as we would expect from Confucianism. As such we should not expect its full realization in practice. Yet it is a moral theory with a notable coercive dimension in the form of punitive expedition. Its logic is straightforward

1962–1966), Taizu shi lu, 27.749–50; MSL, Taizu shi lu, 89.1574-75; MSL, Taizong shi lu, 193.2035; MSL, Taizong shi lu, 101.1313; MSL, Taizong shi lu, 152.1768-69.

27 See Bo Yinhu and Wang Xiong, eds., *Mingdai menggu hanji shiliao huibian (A Compilation of Chinese Historical Sources of the Mongols during the Ming Era-Volume II)*(Huhehaote: Neimenggu daxue chubanshe, 2000), pp. 58, 504.

28 See MSL, Taizu shi lu, 44.866-67; MSL, Taizu shi lu, 116.1903-05; MSL, Taizu shi lu, 90.1582; MSL, Taizong shi lu, 77.1043-44; MSL, Taizong shi lu, 93.1234-35; MSL, Taizong shi lu, 101.1313; MSL, Taizong shi lu, 264.2406; Cheng Liang-Sheng, *Supplement & Revision of 'Sino-Japanese Inter-Relations in Ming History'* (Taipei: The Liberal Arts Press, 1981), p. 254.

29 See Cheng, *Supplement & Revision*, p. 254.

30 See MSL, Taizu shi lu, 85.1518-19.

31 See MSL, Taizu shi lu, 221.3233-35; MSL, Taizu shi lu, 228.3324-25.

32 See MSL, Taizu shi lu, 50.988; MSL, Taizong shi lu, 136.1659; MSL, Taizong shi lu, 152.1768-69.

33 See MSL, Taizong shi lu, 193.2035.

34 See MSL, Taizu shi lu, 50.988.

and the condition of using force clear: force might be used when foreign rulers are seen to have betrayed the Chinese emperor's moral excellence by creating disturbances, and after Chinese attempts to encourage their improvements in accordance with Confucian principles have failed. Thus, even if early Ming rulers believe in war as a last resort for settling international disputes, that last resort is intended not primarily for defence (even though as a practical matter it often has that function), but for rectifying and punishing perceived inappropriate behaviour of others, which is more offensive, or at least proactive, than defensive in orientation. When the situation calls for punitive expedition, pacifism indeed runs against the spirit of Confucian foreign policy. Confucianism places a strong emphasis on 'moral exhortation and inspiration by way of virtuous example',³⁵ but the emphasis does not thereby make Confucian foreign policy pacifistic. If one has to use a label, then 'Confucian punitivism' is more accurate in describing the coercive dimension of Confucian foreign policy than 'Confucian pacifism'.

Confucian pacifism as understood by many modern scholars existed neither in the thought nor in the practice of imperial Chinese foreign policy. It cannot claim to be the dominant tradition of Confucian foreign policy in Chinese history. The puzzle then becomes that of why the idea of Confucian pacifism has become such a popular notion in the modern era. Although this is not the place to explore it, one can suggest that the modern myth of Confucian pacifism is a product of a historical process, beginning no later than the early 20th century, of socially constructing imperial China into a uniquely peaceful and benevolent country dramatically different from the warring European countries. As Hans Van de Ven observes, 'The idea that Chinese culture was one of peace is partly a Confucian aspiration, partly an Enlightenment image produced when dynastic wars ravaged Europe, and finally partly a notion that was given new life after World War I by those in the East and West who wrote about pacifistic Eastern Cultures as an alternative to violent Western ones'.³⁶

Confucian Foreign Policy Tradition I: Exclusivism

If pacifism was not a credible tradition in Confucian foreign policy, what was? Arthur Waldron's insightful analysis of Ming–Mongol relations in the 16th century provides a good starting point for discussion. The example of Ming China's relationship with the Mongols is useful because it more clearly exposes the contrasting Confucian foreign policy traditions under different conditions than do China's relationships with other political units such as Korea or Japan. Waldron reveals a Ming foreign policy approach under a condition of extreme conflict between the Chinese and the Mongols, one that he variously characterizes as culturalist, moralistic, exclusive, xenophobic, and inflexible.³⁷ This is contrasted with an opposing approach described as cosmopolitan, inclusive, rational, pragmatic, and flexible,³⁸ which Waldron associates not with Chinese culture but with Chinese rulers'

35 David Wong, 'Confucian Political Philosophy', in George Klosko, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 778.

36 Van de Ven, 'War in the Making of Modern China', p. 737.

37 Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 9, 32, 72, 88, 109, 172, 178, and 183.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 32, 37, 47, 72, 109, 173, 180, and 183.

pragmatic assessments of circumstance.³⁹ Waldron recognizes ‘the universalistic tendency in Chinese culture’.⁴⁰ However, because this universalism was ‘established long before the nomads appeared’, he asserts that it ‘provided no intellectual framework that could deal with people as different as the nomads’.⁴¹ The claim seems overly strong: although Chinese universalism did not provide universally applicable principles or policies for Sino-nomadic relations, it was a useful intellectual framework under certain circumstances, specifically those when the nomads did not pose serious threats and when China was militarily powerful, as I show below.

The inclusive approach Waldron identified was more than a sort of realpolitik based on situational necessities; it was also derivable from Chinese culture. In fact, the two opposing approaches were both theoretically possible and practically manifested within a Chinese-Confucian cultural framework. A brief comparison of the worldviews of pre-Qin classical Confucianism and Song neo-Confucianism helps clarify this point.

