Emerging China and Critical Geopolitics: Between World Politics and Chinese Particularity

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Abstract: A prominent political and human geographer assesses the rise of contemporary China through the lens of critical geopolitics. In doing so he challenges both (a) conventional world political views of China as merely the most recent world power to emerge through a natural process of linear succession ("the linear narrative") and (b) conceptions of the country as a completely unique phenomenon shaped by a distinct historical experience and cultural particularity ("Sino-centrism"). The paper develops the argument that China's rise rather is shaped by a contradictory amalgam of Western-style nationalism and a traditional totalistic conception of world order that is reactive to and dependent on current world politics. *Journal of Economic Literature*, Classification Numbers: F020, F500, O180, P200. 65 references. Key words: China, critical geopolitics, world politics, modern geopolitical imagination, globalization, United States, May Fourth Movement, soft power, Mao, Confucius, national humiliation, American hegemony, cultural particularity, linear narrative.

Critical geopolitics intends to understand world politics in terms of the ways in which elites and publics actively construct the spaces of political action that are then the medium for the policies of states and other actors. The tendency has been to see this in largely linguistic and intellectual terms as the construction of the world though conceptions of it (e.g., O Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2009a). This has been of profound importance in opening to question the naturalized and ideological basis to traditional geopolitics, with its facile but attractive assumptions about the direct dependence of world politics on various physical-geographical determinants such as the relative location of continents and oceans, the division of global space into zones of modernity and backwardness, and the urge of all modern states to climb atop the global political hierarchy. Particularly important in joining together these assumptions has been a linear narrative drawn from Western intellectual history about the rise of the nation-state and time overcoming space as the Western state system has imposed itself worldwide (Agnew, 2003). The hegemonic calculus of the past 200 years has involved the imposition of a set of normative rules and practical constraints on states and other actors, reflecting the uneven distribution of global power and a common "script" of world politics thereby written more in some places than in others. Though this script has had powerful continuities to its core themes, it has also involved important shifts over time with the rise and fall of dominant actors who have brought different conceptions and practices to bear within it (Agnew, 2005). To date, the overwhelming body of work in critical geopolitics has focused on the contemporary United States and the European colonial powers, often as if they were the sole active forces in world politics toying with the docile masses in the rest of the world.

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The contemporary "rise" of China, historically outside of the golden circle of influentials in the modern era, provides an interesting case for examining the degree to which the conventional hegemonic calculus as the basis to recent world politics can be expected to continue. Typically, China is viewed as either just another in a long succession of Great Powers rising to the top of the global hierarchy (e.g., Kennedy, 1986) or a completely new phenomenon because of its singular history associated with its imperial past, communist rejection of world capitalism, and cultural particularity (e.g., Keith, 2009). In this paper I wish to take issue with both of these accounts to suggest that China's emerging position in world politics cannot be seen as just a process of "regular" hegemonic succession or as bringing a totally new script to the table. If the first view relies on a naturalized story about world politics, the second depends on a view of China as a completely separate "world" largely untainted by how world politics has operated over the past several hundred years. In my perspective, Chinese elites have been in active confrontation with the Western-based world system for centuries and from this have developed a contradictory amalgam of Western-style nationalism and a traditional totalistic conception of world order that remains reactive to and dependent on the ways in which world politics is currently organized. Thus, China does not currently provide some totally alternative scripting to world politics, although it could well contribute to a pluralization away from the recent hegemony of neoliberalism associated with the post-1970s U.S. global role (Agnew, 2009b). Paraphrasing the historian of China Prasenjit Duara (1997, p. 26), the geopolitics of China can no longer be "innocently" a geopolitics in the Western style or the geopolitics of the "true" China as represented by Chinese intellectual history's conception of China's "place" in the world: "It must attend to the politics of narratives—whether these be the rhetorical schemas we deploy for our own understanding or those of the historical actors who give us the world."

CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS

Drawing a distinction between formal and practical geopolitics has been important in recent geographical scholarship. Until recently most people have associated the word geopolitics almost entirely with the former. This is the invention of geopolitical models based on the geographical orientations of different states and their relative global location. One famous example is Mackinder's (1904) model of the global "heartland" recently revived with respect to contemporary China by such writers as Kaplan (2010) and Yee (2010). Classification as a sea- or land-power is seen as particularly important in driving international relations. The term geopolitics, however, can be redefined to refer to the study of the practical geopolitical reasoning of states and other actors in world politics. The phrase "critical geopolitics" has come to apply to those efforts at seeing how geopolitical premises enter into the ways in which political elites and populations see their place in the world. For example, a powerful premise of much contemporary practical geopolitics is the way in which rigid borders are drawn between what is "inside" and what is "outside" a particular country and how this cartography figures in structuring political identities and defining material interests. Beyond these borders, places are viewed as they fit into global schemas of security interests and commitments and how these in turn reflect "national interests and identities." Geopolitics is concerned with creating the image of control and permanence over a global spatiality that is always potentially in flux. Critical geopolitics involves exposing the techniques of concealment and spatial fixing associated with the dual geopolitical disciplining and intellectual naturalization of the world political map.

The two terms "critical" and "geopolitics" sit uneasily together. The first indicates a suspicion of state power in general and of state-centrism in particular. The second is intimately associated with *raison d'état*. Yet, as is frequently noted today, world politics is increasingly driven by non-state actors, from credit-rating agencies to philanthropic NGOs and multi-national corporations, so in using the word geopolitics there is some danger of reproducing the very state-centrism that is putatively under critique (Agnew, 2001).

Be that as it may, critical geopolitics does direct attention to how visual images (particularly maps), language (political rhetoric, analogies, and metaphors), and political performance (economic and political practices relating to, e.g., currencies and military deployments) combine to produce geopolitical imaginaries that both inform "normal" foreign policies and induce change as different parties adjust to novel or evolving imaginaries (Agnew, 2001). The interface between ongoing world politics and Chinese perceptions of how China fits into or challenges its rules can be viewed from this perspective. I pursue this approach by first reviewing how China is frequently incorporated into the dominant Western linear narrative of geopolitics. I then turn to how a completely Chinese-oriented story can be constructed drawing from a conventional narrative about Chinese difference. Finally, I point beyond both the linear narrative and the idiographic conception of Chinese geopolitics to a critical viewpoint that emphasizes how much China must adjust to a world not of its own making but that which is also fundamentally different from previous epochs of hegemonic succession and thus not really amenable to dominance by a single state.

THE LINEAR NARRATIVE OF WESTERN GEOPOLITICS

Much geopolitical writing about China, particularly by specialists in international relations, tends to see its positionality in terms of a storyline in which China has recently "re-emerged" into world politics after a long hiatus and, in some accounts, now shows promise of challenging the United States as the premier global actor or hegemon. This reflects a commitment to what I have termed the "modern geopolitical imagination" even as world politics has become increasingly complex geographically with businesses and world cities increasingly challenging the presumed hold of states as the singular actors about whom we should be concerned (Agnew, 2003).

The modern linear geopolitical narrative has always had four basic elements, even though these have changed in relative significance over the course of time. The first is a global vision in which the world as it came to be known from the 16th century onwards exists for powerful actors to survey and subdue. A hierarchy of places, from the legitimately powerful to the relatively powerless, is justified in terms of an objective claim about the global unevenness of natural material conditions (resource base, access to the sea, etc.), even as it is the "interests" of specific states (such as Britain or the United States) that are seen as at stake. In this way, political claims for particular states are turned into natural claims about the world "as it is." The second element is the representation of different parts of the world as following a linear path from backwardness to modernity, with Europe (and the North America) as the presumed standard of judgment. The imitation of the West becomes the condition of entry into the global state system. This element assumes a third one: that the singular map of the world is the political one of a world divided up into putative nation-states. Territorial states are the individual and usually the singular actors of the modern geopolitical imagination. State sovereignty is inherently territorialized, the state essentially maps the society, and there is a fundamental divergence between the domestic and the foreign. Even though each one of these statements is empirically problematic, together they have created a sense of the transcendental force of

a world divided up into carbon-copy states even though historically the range of polities has been extremely wide, from kin-based systems to city-states and classic empires. Finally, the fourth and binding element of the linear narrative of global geopolitics is that states are in an unremitting competition with one another for primacy. From this viewpoint, achieving high rates of economic growth will automatically translate into an urge for greater power at others' expense and the anarchy of the world beyond state borders makes this task inevitable. Thus is the circle of the modern geopolitical imagination squared.

