
Looking Back to Look Forward: Chinese Geopolitical Narratives and China's Past

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Abstract: A prominent political and human geographer outlines a way of thinking about China's "place in the world" that is based on a penetrating examination of how influential Chinese thinkers and politicians use analogies to China's past historical practices and geographical forms as sources of inspiration for contemporary and future directions in Chinese foreign policy. Different venues within China, such as military academies, universities, and civilian think-thanks, are producing interpretive frames (geopolitical narratives) that are competing for influence within the leadership of the Communist Party and the state bureaucracy. The author distinguishes four such narratives, each with a different emphasis on China's past: (a) Pacific Rim, (b) Orientalist, (c) nationalist *geopolitik*, and (d) international relations with Chinese characteristics. He argues that rather than simply imposing Western narratives on China, investigators should be concerned with exploring the geopolitical narratives that are arising from within China and that will plausibly provide the justifications for future Chinese foreign policy. *Journal of Economic Literature*, Classification Numbers: F020, F500, P200. 43 references. Key words: China, geopolitical narratives, policy entrepreneurs, Pacific Rim, Orientalism, nationalist *geopolitik*, Chinese exceptionalism, China's history, Confucianism, Taiwan, national humiliation, syncretism.

Much writing about contemporary China in relation to world politics tends to gravitate to one of two positions: (1) a China converging toward repeating Western experience as either an incipient hegemon or ordinary nation-state; or (2) an exceptional entity with a totally unique and homogeneous cultural and/or economic history that predestines it to become a center for a distinctive world order in the years ahead (Agnew, 2010). Such accounts have been subject to lacerating criticism from a number of directions. Wang Hui (2011), for example, criticizes the "nation-state logic" that inspires much thinking about China as being based on an essentially European experience of state-making. Yet, at the same time, he is aware how much this historical model now permeates elite thought and practice inside China. From a different viewpoint, William Callahan (2012) is equally critical of studies (a) that see China as just another actor in "international society" or "power politics" and (b) those, increasingly popular recently, that betray a new and triumphal Orientalism in which China is not only completely different culturally from elsewhere but is now on course to re-establish its ancient hierarchical-tributary system across Asia and potentially also worldwide.

Of course, it has been the rising global economic importance of China since the 1980s that has made it the center of so much geopolitical speculation. Without the confluence of massive foreign investment and Chinese labor and infrastructure advantages, China would not be subject to the intense scrutiny about its future course, with respect of both internal political change and the nature of its external influence. Its very size, in terms of land area

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and population, has always been seen as militating to its advantage. Ironically, until China “opened up” to the world economy, however, it remained locked into an internally oriented political-cultural world in which its external limits or sphere of influence was not of central importance to the regime of the time. This has now changed dramatically. As a result, China is even being proposed as the source of a new “Beijing Consensus” in succession to the so-called Washington Consensus, which can serve as a gathering place for those either opposed to the U.S.-dominated one or who like the party-state model of economic development that China represents. Either way, however, this conception seems to miss the point that China is in fact largely assimilated into global capitalism and erases the significance of China’s past for the country’s leaders and population as they come to terms with their new place in the world. What matters is to understand how China’s changed material condition is leading to new geopolitical postures. These postures should not be viewed as a simple reflex reaction to China’s increased economic importance worldwide but rather as competing narratives that frame the directions and possibilities of Chinese foreign policy irrespective of the country’s political and military resources and capabilities.

A striking feature of recent intellectual and policy debate in China has been the way in which versions of the Chinese past² have been brought to bear on contemporary questions about China’s “place in the world.” As well as opening up to the rest of the world since the 1980s, Chinese society seems also in the process of opening up to its past. But rather than a single story that all accept, and notwithstanding political pressures to keep their imaginations in check, a wide range of actors is actively engaged in constructing narratives about how the past can inform the present and the future in China’s relations with the rest of the world.

After laying out the main background premises that inform the approach taken in the paper, I provide a brief argument for and review of multiple and competing Chinese geopolitical narratives. Opening these to question is seen as a preferable epistemological strategy to that of imposing a singular vision on recent Chinese geopolitical experience. In the remainder of the paper, I show how various “traditions” and elements of Chinese history have fed into a number of different themes that have emerged into prominence in recent Chinese discussions of geopolitics and foreign policy. These are usually not simple projections from readings of Chinese history but involve cross-fertilization with ideas of decidedly non-Chinese provenance. I briefly consider a number of these: the theme of “humiliation” experienced at the hands of colonialists and its continuing relevance; Taiwan’s place in Chinese cosmology; the preference for Qing versus Ming dynasties in choosing appropriate analogies for the present; and the nationalizing of Confucius as a prophet for the People’s Republic of China. The purpose of these examples is to give the flavor of current proposals for justifying the different geopolitical narratives and associated strains of foreign policy, not to claim anything definitive about any one of them.