There was nothing intrinsic in classical Confucianism denigrating the *yi* (夷culturally inferior foreign peoples) as irreconcilably alien peoples that must be kept away from the cultural Chinese.⁴² In general, pre-Qin Confucians took the *yi* to be human beings capable of understanding, respecting, and developing moral excellence (*de*德) and observing propriety (*li*礼). The Chinese, therefore, should treat them with humaneness (*ren*仁), in the same way as they would treat their fellow Chinese. Those *yi* who successfully acquired *de* and practiced *li* should moreover be regarded as culturally Chinese. Being ‘Chinese’ was thus an ethical and cultural accomplishment rather than an ethnic or racial precondition.⁴³ Thus, the key classical Confucian principle of *yi* management, based on the premise of their ‘ultimate mutability’,⁴⁴ was that the *yi* were inherently transformable through the inclusive potential of Chinese culture, and therefore should receive such cultural benefits whenever possible. Education and transformation (*jiao hua*教化), not exclusion and isolation, were hence seen as the ultimate goals of Confucian foreign policy.⁴⁵ Indeed, it has been claimed that there was no Self–Other opposition in the Chinese cultural world.⁴⁶

39 *Ibid.*, p. 32. Mark C. Elliott similarly distinguishes two schools of the ‘exclusivists’ and the ‘relativists’; see Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 22.

40 Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, p. 33.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

42 See Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 65.

43 Joseph Chan, ‘Territorial Boundaries and Confucianism’, in Daniel Bell, ed., *Confucian Political Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 76.

44 Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 32.

45 Qian Mu, *Zhongguo wenhuashi daolun (An Introduction to the History of Chinese Culture)* (Beijing: Shangwu chubanshe, 1994), p. 185.

46 Xu Zhuoyun, *Wozhe yu tazhe: Zhongguo lishi shang de neiwai fenji (Self and Other: The Internal–External Differentiation in Chinese History)*(Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe, 2010), p. 20. See also Ge Zhaoguang, *Zhai zi zhongguo: chongjian youguan ‘zhong guo’ de lishi lunshu (This China: Reconstructing Historical Interpretations of ‘China’)*(Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), p. 49.

However, this cosmopolitan and inclusive outlook in classical Confucianism was compromised by a particularistic and exclusivist attitude in Song neo-Confucianism, although it must be pointed out that similar attitudes had long existed before the neo-Confucian transformation. Song neo-Confucians were extremely reluctant to acknowledge the transformative potential of the *yi*. Furthermore, given the equality and even superiority the semi-nomadic regimes of the Liao and Jin were able to maintain vis-à-vis the Song,⁴⁷ they could not but recognize the difficulty of such transformation. They therefore chose to erect an almost absolute political and cultural barrier to protect the purity and peculiarity of Chinese culture from the encroachment of foreign influence.⁴⁸ In urging China to ‘seal herself from foreign peoples and forbid them to mix and interfere with Chinese’, theirs is a ‘monistic philosophy’ that ‘tends to absolutise differences’.⁴⁹

In general, then, classical Confucianism and Song neo-Confucianism embodied two contrasting worldviews. Since Confucian culture influenced both, Confucianism by itself cannot explain their difference. The richness of the Confucian tradition could be interpreted and used in different ways. Sometimes Confucian teachings may inform policy thinking and motives, but sometimes rulers may use the Confucian discourse to justify policies made for other purposes. It is rather the conditions of such varied use of Confucianism that merit analytical focus. Waldron suggests that ‘rather than seeing Chinese foreign policy as more or less consistent and culturally determined, we should see it as the product of the clash of several competing ideas of Chineseness’.⁵⁰ He is right, although one would add that examining the *conditions* of the varying prominence of these ideas is as important as identifying the ideas themselves, for these ideas, serving as the essential intellectual background, did not themselves determine actual policies.

I identify the particularistic and xenophobic tendency in mid-late Ming policies towards the Mongols as embodying the tradition of exclusivism in Confucian foreign policy. Achieving salience in foreign policy-making generally requires one major condition and two contributing conditions: a major condition of the presence of serious foreign threats to Chinese security and authority, and two contributing conditions of Chinese material weakness and a weak executive in domestic decision-making. Foreign threats to Chinese security and authority tend to become more serious with the decline of Chinese power, although this need not be always the case. The condition of executive power is stressed by Waldron, who observes that ‘The influence of the idealistic strand (which is often thought of as more genuinely “Chinese”) turns out to be decisive only at certain times, notably those when no powerful emperor or executive is in command, and China has relied on cultural consensus to maintain cohesion and make policy’.⁵¹ Yet although domestic executive power was

47 See Morris Rossabi, ed., *China among Equals: the Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

48 Ge, *This China*, p. 59; Wang Hui, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* (*The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*-Volume 2)(Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe, 2008), pp. 249–54 and 583. For a case study, see Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, ‘Proto-Nationalism in Twelfth-Century China? The Case of Ch’en Liang’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (1979), pp. 403–28.

49 Tillman, ‘Proto-Nationalism in Twelfth-Century China?’, p. 426.

50 Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, p. 191.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 173. Notice, however, that this condition may be peculiar to, or was at least significantly magnified in, the Ming case, as the Hongwu emperor’s abolition of the prime ministership in 1380 crippled bureaucratic effectiveness, made the presence of a strong ruler a

surely an important factor, it would be less consequential if China were not facing powerful foreign threats, and if it were strong enough to suppress these threats. In fact, Waldron's case meets all of the three conditions: the Mongol threat was endemic, China was weak, and court politics were indecisive.