The adoption of this linear narrative in China and by foreign authorities, both political and intellectual, is of obvious importance in producing resulting effects. By way of example, the influential May Fourth movement of the Republican period (1919) was a direct result of Chinese intellectuals' efforts to come to terms with the Western linear narrative of nationhood and geopolitics (Duara, 1997, p. 235). So, this is not just a story of the imposition of a foreign narrative but its active appropriation in China. Indeed, the great figure in modern Chinese history Sun Yat-sen clearly adopted this perspective in his writings on the "awakening" of China to modern nationhood even, as I shall suggest later, he placed it within a very Chinese conception of cultural change as the precipitator of political transformation (e.g., Bergère, 2000; Mitter, 2005; Zarrow, 2005).

Nevertheless, it is foreign commentators who are especially prone to interpret China's geopolitical position exclusively in terms of Western conventional wisdom. Frequently, this is framed in terms of anxiety and even dread. Recent titles from the U.S. and France, for example, include *Red Dragon Rising: Communist China's Military Threat to America* (Timperlake and Triplett, 1999); *China: The Gathering Threat* (Menges, 2005); *Hegemon: China's Plan to Dominate Asia and the World* (Mosher, 2000); *The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty First Century* (Halper, 2010) and *Le vampire du milieu: Comment la Chine nous dicte sa loi* (Cohen and Richard, 2010). Although such works differ in their precise arguments, for example about the relative utility for China of economic versus military and "hard" versus "soft" power, they share a nervousness about a seemingly inevitable new world order in which China will be the "next" hegemon in the relay race for "top dog" that is central to the modern geopolitical imagination. Following a similar geopolitical logic but welcoming China's rise as a harbinger of a revolutionary new approach to world politics are those authors who see the refusal of the U.S. and Europe to accept the naturalness of the process of China's rise as the main threat to peace and understanding (e.g., Jacques 2009; Steinfeld, 2010). Thus, to Arrighi and Silver (quoted in Johnson 2000, p. 32): "If the system breaks down, it will primarily be because of US resistance to adjustment and accommodation. And conversely, the US adjustment and accommodation to the rising economic power of the East Asian region is an essential condition for a non-catastrophic transition to a new world order."

"Waiting for China," as either threat or hope, is nothing new. Indeed, these have been the two main ways in which the Western linear geopolitical narrative has been applied to China since the 19th century. They both rest initially and finally on a sensibility that China is simply just another Great Power, albeit one that has had a long period of eclipse after earlier grandeur and, thus, that we can expect to see much the same translation of economic power into military power and geopolitical influence in an anarchic world that characterized previous periods of hegemonic transition. That China might bring a distinctive sensibility of its own or that a more complex interweaving of its own encounter with world politics (in the context of a world now no longer appropriately thought of as one where territorial states simply bang up against one another) may be better ways of thinking about China's contemporary geopolitical situation have not been in the cards. The Enlightenment objectivist accounting of global

geopolitics still rules in much of what is written about China today by international-relations specialists and journalists inside and outside of China.

CHINESE PARTICULARITY

The alternative to this Western linear narrative has most often been recourse to an idiographic account of China's place in the world. The so-called Chinese view of the world typically takes one of two forms. The first stresses an essential continuity based in a historic image of world order and China's place in it. This is the vision of a Sino-centric world order subject to humiliation from the 18th century onward as it was challenged by the rise of the West. The second emphasizes a break in this continuity in the early 20th century that reaches its culmination in Mao's view that "struggle" has replaced "harmony," "equality" has substituted for "status" and "hierarchy," and national sovereignty and independence have replaced traditional tributary relations (Agnew, 1980).