PREMISES

Four premises inform the logic of the perspective implicit in this article. The first is that although Chinese government remains authoritarian, policy making is increasingly open to a variety of influences including that of intellectuals, military officers, journalists, and others. The literature on Chinese politics sometimes refers to such people as “policy entrepreneurs,” suggesting that they compete with one another for the ear of political leaders and

²For example, institutional characteristics of different imperial dynasties, varieties of Confucianism, and geographical parameters of previous Chinese polities.

an increasingly vibrant public opinion (e.g., Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988; Murtha, 2009). This “fragmented authoritarianism” offers a useful heuristic for considering the pluralistic range of geopolitical narratives that have emerged into prominence in recent years. The Chinese party-state is no longer best thought of as a monolithic entity. Not only do recent fissures within the party elite over promotions to top-tier leadership positions reveal distinctive ideological and personalized factions, but different factions are clearly recruiting support from within the ranks of the burgeoning intelligentsia to provide them with rationales and justifications for their policy positions (e.g., Zhu Xufeng, 2009). This said, it is important not to overstate the degree to which opinions can be freely expressed outside fairly narrow and officially prescribed limits. China may be a post-totalitarian society but it is hardly an open one. As the Chinese proverb says: “The gun shoots the bird with its head up” (*qiang da chutou niao*) (quoted in Esarey and Qiang, 2008, 755–756).

A second premise reflects the view that China’s opening to the world represents a “time-space crisis” in the sense that China can no longer be set in an eternally present and geographically contained world but must be increasingly externally oriented and dynamic, drawing ideas both from abroad but also from what had been “lost” with the official disavowal of the past China from before the 1949 Revolution. In other words, the geographical and historical limits of “China” are undergoing a fundamental redefinition. This helps to understand why perhaps so much contemporary geopolitical debate in China involves recourse to pre-revolutionary historical sources and analogies even as they must be adapted to a different world-geographical milieu than those historical ones from which they derive. China’s new prominence demands looking back to when it had a similar destiny. This may or may not be equivalent to a shift in “historicity regime,” in the sense that Francois Hartog (2003) uses the term—a temporal crisis for late-18th-century Europe in which the future was no longer seen as a projection of the past but as leading up to the present with the future imported from somewhere else (revolutionary France or the United States; see also Billioud, 2011, 235–236). As yet, however, recognition of the fact that China is ensnared to a startling extent in the network-based logic of globalization has had only limited effects on most of the geopolitical visions in question. They remain largely captive to a territorialized image of global politics with great swathes of the globe presumably always under some Great Power or other’s sway.

The third premise is that the narratives in question together constitute an evolving geopolitical discourse that situates China in relation to world politics. I would reject the contention that these narratives are somehow not equivalent to a discourse (or meaningful and potentially long-lasting script) because they privilege “texts” authored by “agents” more than eventual practices or actual policies (Müller, 2008). The entire point is to identify those clusters of selected ideas and historical events that potentially animate practices and policies. They are not the same thing as those practices and policies. This is why we have different words for each. Now, at present the discourse is rather inchoate, hence the value of speaking in terms of various narratives rather than of a singular discourse in this particular case.

Finally, the various stories told about China’s historical past and Chinese geographical presence today (and how they relate to China’s place in the world) emanate from discrete sites or venues inside China. They are overwhelmingly the output of policy entrepreneurs and intellectuals in institutes, universities, and think tanks in Beijing. These sites are not sealed off from the rest of the world. In fact, though knowledge is always made in particular places by specific persons, the “geography of knowledge” rarely reduces to simply national influences untainted by “foreign” borrowings. Although much of the literature in the history of science, for example, regards “place” largely in terms of national territories, in this respect it parallels the history of social science *tout court* (Agnew, 1989). To speak of “places” of knowledge