Exclusivism may be further disaggregated into two distinct strategic approaches. The major distinguishing condition is the severity of foreign threats. Policies may be characterized by rigidity and the suffering of unnecessary loss if these threats are not serious enough to threaten regime survival, as in the case of the mid-late Ming's relations with the Mongols. Such policies are fundamentally moralistic and idealistic, based on an extremely narrow interpretation of the Sinocentric ideology rather than on a pragmatic appraisal of situational needs. This is an approach that I will call 'exclusive idealpolitik', 'idealpolitik' defined as strategies based on moralistic and ideological premises rather than on calculations of interest and necessity. If, however, the threats are powerful enough to destroy dynastic survival, rulers will usually turn to realpolitik policies of survival, despite continuing a culturally exclusive and politically comforting discourse for internal ideological legitimation, as in the case of the Song. This approach—what I will call 'exclusive realpolitik'—combines cultural prejudices with policy pragmatism. It is clear that exclusivism in no way suggests pacifism in foreign policy. In the Ming case, it in fact led to more conflicts with the Mongols than necessary.

Confucian Foreign Policy Tradition II: Inclusivism

Exclusivism, however, was not the only notable culturalist, Sinocentric orientation of imperial China. Sinocentrism and Confucianism are perfectly capable of producing a far more cosmopolitan and flexible approach—a Confucian foreign policy tradition that I identify as inclusivism. Its practical policy salience also requires one major condition and two contributing conditions: a major condition constituted by the absence of serious foreign threats to Chinese security and authority, and the two contributing conditions of Chinese material strength and a strong government. The logical opposites of the conditions of exclusivism, they can be illustrated by a few examples from early Ming foreign policy.

Both the Hongwu and Yongle emperors, each positioning themselves as the overlord of one universal world family comprising both the *hua* (culturally Chinese) and *yi* (culturally inferior non-Chinese), announced no gulf between the *hua* and *yi* (*hua yi wu jian*⁴ 华夷无间) either when trying to attract Mongol submission or upon obtaining it.⁵² In doing so they embodied an inclusive approach. The early Ming neo-Confucian theory of foreign policy deduced earlier was also a reflection of their inclusivism, and the theory's allowance of punitive force shows that inclusivism did not mean pacifism.

Yet it was when the Mongols turned defiant and started raiding Ming frontiers that the emperors began to describe them as heartless beasts that must be punished.⁵³ Thus, the early Ming also exhibited its particular cultural exclusivism. It, however, was never pronounced or enduring, because Chinese strength enabled the emperors to launch successful

necessary condition of effective rule, and led to factional struggles in the absence of such a ruler.

52 Mao Peiqi and Li Zhuoran, *Ming chengzu shilun (A History of Ming Chengzu)*(Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1994), pp. 91–2; MSL, Taizong shi lu, 111.1419–20; MSL, Taizong shi lu, 264.2408.

53 MSL, Taizong shi lu, 140.1687.

military expeditions against the Mongols, suppress their threats, ensure frontier security, and establish Chinese authority. This is why Chinese material strength is an enhancing condition of inclusivism. The early Ming case illustrates, however, that neither material capability nor executive power are necessary or sufficient conditions for either exclusivism or inclusivism, since although during the early Ming the two conditions can be seen as more or less constant, both strategic dispositions of inclusivism and exclusivism nevertheless appeared (albeit with markedly different degrees of prominence).

In the mid-late Ming, as Waldron notes, Chinese capability declined and the imperial court was paralysed by anaemic emperors and rending factions. A key reason for the Ming's rejection of the Mongol ruler Altan Khan's repeated requests for trade was nevertheless the khan's frequent raids on the Ming frontier triggered by his inability to obtain Chinese trade. Whether or not the rigidity of Ming policy itself provoked these raids, however, was of no concern to many officials, whose positions were based on morality rather than reality. They perceived the pattern of the khan's behaviour—alternation between violent raids and trade requests—as a serious challenge to Ming security and, of no less importance, a demonstration of his treacherousness. They were therefore unwilling to yield to what were in their view the khan's 'coercive requests', for doing so would not only violate the fundamental moral norm of Sinocentrism, but also reveal China's weakness and compromise its awesomeness (*shi ruo sun wei* 示弱损威).⁵⁴ It was not until 1570–1571, when a dispute within the Altan Khan's family persuaded the khan to hand over Chinese defectors wanted by the Ming court and to request tributary trade, that the Ming accepted tributary trade as the policy solution. This inclusive solution was achieved only after several prominent officials both on the frontier and in the Ming court perceived and constructed the khan's request as 'offering tribute and declaring vassalage' (*na gong chen chen* 纳贡称臣) as a result of his 'gratefulness for China's grace and emulation of its appropriateness' (*gan en mu yi* 感恩慕义), in contrast to his earlier 'coercion and extortion' (*yao suo* 勒索).⁵⁵

The availability of the image of the Mongols' 'peaceful and submissive request' was extremely important for policy inclusivism to succeed. Only through such an image could pragmatic officials deploy Sinocentrism as an ideological weapon in their—rather than the culturally exclusivist officials'—favour, turn the powerfully negative example of the Song's appeasement of the Liao and Jin on its head, and argue that the Ming was fundamentally different from the Song because it was accepting Mongol requests from a position of superiority and strength rather than of inferiority and weakness. Thus, Gao Gong, a Ming Grand Secretary instrumental in the solution, asserted in a court debate that the Song's humiliating compromise was a result of Song weakness, whereas the Ming acceptance of Mongol tribute could not be seen as such because the Ming had made the Mongols submit to peace rather than having to request it of them.⁵⁶ Similarly, Zhang Juzheng, an even more important Grand Secretary responsible for the final settlement, argued that the Ming's position was fundamentally different from the Han's *heqin* (和亲 peace through kinship relations) or the Song's tribute to the northern nomads, because in this case it was the Central Kingdom, not the *yi* and *di*, that was dictating the terms of settlement. The Ming approach

54 Bo and Wang, *A Compilation of Chinese Historical Sources of the Mongols during the Ming Era*-Volume II, p. 58.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 64–5, 70–1, 182, 216.