The crux of the traditional Chinese view of world order in Chinese intellectual history was a Sino-centric cosmology. China was thought to be the center of civilization and the emperor had the *de jure* right to rule over all human affairs. Although pre-Confucian in origin, the idea of a universal state ruled by a universal emperor was codified clearly in the Confucian order. In this understanding, the emperor ruled by virtue in order to preserve harmony among humans and in the natural world. The physical isolation of China was seen as inspiring and reinforcing this sense of China's uniqueness, with deserts and mountains to the west and south and the ocean to the east. But the boundaries of this world order were always strictly cultural, located so as to distinguish the civilized from the barbarian. The pattern of relationships between civilized center and barbarian periphery took a definite form until disrupted by the onslaught of Western imperialism in the 19th century: the tribute system.[2] According to Wolfgang Franke (1967, p. 24), "In Chinese thought the tribute system held a similar place to that enjoyed by nationalism and international law in western thought during the nineteenth century." This was not, then, a system of international relations in the Western sense of the term, with interstate stability maintained by a balance of power among putative co-equals or a simple imperialist relationship in the western manner. Rather, it was a system of hierarchical harmony promoted and preserved by the preponderance of power and virtue located in China (Mancall, 1963; Franke, 1967). If in the 19th century the external pressure to accord foreign states equal rights with China made a mockery of this system, the official Chinese response was to engage with the West while still trying to justify their behavior in traditional terms. Unfortunately, as Franke (1967, p. 115) remarks, this was: " as though they were trying to decorate the roof of a house of which they were at the same time demolishing the foundations."

The overthrow of the imperial system in 1911 was of course not unrelated to this crisis and the decline in authority of the central government of which it was an important symptom. Out of the defeats and humiliations of the 19th century, a rising generation of intellectuals and political leaders drew what appeared to be an appropriate inference. It was not the foreigners' chicanery or military superiority that was the source of the problem but China's failure to acknowledge that it was "no longer the center of the East Asian family of nations but became instead a member—at first only of inferior rank—of a larger family of nations which

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[2]The tribute system required politically subordinate groups and polities on the periphery of the empire to *kow tow* to the emperor by offering tributary goods as symbols of their subordination. It would be incorrect to interpret this as any sort of economic process. It was about cultural-political subjugation.

at that time was exclusively centered in Europe" (Franke, 1967, pp. 75–76). The net effect on the part of much of the rising political elite was to reject the old Confucian cosmology in its entirety. Between 1912 and 1927 the old totalism was rejected but, ironically, according to many students of Chinese intellectual history, a new totalism was invented that was equally Chinese. The so-called May Fourth Movement represents this anti-traditionalism at its most totalistic. According to Lin Yü-sheng (1979, x–xi) "in spite of the conflicting tendencies within [Chinese] culture, the notion of integral wholeness of culture, the notion that every aspect of society and culture could somehow be controlled through the political order, and the notion that conscious ideas could play a decisive role in transforming human life formed a powerful, widely shared syndrome of ideas within the cultural tradition … in many subtle ways these cultural propensities … shaped even those who most decisively rejected the past." Thus, acceptance of Western ideas was based now on their relevance for Chinese nationalism but with change in ideas rather than in institutions as the foundation for all else. From Sun Yat-sen to Mao and Deng, it is possible to trace a similar *modus operandi*. It is plausible then to see an essential continuity in the character of thought about China's place in the world even when the content has changed substantially.

Rather than seeing a Sun to Mao continuity in the emphasis on cultural revolution, however, Mao and the period after 1949 when the Communist Party came to power can be viewed as a decisive break. In many respects Mao was heir to the emphasis placed on cultural struggle by the generation of 1911. In his own writing he continually stressed the need for consciousness guiding political change, arguing that, for example, world communism could not be attained until "all mankind voluntarily and consciously changes itself and the world" (Mao 1965, p. 308). Mao's priority to consciousness and will rather than to materialist factors distinguishes his revolutionary ideology from that of conventional Marxist-Leninism. Where Mao differed from his forbears was in extending his radical anti-traditionalism beyond China as a "totalistic attack on the culture of the bourgeois West, in which at a certain point he included Soviet Russia" (Lin 1979, p. 158). In this way, he projected China as a champion of the world's oppressed against the depredations of an imperial West. Yet, he also never managed to show how a revolutionary nationalism at home could be satisfactorily combined with the cause of world revolution at large.