production is to invoke much more sociologically meaningful but also typically localized sites where local, national, and long-distance influences on thinking and research practice come together (e.g., Livingstone, 2007; Agnew and Livingstone, 2011). In China, an array of foreign policy think tanks and research institutes, some with and some without official governmental affiliation, has arisen over the past 30 years, drawing explicitly on U.S. models (e.g., Zhu Xufeng, 2009; McGann, 2012). The figure of the “intellectual,” long reviled during and in the aftermath of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, has also made a parallel comeback (Bondiguel and Kellner, 2009). The renewed role for intellectuals oriented to public questions, including international relations and geopolitics, itself reflects the pluralization of public discourse and implicit acceptance of the idea of multiple narratives competing with one another in the “marketplace” of ideas, even as they all attempt to influence the policies and practices of the party-state (Cheek, 2006). Indeed, as the various narratives gain acceptance in different quarters, a sort of “arms race” for political attention and influence among the various agencies and institutes within the government can push the boundaries of policy in ways that a more centralized polity might be able to resist. This seems to have become the case in relation to China’s official actions in the South China Sea (e.g., Pilling, 2012).

MULTIPLE GEOPOLITICAL NARRATIVES

A number of different refrains characterize the geopolitical narratives about China’s place in the world and its consequences. All of these to one degree or another invoke historical events and past geographies of China in their understandings of the present and their perceptions of the future. Different Chinese policy entrepreneurs and intellectuals and their foreign collaborators and influences have seen their narratives rise and fall in relative popularity over time. Of course, proponents see their narratives as the “best” ones in the sense of providing the truest accounts. In the end, however, it is which ones that prove most influential to Chinese governments and what they choose to do on that basis that really matters.

From the available literature that departs from simply seeing China in terms of conventional Western narratives, I would distinguish four broadly different types of geopolitical narrative, each of which has a different emphasis on China’s past: the Pacific Rim, the Orientalist, the nationalist *geopolitik*, and international relations with Chinese characteristics. If the first has faded somewhat since the 1990s, the others, particularly the second and the third, have increased in influence over the past five years. As several commentators have noted, increased resort to historical events and philosophical concepts mined from deep in Chinese history has become *de rigueur*. At the same time, however, a deeply territorialized vision not only of China’s past and present but also of its future inspires those narratives that are now most ascendant. In this way, the past underpins the future through the creation of a transcendental historical thread flowing from an ancient and settled China down to the unsettled one of today. China’s contemporary identity, and the security demands this entails, is thus stabilized by reference to its idealized past.

The idea of the Pacific Rim now seems so dated. Yet in the 1990s it was central to much debate about the integration of the newly opened China into world politics. Within China its main proponents tend to come from think tanks and quasi-official agencies most supportive of globalization and China’s links to the overseas Chinese and neighboring countries. The focus on China as part of a larger Pacific or Asian world, the terms vary, is designed to place China at the center of a web of connections around the massive Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and around the Pacific Ocean, paying particular attention to how a widespread network of nodes and territories has played a disproportionate role in fostering the opening up and

economic growth of China since the 1980s. Dubbed “Rimspeak” by Bruce Cumings (1998), rather than celebrating an essential Chinese identity locked into a historically given territory, this narrative sees China as a central geographical moment in a new geopolitical logic knitting together the Pacific Rim as an alternative global focus to the previously dominant North Atlantic core. What is lacking, it now seems clear, is much to connect this geopolitical vision to a positive rendering of the Chinese past. Its proponents seem to have thought that projecting what seemed to be the dominant trend of the present into the future was sufficient justification. Yet, the emphasis on the diaspora always ran the risk of bringing to mind, implicitly if not explicitly, the years of Chinese “humiliation” at the hands of foreigners and the emigration of Chinese in search of greener pastures elsewhere than those left at home. The apparent postcolonial and post-territorial moorings of the Pacific Rim concept have also made it seem less attractive in China in the face of the country’s increasingly self-sustained economic growth, the crisis in global finance, and fears articulated in the U.S. of the military “threat” emanating reflex-like from an economically vibrant China.