56 *Ibid.*, 64–5.

should therefore be called ‘accepting tribute’ (*tong gong* 通贡) rather than ‘negotiating peace’ (*jiang he* 讲和).⁵⁷

Such arguments were themselves, of course, ideologically constructed for the sake of pushing through a realistic policy position. The point, however, is that these officials had to spin Ming compromise, which was in fact not remarkably different from Song appeasement, into a scenario where the Ming bestowed magnanimous grace on the deferential Mongols in order to establish a necessary condition of perceived Ming superiority and Mongol submissiveness. Yuan-kang Wang argues that the decline of Ming relative capability determined the final settlement.⁵⁸ Although not discounting the essential importance of the material background, I doubt that the pragmatic position could have carried its day by cutting through all opposition without the officials’ ‘spin’ of the situation that exploited the image of the Altan Khan’s ‘voluntary tribute’. It may still be argued that Ming weakness was ultimately the cause of such ‘spin’. Without specifying the crucial policy mechanism of the ‘spin’, however, one would still not know exactly how Ming weakness led to the tributary-trade settlement. This rare example of mid-late Ming inclusivism towards the Mongols shows that the absence, whether real or constructed, of serious foreign threats to Chinese security and authority was a key condition of Chinese inclusivism. It is important to note that this was a *relational condition* endogenous to the interaction dynamics of China’s foreign relations.

A Chinese Theory of Human Nature

I have argued above that exclusivism and inclusivism constituted two major traditions of Confucian foreign policy in Chinese history. I now wish to point out the long established Chinese theory of human nature that underlay these traditions, while further stressing that these traditions were not just culturally informed but also *relationally conditioned*. The cultural exclusivism of the Ming was, in general, not about erecting an absolute cultural, ethnic, or racial boundary to keep out the *yi*, such as the Mongols, but to prevent their alleged treacherousness and untrustworthiness from complicating China’s relations with them and harming China’s interests, such as frontier security and stability.⁵⁹ These were political and strategic considerations expressed in ethnic and cultural terms.⁶⁰ Underlying them was a particular understanding of human nature, not a categorical rejection of the *yi* in the Chinese cultural sphere or an inherent hostility to them per se, except perhaps in the minds of a few extremist neo-Confucians.⁶¹ The Chinese and non-Chinese were believed to be culturally different, but not dichotomously separate.⁶² This belief used culture to blur, if not erase, ethnic or racial boundaries.

57 *Ibid.*, 445.

58 Wang, *Harmony and War*, pp. 140–42.

59 See, for example, a court debate on whether to grant the Altan Khan trading rights in Bo and Wang, *A Compilation of Chinese Historical Sources of the Mongols during the Ming Era*-Volume II, pp. 134–35.

60 See Luo Zhitian, *Minzu zhuyi yu jindai Zhongguo sixiang (Nationalism and Modern Chinese Thought)*(Taipei: Dongda tushu, 1998), p. 60.

61 Not all neo-Confucians were extremist exclusivists. See de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy*, p. 24.

62 Xing Yitian, *Tianxia yijia: huangdi, guanliao yu shehui (The Tianxia as One Family: The Emperor, Bureaucrats and Society)*(Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), p. 105.

I suggest that such understanding reveals a traditional Chinese cultural theory of human nature that tends to see the cultural Chinese as more trustworthy than foreign peoples, and to regard the *yi*, particularly the nomads, as liable to treachery, duplicity, and cupidity. Whenever *relationships* with them turned problematic, Chinese officials began to attribute 'the (bad) nature of the *yi* and *di*' (*yi di zhi xing* 夷狄之性) as the fundamental cause.⁶³ Yet the theory itself, other than the extremist neo-Confucian version, does not contain definitive principles on whether or not to culturally transform the *yi* so as to make them more palatable to Chinese tastes, to establish an open but loose and symbolic relationship with them in order to fulfil the moral requirement to demonstrate China's moral excellence (*de* 德), or to exclude and isolate them because they were beyond the pale of the Chinese civilization.

Chinese rulers may have adopted all three of these approaches to *yi* management at different times and to varying degrees. The above discussion on the conditions of exclusivism and inclusivism suggests that, under the general influence of Confucianism, the more powerful China was and the stronger the executive authority in domestic decision-making became, the more open and transformative the approach would tend to be. Historically, the second option of loose contact—referred to as *jimi* (羈縻 loose rein)—was a particularly salient principle throughout imperial history, perhaps because it was cost-effective and at the same time culturally faithful.