Since Mao's death in 1976, it has become common in some quarters, particularly those keen to question the Western linear narrative, to re-emphasize the importance of a Sino-centric account of China's place in the world. Given my earlier remarks about the limitations of that narrative *tout court*, this is undoubtedly a good thing. But you can also have too much of a good thing. The Sinologist Ronald Keith (2009), for example, takes at face value both the self-evident veracity and singular causal significance of the cultural specificity of China's relations with the rest of the world. He writes, for example, of the contemporary Chinese idea of "diversity of civilizations" as "at once Chinese and internationalist," in which "the Chinese foreign policy notion of 'harmony without uniformity,' or 'harmony without differences' (*he er butong*) correlates with the original Cold War formulation on 'seeking common ground while reserving differences'" (Keith, 2009, pp. 129–130) In this framework, Zhou En-lai's five principles of peaceful coexistence are seen as continuing to drive China's relationships with the rest of the world. These are taken to reflect a longer-term continuity in Chinese thinking about world politics. They are "equality and mutual benefit, mutual respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in other states' affairs, and peaceful coexistence" (ibid., p. 130). In this way, Confucius lives on into the modern era and as a driving force even as China becomes a major actor in world politics and its economic growth rate allows its leaders greater scope for a

little arrogance relative to foreigners than for several centuries past perhaps seemed wise. Chinese intellectual history is all too easily reduced to the adages of Confucius, however warmed over with "new interpretations" (Elman, 2010; more generally, see Wasserstrom, 2010, Chapter 1).

CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS OF CHINA: BEYOND THE CHOICE OF EITHER THE   LINEAR NARRATIVE OR SINO-CENTRISM

Both the Western linear perspective and the particularistic Chinese ones portray a relatively unambiguous Chinese relationship to world politics down the years, if in very different ways. I believe that what is missing on all sides is twofold: (1) a sense of the tension between continuity and change in the degree of Sino-centrism; and (2) an understanding of the degree to which all states, including China, must necessarily adjust in practice to a world politics in constant evolution and not just of their making.

The Uses and Limits of Sino-centrism

Turning first to the relative "Chineseness" of China's geopolitics, there are a number of ways in which we can assess its particularity and how this matters. One is to understand, as Callahan (2009) has recently argued, how China is itself imagined as a "geobody" and the degree to which bounded sovereign territory and unbounded imperial domain compete in maps portraying the country and its environs. Callahan takes pains to emphasize, quite rightly in my judgment, the importance of the humiliation visited on China down until the recent past and how this imaginary still prevails in school textbooks and official cartography. He uses a series of maps that he calls "Maps of China's National Humiliation" to show the trajectory of thinking about where China "ends" and the rest of the world begins. These are not simply maps of territorial claims, as the Western linear narrative might suggest, but normative maps conveying useful information about China's growing identity as a Great Power. Such normative maps are by no means unique to China. Indeed, a case can be made that they are of the essence of modern political cartography. As argued previously by Thongchai Winichakul (1994) for Thailand, Callahan sees three discursive or representational strategies at work in these maps. One reflects historic claims to imperial possessions as national territories, and involves displacing the historic hierarchical unbounded space with an homogeneous sovereign territory. A second situates China's past not in relation to its own imperial conquest but entirely in relation to a later foreign colonialism. And the third reads Chinese territory through the lens of Beijing, thus suppressing provincial and regional perspectives be they from Lhasa, Guangzhou, Shanghai, or Taipei.

In this setting I cannot possibly do justice to the details of Callahan's analysis. Suffice it to say that he interestingly juxtaposes a number of maps to make his central argument that the experience of humiliation at the hands of foreign colonialists remains relatively central to the Chinese sense of China's place in the world but without immediate relevance to constructing a detailed foreign policy except, for example, in regard to defending control over Tibet and in retaining a claim to Taiwan. Lurking in the background is the fact that China is not and has never been a "natural" unit without its own history of conquest and subordination of others, particularly at its geographical peripheries. In such a historical framing, mapping borders inevitably engenders collective anxiety (Krishna, 1994). Callahan draws many of his maps from a compilation published in 1997 in Beijing and called *Maps of the Century of National Humiliation*. As he puts it: "the cartographic agony of the early twentieth century is