It is the Orientalist vision that has probably been most visible among popular writers and think tanks associated with the mainstream faction within the leadership of the party-state over the past five years. But this has older roots in the common insistence by many authorities, both Chinese and not, of Chinese history for most of its course down until the 20th century as representing the workings of a Sinocentric tributary system with Confucian adages providing the socio-psychological basis to a Chinese exceptionalism that is completely different from anything to be found anywhere else. Prominent in certain popular works by Western writers (e.g., Jacques, 2009), this type of narrative based on an idealized image of China’s past also has many Chinese proponents. Such intellectuals have been looking to venerable concepts such as *tianxia* (or “All-under-Heaven”) to rethink empire and world order in a register drawn from Chinese intellectual history but applied to the contemporary world (e.g., Zhou Tingyang, 2005, 2011). Thus, for example, Yan Xuetong (2011) borrows from the ancient Chinese philosopher Xunzi to construct a hierarchical-realist perspective predicting that a “balanced” economic-political-military approach to Chinese foreign relations will produce better outcomes all round than would a China emphasizing economic growth alone. Others look back not so much for philosophical inspiration as to identify popular “historical traditions” such as some variety of Confucianism or historical features such as the lack of a “balance-of-power” between polities in East Asia (e.g., see Carlson, 2011) to underpin their prognostications about contemporary world politics.

Somewhat less visible has been a developing discovery of old-school German and Japanese geopolitics framed in nationalist terms. Termed “the *geopolitik* turn” by Christopher Hughes (2011), this type of narrative, epitomized by such books as *China Dream* (Liu Mingfu, 2010) and the immensely popular novel *Wolf Totem* (Jiang Rong, 2004), focuses on China’s need to protect access to resources around the world through the projection of sea power. To one degree or another, all of these accounts recycle old geopolitical nostrums equivalent to *lebensraum*, organismic statehood, and racial categorization. They are characterized by the same “moral exceptionalism” as the older German model. China, as was Germany in its day, is *sui generis*. It is a Han Chinese enterprise in a Social Darwinian world. In this construction, China is awakening from its slumber to resurrect the martial values that in the past had led its dynasties to expand territorially across Asia. The message from this posture for China’s leaders is that every event in China’s “neighborhood” involving other actors is a potential challenge to China’s status and thus must be met with an immediate response. As a result, and among other things, “Ultimately no room is left for compromise in the contest with Japan, because control of the East China Sea is not just about energy reserves; it is about the bigger

question of who controls Taiwan, access to the Pacific and ultimately to the world” (Hughes, 2011, p. 620). The syncretism here is obvious, yet it now serves to justify totally Sinocentric ends. Perhaps not surprisingly, it is elements in the People’s Liberation Army and military-oriented think tanks that are the main proponents of this recycled *geopolitik*. But it has also become increasingly popular in the blogosphere among so-called Han (racial) nationalists.

Finally, by comparison significantly more anodyne, are those attempts at configuring a conception of international relations with Chinese characteristics. Many studies are of this genre. They tend to be most closely associated with American-educated political scientists attempting to reproduce in China the sort of Ivy League university–think tank–State Department connection that they have observed in the U.S. As is well known, much of what goes for international relations theory was invented in the United States (Agnew, 2012). If in the realist register, this involves crucial assumptions of anarchy beyond state borders and inter-state competition for status, in a rationalist/liberal one the emphasis is on relative gains in utility and a focus on economic rather than military contestation. Sinicizing such approaches takes several forms. One involves “highlighting Chinese traditions as a partial explanation of Chinese diplomatic conduct” (Ming Wan, 2012, p. 105). In this way allusions to “harmony” and analogies to ancient dynastic wars take on deeper meaning as representing something fundamentally Chinese rather than as noble and arguably universal sentiments or historically contingent events of distant memory. Implicit here still is a potential celebration of an essential Chinese difference that remains unrelated to much actual Chinese history; the fact, for example, as Gilbert Rozman (2012, p. 122) puts it, “The hereditary family elite in China is steeped in family socialism, not Confucianism.” Rather more profoundly, however, the other involves reorienting the entire field (inside and beyond China) around concepts drawn from the ancient philosopher Xunzi (and others), the benevolent nature of Chinese power, and a “normative hierarchical order.” Reading across a number of writers, particularly Qin Yaqing (2011), Yan Xuetong (2011), and Yiwei Wang (2007), Allen Carlson (2011, p. 101) sees evidence for “the development of a new vision of world order which supplements, if not replaces, Westphalia with newly resurrected, yet historically grounded, ‘Chinese’ concepts of how international politics might be reorganized.” Increasingly, however these accounts appear more “realist” in their emphasis on China versus the rest than oriented to a “rationalist” view of relative gains among fellow states (Lynch, 2009). Moreover, and ironically, that the reference point is Westphalia even as Chinese history is mined for concepts and crucial events to argue against it is suggestive again of the degree to which these new geopolitical narratives are of mixed and not simply Chinese origin. Of course, this is by no means a new development. Chinese intellectuals and politicians have wrestled with Western influences, not least the now increasingly forgotten borrowing from Marxism, for centuries. Mining history, it seems, is as much about what is forgotten as what is remembered.