A *jimi* relationship was not one of sovereign-vassal, but rather a low-key foreign policy that stressed the necessity of keeping in touch with remote and rebellious countries without establishing substantive political relationships with them.⁶⁴ In fact, one may say that the mainstream imperial Chinese foreign policy—or at least the normative ideal—was a blend of the first two approaches, a policy often called *huairou* (怀柔 winning admiration through kindness).⁶⁵ It suggested maintaining generous contacts of varying strength with foreign peoples and assimilating them into Chinese cultural norms, customs, and ways of life where possible.⁶⁶ Obviously, *huairou* embodied China's inclusivism.

Among the three possible options of transformation, loose rein, and exclusion, whichever one prevailed in practice was not a function of the Chinese theory of human nature just described, but rather a contingent outcome of relational interactions between China and its neighbours, conditioned by the severity of foreign threats to Chinese security and authority. The theory provided the essential cultural and intellectual background, and may be used to inform or justify each of these options depending on the relational context. This was true even in the case of the exclusivist neo-Confucian approach described earlier, since neo-Confucian exclusivism was itself a product of extreme tension in Song foreign relations, and since it was not always followed during the Ming and Qing, when neo-Confucianism reigned as the state ideology and intellectual orthodoxy.

When no foreign threat existed, and especially when foreign tributary submissions to the Chinese emperor were handy, the open and inclusive aspect of the theory more

63 See, for example, Bo and Wang, *A Compilation of Chinese Historical Sources of the Mongols during the Ming Era*-Volume II, p. 70.

64 Wang Zhenping, *Ambassadors from the Islands of Immortals: China-Japan Relations in the Han-Tang Period* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), pp. 31, 225.

65 The translation modifies the one in Wang Gungwu, 'The Rhetoric of a Lesser Empire: Early Sung Relations with Its Neighbors', in Rossabi, ed., *China among Equals*, p. 60.

66 Qian, *An Introduction to the History of Chinese Culture*, p. 134.

reflective of classical Confucianism tended to come to the fore. When foreign threats were plentiful, serious, and insurmountable, however, the narrow and exclusivist aspect more fully embodied in neo-Confucianism tended to prevail. This pattern is well illustrated by a comparison between the early Ming and mid-late Ming's relations with the Mongols, and even by the early Ming emperors' contrasting descriptions of the Mongols as sometimes belonging to one civilizational family and at others as a wholly different animal, as noted earlier.

The theory of human nature, resting as it does on a fundamental cultural distinction between the *hua* and *yi*, is a cultural theory of foreign policy. Yet its culturalism—with the exception of the extremist neo-Confucian variant, which is better seen as a sort of proto-nationalism⁶⁷—is not in itself exclusivist. In practice this culturalism did not exclude the assimilation of non-Han Chinese peoples and customs and the progressive enrichment of the main Sinic tradition as a consequence.⁶⁸

The *hua-yi* distinction, especially in classical Confucianism, was meant less to essentialize and perpetuate a categorical separation between the Chinese and non-Chinese than to suggest a universal path of cultural development for all peoples—that is, the *yi* could become the *hua* through cultural advancement while the *hua* may degenerate into the *yi* through cultural retrogression.⁶⁹ The distinction could lead to either inclusivism or exclusivism under conditions discussed earlier. Inclusivism was arguably the mainstream tradition of Chinese Confucian foreign policy. Exclusivism, although an enduring and sometimes influential tradition, was on the whole not the dominant attitude of imperial Chinese elites.⁷⁰

Inclusive Relationalism in Contemporary Chinese Foreign Policy

We have seen that inclusivism and exclusivism were two major traditions in Chinese history of Confucian foreign policy. The theory of human nature underpinning them—the presumption that the Chinese were more culturally advanced and trustworthy than foreign peoples—was a reflection of traditional Sinocentrism, and clearly became outmoded in the modern world.

Also outdated was the normative hierarchy of imperial Chinese foreign relations contained in the institution of the tribute system.⁷¹ This, however, does not mean that the

67 See Tillman, 'Proto-Nationalism in Twelfth-Century China?.'

68 John D. Langlois, Jr, 'Chinese Culturalism and the Yüan Analogy: Seventeenth-Century Perspectives', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (1980), pp. 356–57, fn. 2.

69 See Ren Jiantao, 'Yuqiu pushi ruxue: xiandaixing ruxue pushilun lichang de jiangou' ('Calling for a Universalist Confucianism: The Construction of a Position of Modern Confucian Universalism'), *Kaifang shidai (Open Times)* No. 3 (2011), p. 7; Wang, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*-Volume 2, p. 87. See also Elliott, *The Manchu Way*, p. 22.

70 Luo, *Nationalism and Modern Chinese Thought*, pp. 58–60. See also Xing, *The Tianxia as One Family*, p. 134.

71 On the tribute system, see David C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); David C. Kang, 'Hierarchy and Legitimacy in International Systems: The Tribute System in Early Modern East Asia', *Security Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2010), pp. 591–622; Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Womack,

historical inclusive and exclusive traditions and the relational conditions for their attainment have no implications for the international relations of contemporary China. In order to draw out those implications, however, one must first understand the intellectual underpinnings of contemporary Chinese foreign policy. Are the intellectual foundations sound and effective from both normative and practical perspectives? What might be the 'value added' of a more Confucian approach?

In the era of Maoist China, the ruling ideology of Chinese foreign policy was revolutionary leftism based on orthodox Marxist views of class struggle and international conflict. Although the old leftism ceased to dominate official policy in the reform period (1978–present), it is still influencing today's extreme nationalistic views, most often found online. Leftism is marked by intense distrust of the outside world, insistence on China's absolute sovereignty and autonomy, and belief in the necessity of waging political, economic, military, and ideological struggles against the West.