republished as a new anxiety about China's geobody in 1997" (Callahan, 2009, 157). One of the maps (from 1912) makes it difficult to pick "China" out from the rest of Asia but subsequent ones in 1916 and 1930 chart distinctive sets of "lost territories," though these remain much less Beijing-centered and concerned with China's periphery than do many later ones. The recently "discovered" but probably fake 1418 map of Zheng He's American voyage (why would he want to go there then?) offers a profoundly normative sense of China as a confident world power even before Europe knew there was a whole big world out there. A recent Chinese/English version of *Zheng He's Voyages to the Western Oceans* (Jienan, 2009), in a series of books on China's encounters with the West and the West's encounters with China ("Roads to the World"), makes clear that Zheng went west, not east, and was pragmatic and not triumphalist in his account of what he saw. The English-language map on the back cover of the recent best-selling Chinese book, *China's Road under the Shadow of Globalization* (Xiaodong et al., 1999), purports to show how Westerners dismember China cartographically and thus openly challenge the wholeness of the country. I have never seen such a map and cannot find it anywhere in the West. But the truthfulness of these maps, as Callahan observes, is beside the point. Such maps are deeply revealing of the anxieties engendered by China's engagement with the world and the continuing significance of the logic of humiliation in relation to cleansing "the stains of lost honor and pride" (Callahan, 2009, p. 171).

China is distinctive in one other very different respect, however. It is a very large country in terms of area and population with a recent history of humiliation, not conquest. These elements play an important role in both the behavior of China's leaders and in perceptions of outsiders. Clearly, the very heft of China is an integral part of much of the political discourse about the rise of China. Metaphors such as the "sleeping giant" come to life (Shirk, 2007) animate much discussion even when authors are concerned with the "fragility" of the Chinese economy. It is the very size and importance to the world economy of China's export-oriented manufacturing sector that has allowed China to become the world's major creditor country. It has done this by pegging its currency to the U.S. dollar (the main currency of international trade and investment) and thus recreating for itself some of the stability that was associated worldwide with the Bretton Woods monetary system of 1944–1974. Of course, this has tied the Chinese economy closely to that of the United States but in the name of national sovereignty and self-development (Agnew, 2010). At the same time, the way that China's currency is managed points away, at least at a macroeconomic level, from the neoliberal model of floating exchange rates adopted in many places as a consequence of the collapse of the Bretton Woods Agreement. Perhaps even more importantly, this huge country was also systematically humiliated and coerced by foreigners historically, but never in fact conquered by any single foreign power. This led to both the ready recourse to isolation after 1949 and to a popular sense of the potential threats to China's independence from foreign sources, if nevertheless with a sense of continuing pride in an exceptional cultural history (Elvin, 1999). There has been, therefore, a fundamentally Chinese dimension to how China has been incorporated into the world economy, rooted in its size and recent history. Whether this incorporation would have been possible without both the strong central government based in the Chinese Communist Party and the previous isolation of the country for a long period of time, allowing China to come into the world economy on its own terms, is open to considerable doubt.

A final important dimension of how China could be distinctive is the way in which Chinese intellectuals have tried to adapt imported ideas of various sorts indicative of American hegemony, above all in recent years those of American international relations. In fact, Zhang (2003) shows that people trained in the United States ran all of the major foreign-policy research institutes in China at the time of his study in 2000. To a large extent, therefore,

academic Chinese knowledge of the "international," seemingly remains refracted through intellectual lenses made in the United States. As with American students of international relations, there is some range of viewpoints, going from the neoliberal (seeing states as rational actors concerned with relative gains) to the neo-realist (seeing states as trapped in zero-sum conflicts over absolute gains and losses). In his fascinating report on his interviews with Chinese foreign-policy specialists, Mark Leonard (2008) shows that all seem to want to stop China being "flattened" by globalization and to re-establish a place for powerful nation-states (such as China) in world politics. There is a tension, however, between those he calls liberal internationalists and the neo-communists in a contemporary variant of the Mao-era split between "bourgeois" and "revolutionary" nationalists. In the long run, the neo-communists look forward to building "pockets of an alternative realty where it is Chinese values and norms that determine the course of events rather than Western ones" (Leonard, 2008, p. 154). Recent popular books by Li Delin and Wu Shu emphasizing the victimization of China at the hands of Western banks and governments take this to an extreme (e.g., Conspiracy, 2010). At first sight within contemporary China, this is the trend in the offing. As a result, some Chinese academics now write explicitly about what they term "international relations theory with Chinese characteristics" (Xinning, 2001). In other words, China has become involved in developing something of its own akin to what happened in the formalization of international relations theory in the U.S. in the 1940s and 1950s. But this also sounds suspiciously like the phraseology of the May Fourth Movement in the Republican period.