GEOPOLITICAL THEMES

Selecting which geopolitical themes to address in order to give a somewhat more detailed appreciation of how the various geopolitical narratives are deployed is inevitably arbitrary. I choose several because they seem central to the current leadership’s agendas (Taiwan and Qing versus Ming analogies in justifying centralized rule) and others because they animate particular interest among policy entrepreneurs and intellectuals (national humiliation and Confucianism).

To the extent that the current Chinese leadership group has its own storyline about China’s role in the world, and notwithstanding blustering rhetoric, particularly from elements

in the military, about Taiwan, Tibet, and the South China Sea, it is as a “peacefully rising” power aiming toward a “harmonious world.” Yet, lurking behind this apparently Confucian image lies a sense of anxiety about what the “China” that is rising exactly is. The aggressive rhetoric about Taiwan, etc. then is not completely divorced from that about the peacefully rising power. My point is not that the Chinese government necessarily harbors expansionist sentiments but that the collective memory of humiliation at the hands of foreign powers in the 19th and 20th centuries is now leading to a desire for recognition and respect—from the self-same foreigners and from minorities scattered within China’s territory, whose idea of China must be that of a national space restored to its former greatness. Many Chinese intellectuals, and not just those affiliated with the military, have become increasingly concerned about historic slights to what can be called the Chinese “geo-body” and how many of these remain both alive (as with the status of Taiwan and Tibet as Chinese territories) and connected to foreigners perceived belittling of Chinese claims by their support for the Dalai Lama or of Taiwanese claims to nation-statehood. Among contemporary scholars, William Callahan (2009) has done the most to highlight the significance of what he calls the “cartography of national humiliation,” the use of historic and contemporary maps to document both Chinese claims and foreign denials. He makes a powerful empirical case for how “the cartography of national humiliation still animates official, scholarly, and popular understandings of national territoriality in China. Most important, these maps show a strangely anxious popular counter-current to Beijing’s current positive images of the PRC as a ‘peacefully rising’ power” (ibid., p. 171). The maps in question consist of those that show how foreign countries dismembered China by hiving off chunks of territory and creating the Treaty Port system in the 19th century and those that purport to show how much foreigners still regard many Chinese territorial claims as illegitimate.

Callahan makes a number of telling points about the humiliation narrative and how it fits efforts to portray China as a historical victim presently simply reestablishing its old self. One is to note how it employs “the Westphalian international system’s grid to reduce, classify, or exclude the voices of [the] quasi states [around its edges] and allow only the story of the ‘great unity’ of the emerging Chinese nation-state to be heard” (Callahan, 2009, pp. 159–160). This reflects a second important feature of the humiliation narrative: an almost obsessive concern with mapping contemporary national sovereignty (in the Western sense of exclusive jurisdiction) onto a traditional imperial domain. But this is not simply borrowing a foreign idea but using it to communicate a more profound insecurity about the fragility of Chinese identity as manifested in the recent history of national geopolitical fragmentation. Behind this, and a third point, the search for “great unity” (*da yitong*) was a powerful refrain across many dynasties and can thus be viewed as constituting the guiding leitmotif for an organic historical geography to the country as a whole.

Two theoretical insights underpin Callahan’s interpretation of the significance of the humiliation maps. The first is that in the imagination of those recently and presently in power in China, the country had until very recently been considered the “Sick Man of Asia.” In this telling metaphor, the country represents a life needing to be saved (*jiuguo*), with dismembered limbs (*fenge*) that need re-attaching. Thus, in a biopolitical register, the re-emergence of an entire “body politic” for China can be construed as a productive return of the country to health after a long period of morbidity. Understanding the nature of the present day geo-body is served by a second theoretical insight. The size and shape of China remains a subject of contention within China as well as in relation to neighboring countries. Politics never acquire some final geopolitical form; they are always works in progress. This keeps their identities alive by forever calling them into question. The typical claim, however, is

that there has been a relatively uncomplicated “shift from the late imperial Chinese concept of unbounded domain (*jiangyu*) to a modern understanding of bounded sovereign territory (*zhuquan lingtu*)” (Callahan, 2009, p. 146). What Callahan (*ibid.*, p. 145) argues and shows empirically with the various humiliation maps is that “China’s uneasy shift from premodern unbounded understandings of space and territory to bounded understandings of space and territory in the twentieth century” has been anything but a simple linear progression. The tension between past imperial domain and present nation-state territory is alive and well.