In the reform era, a 'defensive realist' calculation of China's need to pursue security cooperation with other states rather than confrontation has guided China's largely pragmatic security policy.⁷² Until recently, this has been the position of the majority of Chinese analysts as well as the government. Other realist schools of thought, however, have been trying to assert their influence. Some 'offensive realists' argue that Beijing needs to forcefully advance its national interests where conditions permit.⁷³ The protracted debate on whether or not to abandon Deng Xiaoping's strategic axiom of *tao guang yang hui* (韬光养晦 keeping low profile) can in part be seen as a reflection of the competition between defensive and offensive realism as applied to foreign policy theories within China's intellectual and policy communities.⁷⁴ In the area of foreign economic policy, the dominant influence since the 1980s has, in contrast, been liberalism, China having focused on economic integration with the capitalist world economy. Liberalism has also influenced the general outlook of Chinese foreign policy in promoting China's engagement with international society through cooperation and accommodation, rather than confrontation and conflict.

Beyond the influence of realism in security policy and liberalism in economic policy, the Chinese government is also under pressure emanating from the popularity in the public sphere of assertive nationalism. Although assertive nationalism does not yet seem to

'Asymmetry and China's Tributary System', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2012), pp. 37–54; Zhou Fangyin, 'Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2011), pp. 147–78; Feng Zhang, 'Rethinking the "Tribute System": Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (2009), pp. 545–74.

- 72 Tang Shiping, 'From Offensive to Defensive Realism: A Social Evolutionary Interpretation of China's Security Strategy', in Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng, eds., *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 141–62.
- 73 Yan Xuetong's works before 2005, when he turned his attention to ancient Chinese thought and subsequently became a moral realist, reflected a sort of offensive realism. See Yan, *Guoji zhengzhi yu Zhongguo (International Politics and China)* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2005).
- 74 On the debate, see Dingding Chen and Jianwei Wang, 'Lying Low No More? China's New Thinking on the *Tao Guang Yang Hui* Strategy', *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2011), pp. 195–216.

command the mainstream opinion in China today, it nevertheless grows more vocal and vociferous with the rise of Chinese power. Although it does not have the xenophobic quality of extreme nationalism, nor does it show the restraint and moderation of defensive realism and liberalism. What it asserts, in essence, is that China should actively prepare for struggle and conflict with other states, especially against Western hegemony.⁷⁵ In addition, geopolitik nationalism—promoting realpolitik strategies on the basis of geopolitik theories of international politics—is also engrossing a notable section of China’s strategic community.⁷⁶

Can a modernized Confucianism contribute to enriching the intellectual foundations of Chinese foreign policy? The current intellectual climate of Chinese foreign policy is less than reassuring. In particular, leftism, assertive nationalism, and geopolitik nationalism are based on excessive instrumental self-interest maximization, and leftism has an added xenophobic and ideological quality. A policy liaison among them could make for an isolationist and aggressive China, producing great-power hubris and excessive ambitions, particularly during this time of the rapid rise of Chinese power. It would be highly unsettling if Chinese foreign policy were to be reduced to a crude instrumental logic of power politics and narrowly defined self-interest.

Confucianism can moderate, if not obliterate, this xenophobic and realpolitik instrumentalism by providing an inclusive humanism rooted in China’s native cultural and intellectual tradition.⁷⁷ In fact, this Confucian constraint on Chinese policy discourse is already apparent, if not yet in behaviour, in the official and semi-official discourse of Chinese exceptionalism that emphasizes peace, harmony, and inclusion in international relations.⁷⁸

Confucianism can thus apply certain ethical constraints on excessive nationalism. It can also broaden the outlook of Chinese foreign policy, currently limited by realism and liberalism. Wise realism produces pragmatism and prudence in policy, while open liberalism encourages international cooperation towards achieving economic and political interests. They are both useful within their own limits and certainly preferable to leftism and assertive nationalism as intellectual guides of Chinese foreign policy. Yet they are also highly limiting. Realism is largely confined to the realm of security calculation, while liberalism, in the Chinese case being more economically than institutionally and politically oriented, is most influential in economic diplomacy. Realism and liberalism are geared towards ensuring China’s security and economic interests, but have little to say on the wider political, cultural, and ideological fields of international relations. Confucianism’s strength, in contrast, lies precisely in these fields, because it can broaden and deepen China’s vision of international relations through its inclusive humanism. Indeed, this inclusive humanism, reflected in the historical inclusive tradition earlier discussed of Confucian foreign policy, is one of

75 See Wang Xiaodong, *Tianming suogui shi daguo (Beijing a Greater Power is China’s Heavenly Destiny)*(Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2009).

76 Christopher Hughes, ‘Reclassifying Chinese Nationalism: The *Geopolitik* Turn’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 20, No. 71 (2011), pp. 601–20.

77 See Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*.

78 See Feng Zhang, ‘The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2013), pp. 305–28; Feng Zhang, ‘Chinese Exceptionalism in the Intellectual World of China’s Foreign Policy’, in Rosemary Foot, ed., *China across the Divide: The Domestic and Global in Politics and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 43–71.

the greatest intellectual inspirations Confucianism can bring to modern Chinese foreign policy.