What is this "Chinese synthesis"? According to Song Xinning (2001) there are two variants, with the second smaller but growing more quickly. The first borrows the phrase "Chinese characteristics" from Deng Xiaoping to indicate an international relations theory that centers on China's need to protect its sovereignty, engage in peaceful coexistence with other states, and use Chinese language, thought, and expression. The second asserts a more radically Chinese vision of the world, with China's status as the center or middle of a surrounding system, Confucian "benevolent governance," winning conflicts without resorting to war, and interests not morality as the basis for interstate behavior. Xinning (2001, p. 62) claims that:

> After the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989, most social science disciplines (especially political science, sociology, and journalism) suffered a setback because of the government's campaign against the ideological liberalism of Chinese scholars and the so-called peaceful evolution initiated by the West. However, International Relations received a different treatment. Theoretical studies on IR continued to develop. The teaching of Western IR theories continued at key universities, and academic exchanges with the West in IR studies became more active. This was mainly because Chinese leaders worried more about China's isolation from the outside world than a "peaceful evolution."

But more recently, as Xinning makes clear, a new Chinese IR is evolving, combining a range of elements (also see Yang and Li 2009). As in the U.S. case, however, it is its connection to state policy that gives it special status. As in so many other features of the relationship between the United States and China, there is an almost mirror image in assumptions between the U.S. import and what increasingly goes for "Chinese" IR theory. What at first sight seems Chinese, on closer inspection is not far from what goes for the neo-realist synthesis among U.S. international relations scholars and shares many of the presuppositions of the Western linear narrative. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. International relations theory with Chinese characteristics does not yet look very different from the original American variety.

THE BECKONING WORLD

The persistent and unresolved ambiguity in Chinese elite ideology about China's unique place in the world has never stopped China from participating in various ways in world politics. It is reasonable to say that a general pragmatic attitude has tended to characterize much Chinese rhetoric and action in relation to its immediate neighbors and to world politics at large. In brief, China has not been able to completely escape from the influence of the rest of the world and has had to negotiate its relations with other states, international organizations, and all manner of private actors even when this has contradicted official ideology. Indeed, historically, and in negotiations, for example, with its land neighbor Russia, China was open to compromises for which its Western competitors, such as Britain, were usually not available (Perdue, 2010). Turning to more recent times, numerous studies have shown that as early as 1949, and certainly in the years since, Chinese foreign policy was reactive to initiatives and pressures from elsewhere more than proactive in its own right (e.g., Gittings, 1974; Kim, 1979, 1994; Waley-Cohen, 1999; Fravel, 2005). China's involvement in the Korean War and the Sino-Soviet dispute can both be seen as essentially reactive on China's part. In each case China's independence and territorial integrity was at issue in a confrontation initiated by a major world power. In Chinese domestic politics since 1949, foreign policy questions have not been of great importance (Halliday, 1976; McGregor, 2010). Significantly, and given Mao's continuing ideological significance, it is important that "there is not a single concrete analysis of any foreign country or revolutionary movement in the whole of Mao's writings" (Halliday, 1976, p. 190). Despite the existence of Maoist groups around the world, there is no history of sustaining these or of supporting the Castroite philosophy of "exporting revolution" (Halliday, 1976; Harris, 1978). It seems clear today that China also no longer has a "universal" model of revolutionary nationalism or anything similar on offer to the rest of the world (*pace* Arrighi, 2007).