Perhaps nowhere is this tension more apparent than in China’s relationship to Taiwan. The longstanding conflict between the “renegade province,” the seat of the Kuomintang Government “in exile” since 1949, and the PRC reflects both the increasingly separate identity of Taiwan and the refusal of the Beijing government to countenance the idea of Taiwan’s distinction from, let alone potential independence from, “China proper.” With the rise of the independence movement in Taiwan, official maps on the island have shifted from the convention of accepting the possibility of China reunited under the government of the ROC that fled to the island after the Chinese Revolution and thus that incorporate Taiwan into the geo-body of China as a whole. Today’s maps rather depict it as separate, and use projections to situate it as a maritime nation facing away from the mainland in a deliberate act of politicized cartography (Callahan, 2009, pp. 169–170).

The Taiwanese independence movement has, however, also attempted to rewrite the history of the island’s historic ties to the mainland. For example, much has been made of the fact that before Taiwan was first conquered for China, by the Qing Dynasty as recently (in the Chinese timeframe) as 1683, the imperial court debated the value of colonizing an island that was viewed as outside the “inner world” of China proper (e.g., Teng, 2012). Of course, following the defeat of Qing forces in 1895 until after the Second World War, Taiwan was, renamed as Formosa, part of the Japanese Empire. So, effectively at least, Taiwan was territorially integral to China only from 1683 to 1895. Yet, the fact that it was the seat of an alternative government to China after 1949 has meant that its status has been very different from that of peripheral regions such as Tibet or Xinjiang, which both have had subordinate relations to Beijing. These two regions have never posed the symbolic-military threat that could be seen as emanating from Taiwan, with its claim to be the legitimate government of China as a whole, its embassies around the world (however reduced in number over the years), and its alliance with the United States (however limited by the need for the U.S. to improve relations with the PRC).

The more conservative elements among China’s “intellectuals of statecraft” are those most exercised by the “challenge” that comes from Taiwan. Yan Xuetong, for example, criticizes the “peaceful rise” thesis of Qin Yaqing and others primarily because “it gives Taiwan a message that they can declare independence and we will not attack them. . . . The problems we are having with Japan and Taiwan are a direct result of years of appeasement” (quoted in Leonard, 2008, p. 98). Even Qin Yaqing, however, sees Taiwan and other mini-states in the vicinity as challengers, albeit ones that have met with some success, in tying down China into the regional “neighborhood.” He sees China’s links with its neighbors as akin to that of Gulliver and the Lilliputians in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (Leonard, 2008, p. 105). The language of “appeasement” and “containment,” as well as the recourse to Swiftian analogy, suggest how much thinking on all sides is permeated with Western influences.

The hard line view concerning Taiwan has tended to prevail in practice, particularly when supporters of independence are in the ascendancy in Taiwanese politics. The 2005 “Anti-Secession Law,” directed principally at Taiwan, was the outcome of this confluence between the historic commitment to the idea of Taiwan as integral to China (however doubtful

that claim may be) and the threat to Chinese government credibility that would come from acknowledging the “right” of Taiwan to go its own way. Taiwan is frequently still described as one of the “five poisons” that challenge Chinese integrity as an empire/state: the others are separatists in Muslim districts of Xinjiang, Tibet, Mongolia, and the provinces around Korea. But it is the obsession with Taiwan that still most defines Chinese collective “cartographic anxiety” as expressed by intellectuals and policy entrepreneurs of all political stripes (Leonard, 2008).