One can, in fact, deduce a distinct Confucian grand strategy of 'inclusive relationalism' on the basis of the theoretical and historical discussions of Confucian foreign policy attempted in this article. A grand strategy is a purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks to accomplish in the world, and how it should go about doing so. It is the 'theory, or logic, that guides leaders seeking security in a complex and insecure world'.⁷⁹

A Confucian grand strategy of inclusive relationalism can envisage its overarching goals at two levels. At the first, more practical level, the strategy should aim to establish relationships of mutual benefit and trust with all countries in the world. At the second, more visionary level, it should try to establish humaneness as the central moral purpose of international relations and thus create a humane international community of states. The key concepts in this formulation are relationship, mutual benefit, trust, and humaneness. Confucianism as a way of life is fundamentally an ethical paradigm of relational social life. Rather than using particular relationships to achieve instrumental ends, Confucianism takes the establishment of proper relationships as the end of social interaction.⁸⁰ It is the particular character and quality of relationships that a Confucian social life seeks. Historically, Confucians considered *ren* the highest relational quality. *Ren* was understood as a psychological condition able to produce feelings of affection and obligation with emotional attachments and ethical implications.⁸¹

How can the objective of mutually beneficial relationships be realized? The most direct strategic means is to establish such relationships in all relevant functional areas. This might at first sight seem tautological. It is, however, eminently faithful to the Confucian spirit. The Confucian relational paradigm holds that persons are constituted by their relations, and the goal of becoming a person is to become consummately so. From such a perspective, the conventional means-end distinction, which is rooted more firmly in Western than in Chinese intellectual traditions, would have no purchase in the Confucian world.⁸² Interestingly, Confucianism is not the only intellectual tradition taking relationships as both means and ends. From an ancient Greek perspective, Richard Ned Lebow has also observed that 'Relationships and the commitments they entail are not simply instrumental means to selfish ends, but important ends in their own right'.⁸³

If the Confucian strategy of using the means of establishing mutually beneficial relationships to achieve the end of establishing and sustaining mutually beneficial relationships invites scepticism and even ridicule, it is only because in the realm of strategy we have

79 Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 3.

80 Hwang Kwang-Kuo, 'Face and Favor: The Chinese Power Game', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (1987), p. 950.

81 Liang Shuming, *Dongxi wenhua jiqi zhexue (Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies)* (Beijing: Shangwu chubanshe, 1999), p. 133.

82 See Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), p. 180.

83 Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interest and Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 354.

become so beholden to the modern Western instrumentalist epistemology that we are yet to accustom ourselves to the Confucian logic of mutually entailing means and ends.

Significantly, when one reviews the foreign policy statements and remarks the Xi administration has made in the past two years, one finds that they already contain an important degree of inclusive relationalism. In his speech to the first World Peace Forum hosted by Tsinghua University in 2012, President Xi observed that a country, in pursuing its own development, security, and well-being, must also let other countries pursue their development, security, and well-being. The speech also stressed that the development China seeks is peaceful, open, cooperative, and win–win development.⁸⁴ The concept of win–win for all (*gongying* 共赢), emphasized in almost all major foreign policy statements of the Xi administration, is clearly a relational concept.

In an important speech delivered in October 2013, on the occasion of a major conference on diplomacy towards countries on China's periphery,⁸⁵ Xi advanced the concepts of *qin* (亲 intimate), *cheng* (诚 sincere), *hui* (惠 beneficial), and *rong* (容 inclusive) as the ideational underpinnings of Chinese diplomacy. He further pointed out that Chinese diplomacy needs to emphasize affective feelings (*ganqing* 感情) and to promote inclusive ideas about common development. More important still, Xi laid out a new concept of properly approaching the relationship between morality and interest (*yi li guan* 义利观), advising that Chinese diplomacy should be based on principle, involve affection and friendship, and embrace morality.⁸⁶ In addition, Xi put forward the concept of a community of common destiny (*mingyun gongtongti* 命运共同体) to underscore the interdependent nature of the development between China and other countries. These new concepts, highlighted again in Xi's speech to a major foreign affairs conference held on 28–29 November 2014 (probably the most important foreign policy speech Xi has given so far),⁸⁷ can all be given a Confucian inclusive interpretation.

It thus seems that Confucian inclusive relationalism is already informing a large part of Chinese foreign policy discourse, and it is fortunate that it is the inclusive tradition of historical Confucian foreign policy discussed in earlier sections, not the exclusive tradition, that is informing this discourse. The question, of course, is whether or not inclusive relationalism is also guiding Chinese foreign policy behaviour. Contemporary Chinese foreign policy may be influenced by various schools of ancient Chinese thought, Confucianism just one of them. Indeed, if China's historical experience is any guide, a quite possible outcome is that of a blend of Confucianism and Legalism to guide policy, as has repeatedly been the case in the long history of Chinese politics and foreign policy. For some intriguing reasons that historians are still debating, a Confucian-Legalist liaison has proved to be the most consequential—almost a norm—through Chinese history. In this context, Xunzi, among

84 Xi Jinping, 'Opening Remarks to the World Peace Forum', 7 July, 2012, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2012/0707/c70731-18465827.html>.

85 See Michael D. Swaine, 'Chinese Views and Commentary on Periphery Diplomacy', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 44 (2014), pp. 1–43.

86 Qian Tong, 'Xi Jinping Delivers an Important Speech at the Conference on Diplomacy toward China's Periphery', 25 October, 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/1025/c1024-23332318.html>.

87 Xinhua News Agency, 'Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Foreign Affairs Conference Is Held in Beijing', 29 November, 2014, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/1129/c1024-26118455.html>.

the many ancient Chinese thinkers, may turn out to be uniquely relevant to contemporary Chinese foreign policy. As Tsinghua University scholar Yan Xuetong has shown, Xunzi's political thought on humane authority (*wang*王) and hegemony (*ba*霸) contains a fascinating mix of Confucian and Legalist ideas.⁸⁸ Although decisively a Confucian scholar, Xunzi himself is nevertheless considered the most Legalist among the early Confucians.