Beyond the overall pragmatism of Chinese foreign policy, however, are two more specific ways in which world politics has imposed itself on China and to which Chinese governments have had to react. The first is the fact that recent Chinese economic development is seen in China as largely the product of globalization rather than national development per se. It has been the export-oriented sectors of the economy, fueled initially and on a continuing basis by foreign direct investment, that lie behind the high rate of China's economic growth since the opening of the Chinese economy in the 1980s. China has a stake in the regulation and reproduction of this system of which it is now an integral part. Its elite has tied itself irrevocably to the very world order that its forebears condemned. Though often posed outside China as a sort of Chinese imperialism, Chinese investment in resource economies in Africa (e.g., Pannell, 2008) and elsewhere can be seen as an element of globalization in that many of the products produced by those resources will end up being consumed in the United States and Europe, not in China itself. Globalization is also not simply about markets and spontaneous growth of trade and investment. It works only because of a high degree of institutional and legal interdependence. China's growing prosperity depends on tightening these bonds and participating in those global and regional institutions that facilitate its growth. This is so even as China itself has obvious institutional and policy differences with the dominant neoliberal strands in global capitalism such as important sovereign wealth funds (Backer, 2009) and local political-social conditions that have made China's capitalist transformation highly differentiated geographically (Fan and Sun, 2008; Chan and Wang, 2008; Webber, 2008; Wu, 2009). The language of recent Chinese party chiefs and national leaders reflects their view of the centrality to China's future of continuing adaptation to external constraints (McGregor, 2010). A major challenge

is the fact that much of the economic growth has been centered in the coastal regions and around Beijing. As Carolyn Cartier (2001) has shown convincingly for southern China, globalization brings with it all sorts of possibilities for the rising significance of regional and local identities as it breaks down the hold that national states have over both economic growth and political imaginaries. At the same time, however, as the "most practical of world powers" (Woo, 2007, p. 69), China's government knows that surrounding countries also have a stake in China's rebound, not least because the 1997 Asian financial crisis produced a reorientation of their economies around China that will not easily reverse.

The second specific way in which world politics as practiced today affects China is that China is entering into a prominent global role in the footsteps of the United States. Though the Chinese political economy can be characterized, as it has been by Giovanni Arrighi (2007), as a non-capitalist market economy, its external links currently at least involve actively working in a world remade by the United States in its image in the years after the Second World War. Arrighi systematically understates the role of foreign direct investment and foreign markets in stimulating China's economic growth since the 1980s. This does not mean that China has simply followed the rules of U.S.-style neoliberal globalization; obviously the central role of the state in China's recent economic growth suggests anything but. Rather, its very specificity has limits that are set externally by membership in international organizations (particularly since 2001 in the WTO) and the need to adapt to the demands of foreign investors and banks. Arrighi also neglects the general cultural context in which China's foreign relations have developed during the same time period since the late 1980s (Agnew, 2005). For example, some Chinese intellectuals and politicians have become particularly enamored recently of the idea of "soft power." This idea, originating with Joseph Nye's (1990) usage in relation to what he took to be the major contribution that the U.S. had brought to world politics, involves "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye, 2004, p. x). What this reflects, of course, is the hegemony that the U.S. has exercised in its sphere of influence during the Cold War and everywhere since then. This has never been entirely independent of other dimensions of U.S. influence, particularly its economic and military roles. Whether China's generally accommodating foreign policy of recent years is enough to tag it as an exercise in "soft power" without these other "harder" elements of power in the wings, remains to be seen (Li, 2009). More importantly in the present context, the very fact of this discussion suggests how much China is the inheritor of the character of world politics as it has evolved since the late 20th century (Cumings, 2009). Just seeing the rise of China in terms of economic and, potentially, military power obviously misses this entire aspect of how world politics as currently practiced channels what will be possible for a "reborn" China.

CONCLUSION

From a critical geopolitical perspective, China is not just the "next" hegemonic power in the escalator image of Great Powers moving up and down the global state hierarchy. It, rather, brings its own contribution to the game. Yet, it does so, as I have tried to emphasize, within the context of an evolving world-political milieu based in the modern geopolitical imagination. After providing a critique of the conventional Western linear geopolitical narrative and conventional Sino-centric accounts anchored typically in a Confucian intellectual history, I have tried to suggest an alternative perspective as the best way of thinking about the rise of China within world politics in the years ahead, drawing from contemporary critical geopolitics. This suggests as crucial the twin roles of the uses and limits of Sino-centrism, on the one hand, and the various elements of a beckoning world that China's intellectuals and leaders

have usually tended to tackle pragmatically, on the other. At the same time as we develop our ability to study China in the world, of course, China in itself will have to become a much more important focus of study than it has been for critical geopolitics in particular and for political geography more generally.

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