One irony in the hostility to Taiwan is that until recently it was the Kuomintang governments in Taiwan that had made most use of Confucianism as providing the cultural basis to their rule, yet now a similar recourse is under way in the PRC. The themes of harmony (*hexie*) and the rule of virtue (*yi de zhi guo*) have become favorites of both China’s leaders and many intellectuals. These are terms with a long Confucian genealogy but fit uneasily into the twin and utterly contradictory worlds of socialist ideology and capitalist organization that currently characterize China. At first sight, usage seems largely instrumental. The notion of a “Confucian renaissance” (*ruxue fuxing*) would certainly seem premature. The current regime’s legitimacy still depends to a degree on the break with the old cultural order symbolized by the 1949 Revolution (Billioud, 2011, p. 235). Yet, there has been an obvious drift toward Confucian themes among both intellectuals and politicians over the past 10 years. Although there is a variety of schools of thought, from liberal to socialist Confucianism, even thinkers outside any particular school such as the “New Left” writer Gan Yang (2007), for example, now advocate some sort of “Confucian socialist republic” (*rujia shehuizhuyi gongheguo*). In his case, it is to be an amalgam of liberal (rights), Maoist (equality), and Confucian (filial piety, family relations) elements. There are others whose Confucianism is more “hard-core.” Though sometimes criticized for a legalism and authoritarianism, authors such as Jiang Qing (2003) are often difficult to classify. They are committed to a much greater institutional reliance on Confucian principles for justifying central political authority, such as developing proposals for, among other things, a tricameral parliament representing three quintessential Confucian sources: Heaven (*tian*), the transcendental scheme of things; the Earth (*di*), cultural history; and humanity (*ren*), the will of the people. However fanciful such schemes appear, they do suggest how much Confucian language and thinking have begun to penetrate into Chinese political discourse in general. Even when they are criticized, their naming as Confucian brings such ideas into greater currency (Billioud, 2011, p. 234).

The various tracks of political Confucianism undoubtedly feed into the exceptionalist renderings of Chinese history and the positive spin that is increasingly given to pre-revolutionary China. An increasingly vibrant Sinocentric Confucianism (as opposed to that based on “sharing” with much of East Asia, as was redolent for a while in the 1980s and 1990s) now challenges an increasingly faux socialism for command over competing geopolitical narratives. Its “authentically native alternative” (Rozman, 2012, p. 123) could, of course, become the basis for a critique of both Maoist-era socialism and what has substituted for it since the rise of Deng Xiaoping and his political offspring, beginning in the late 1970s. Such an approach might also not travel that well, particularly in “neighboring states reminded of their own historical memories of sinocentrism” (Rozman, 2012, p. 124). This has not discouraged attempts at doing so. Since 2004, as a part of its “soft power” drive to spread its cultural-political influence, the Chinese government has set up over 700 Confucius Institutes and Classrooms around the world in an effort to propagate Chinese language and culture in the name of the Great Sage (Hartig, 2012). The Confucian bona fides of many of the “values” championed by the Confucius Institutes seem doubtful. As Elena Barabantseva (2011, p. 196) notes:

It is remarkable how the recent move of the Chinese authorities to promote Confucian ideas is mixed with other modern ideas, such as mobility, adaptability, and affluence. These attributes are not only incompatible with classical Confucian thought but also go against its very grain. When China claimed to be ruled according to Confucian principles, emigration and trade were perceived by the Chinese rulers as undermining the stability of the Confucian order. Confucianism prioritized agriculture and regarded commerce as a dishonorable activity; it associated those engaged in commerce with exploitation and parasitism. Trade was seen as corrupting of human morality. Emigration was suppressed and condemned as against the value of filial piety toward parents and ancestors, as emigrants could not dutifully pay their respects to older family members.

The term Confucianism, therefore, has come to have such a wide range of meanings that it is now equivalent to “Chineseness.” What precisely it signifies in terms of guiding practice and policy is unclear.

This is not the case, however, concerning what can be garnered from China’s eventful dynastic history. Imperial memories have become important resources in informing China’s contemporary domestic politics and foreign policy planning alike. Naval strategists, for example, increasingly look to historic epochs when foreign dynasties (such as the Yuan and the Qing) dominated China and potentially, therefore, open to question whether it is the more inward-looking Han dynasties, such as the Ming, that offer the best lessons for the present and the future of China’s external relations (Horner, 2009, p. 145). But the Qing Dynasty, once the last word in “feudalism” and reaction as far as both Kuomintang and Communist cosmologies of Chinese history were concerned, has become fashionable as a source of historical analogies for reasons other than its relative “foreignness” and openness. This is apparent in popular television programs as much as it is in the pronouncements of intellectuals. The Qing is not alone. Particularly popular are the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Tang (618–917) as well as the expansionist and flourishing eras of the early Qing emperors Kangxi (r. 1661–1722) and Qianlong (r. 1735–1796).