Is China already carrying out a grand strategy of inclusive relationalism grounded in Confucian thought? Is the new Confucian discourse of the Xi administration part of a new Chinese exceptionalism to justify and gloss over policies motivated by hard realpolitik? Or is the Xi administration in fact adopting a modern version of the historical paradigm of some sort of Confucian–Legalist integration? These questions are beyond the scope of this article. The point that can be made, however, is this: Chinese foreign policy discourse already contains a rarely noted but significant element of inclusive relationalism that promises to be beneficial for China's relations with the outside world. The task now is to encourage China to put this inclusive relationalism more into practice.

What is the implication of this analysis for the approach of the outside world towards China? Chinese assertiveness has dominated discussions of Chinese foreign policy since 2009,⁸⁹ and is considered highly damaging to China's relationships with its neighbours because it signals Chinese aggression or expansion on its periphery. From the perspective of this analysis, however, the question is not that of Chinese assertiveness per se, but whether or not inclusive relationalism as an intellectual source of Chinese foreign policy can restrain and even subdue the aggressive realpolitik impulse that surfaces from time to time in Chinese foreign policy. Recognizing the inclusive relational dimension of Chinese foreign policy can reduce undue worry about the impact of China's rise. Realizing the competition between inclusive relationalism and other intellectual currents, such as aggressive nationalism and realpolitik within the intellectual world of China's foreign policy, induces a cautious and sobering attitude about the future direction of Chinese foreign policy.

Although normatively preferable, there is no guarantee that inclusive relationalism will dominate Chinese foreign policy in the future. Yet the outside world can enhance this prospect. Recall our earlier discussion that in the history of imperial Chinese foreign policy, the absence of serious foreign threats to Chinese security and authority was a key condition of Chinese inclusivism. Applying this historical insight, we can say that the severity of foreign threats to Chinese security and sovereignty may be a key condition of Chinese inclusivism today. In other words, if other countries want China to be more inclusive and relational in its foreign policy, they must by the same token reciprocate with an inclusive and relational foreign policy, so reducing Chinese apprehension of foreign threat. A strategy of overt balancing against China, for example, will raise such apprehension and galvanize nationalistic and realpolitik sentiments within China, and suppress inclusive relationalism. That is why the United States' so-called rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific region by tightening its alliance system in the region and directing it against China is misguided. The only likely effect it will have on Chinese foreign policy is to provoke Chinese assertiveness at the expense of inclusive relationalism.

88 See Yan Xuetong, 'Xun Zi's Thoughts on International Politics and Their Implications', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2008), pp. 135–65; Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*.

89 For a fair-minded analysis, see Alastair Iain Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?' *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2013), pp. 7–48.

Conclusion

Can contemporary Chinese foreign policy borrow intellectual inspirations from Confucianism? In order to answer this question, one must first know the possible roles of Confucianism in foreign policy and their theoretical and historical foundations. The first task of this article was to identify major traditions in Chinese history of Confucian foreign policy. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the popular notion of Confucian pacifism was never a credible tradition of Confucian foreign policy. In fact, imperial Chinese rulers neither conceived of Confucian pacifism as it is understood today nor practiced it as such in their foreign relations. The major traditions of Confucian foreign policy lie elsewhere.

I argue that inclusivism and exclusivism constituted two major traditions in Chinese history of Confucian foreign policy. The adoption of either the inclusive or exclusive approach was not determined by Confucian culture or Chinese power, but by the relational conditions of the interaction dynamics between China and other polities, particularly the level of foreign threats to Chinese security and authority. I argue further that a traditional Chinese theory of human nature, that tended to see the cultural Chinese as more trustworthy than foreign peoples, underpinned the inclusive and exclusive traditions. The theory further underscores the fact that the adoption of either inclusivism or exclusivism was a contingent outcome of relational interactions in China's foreign relations, conditioned according to the severity of foreign threats to Chinese security and authority.

This article then considered the contemporary implications of this historical and theoretical analysis of Confucian traditions in Chinese foreign policy. Contemporary Chinese foreign policy needs Confucianism for intellectual inspiration because the current intellectual climate of Chinese foreign policy, where nationalistic and realpolitik currents promote narrow power politics, is less than reassuring. Confucianism can moderate such xenophobic and realpolitik instrumentalism by providing an inclusive humanism that is rooted in China's native cultural and intellectual tradition. It can also broaden the outlook of Chinese foreign policy beyond the one currently limited to Western theories of realism and liberalism.

In fact, Confucian inclusivism can suggest for contemporary China a distinct Confucian grand strategy of inclusive relationalism. Chinese foreign policy discourse, especially over the past two years of the Xi administration, already contains an important degree of such inclusive relationalism. The task now is to put the strategy more into practice, so developing its conceptual apparatus for contemporary Chinese foreign policy. The outside world has a big role to play in this process: other countries can initiate their respective inclusive relational foreign policies towards China and so promote the principle's applicability in Chinese foreign policy. The success of inclusive relationalism within China's now highly competitive intellectual environment, however, is not preordained. Exclusive strategies such as balancing against China will inevitably provoke a similarly exclusive response, thus jeopardizing the progress inside China of inclusive relationalism. Such an outcome would be highly unfortunate for China and the world.

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