What appears to be most appealing for many of today’s intellectuals about these epochs seems to be the mode of governance most frequently associated with them. This is what Pierre-Étienne Will (2011, p. 5) calls “a sort of autocratic paternalism, as opposed to a democracy where manipulative and incompetent politicians are chosen by an ignorant populace.” He makes this judgment on the basis of examining the recent revival of interest in so-called magistrate handbooks (*guanzen shu*) from the golden age of the Qing in the 18th century (e.g., Guo Chengwei, 2000). Alongside their paternalism, it is the imperial successes of the 18th-century Qing emperors that attracts most positive attention. But even the previously reviled 19th-century Qing emperors are now being reevaluated “as symbols of resistance against external aggression and internal rebellion, even though in reality they proved totally unable to deal with situations that were beyond them” (Will, 2011, p. 6). The Ming Dynasty, a native Han one, attracts nothing like the same positive attribution. In Will’s (2011, p. 13) opinion this is because the Ming were seen by the Qing emperors and still are today as having being fatally weakened (and thus subject to the overthrow that the Qing brought their way) by their relative openness to factional politics. The Qing determined, and present-day policy entrepreneurs and many intellectuals seem to be leaning the same way, that “they would not allow the same sort of situation to endanger their own regime.” This is one important institutional way in contemporary China in which the past speaks to the present and the future.

Another more subtle influence is worth mentioning. This is that the early Qing Emperor Kangxi made himself into the final authority of classical Confucian authority, thus replacing the cadre of scholars who had dominated previously. This should remind their contemporary equivalents (and us) of the real limitations on their autonomy in contemporary China. However much they may contribute to “debate” about the relevance of episodes in China’s past in the present, in the end this debate is always conducted within fairly narrow parameters. As Will (2011, p. 15) concludes in making this allusion: “capturing ideological legitimacy at the expense of the intellectuals, as Kangxi and his successors were able to do, is something that cannot fail to remind us of more recent realities in China.”

CONCLUSION

As China becomes a possible Great Power in the Western sense of the phrase, an economic and potentially military behemoth, its leaders and intellectual elites must struggle with how to respond. Given that “China” has had a centuries-long existence as some sort of polity, this task is made particularly difficult by the rich history of geographical forms and modes of rule that have characterized it down the years. Over the past 30 years, as modern China has opened up to the world and returned to mining its past for guidance in the present, its intellectuals and policy entrepreneurs have increasingly produced geopolitical narratives that rely heavily on past “experience” as a guide to the present. Such narratives are inevitably selective. It is what is selected that is of most interest. Some narratives emphasize martial and expansionist elements from the Chinese past, others pick up on more pacific strains in Chinese cultural history. Many seem enamored of a vacuous appeal to Confucianism as some sort of magic Chinese elixir. Most base their cases for a reactivated China in the negative experience of Chinese victimhood at the expense of foreign colonial powers. Looking to very specific periods in the past to justify autocratic rule and keeping Taiwan (and other peripheral territories) in the imperial fold have been particularly important tasks for China’s in-house “intellectuals of statecraft.”

Yet, it would be mistaken to see all of the many commentators and contributors to debate over Chinese foreign policy as working from exactly the same script. I identify four relatively distinctive geopolitical narratives that currently seem to inspire most constructions of “China” and its place in the world among Chinese policy entrepreneurs and intellectuals. If the Pacific Rim story is somewhat in eclipse, it still has considerable political-economic dynamism behind it and not a little Chinese history of its own, particularly with respect to the powerful diaspora influence of China around the world. The new Orientalism is the most invested in the revival of Confucianism as a guiding hand, but relies on an idealized image of the Chinese past that also produces hostile as well as pacific postures towards neighboring states and the world at large. The “nationalist *geopolitik*” grouping is much less influential than the Orientalist, except perhaps among elements in the military, but is by far the most aggressive in finding much of its inspiration in the revisionist powers of the 20th century: Nazi Germany and Militarist Japan. It relies the least of all of the narratives on much sense of the Chinese past except as a victim of the sort of thinking it endorses. Finally, the attempt at creating an international relations theory “with Chinese characteristics” represents the fourth type of geopolitical narrative as I have defined them. This is the seemingly most benign of the last three and as yet has had the least effect in terms of formulating perspectives that can feed into policy making. But that has long been a problem for international relations theory without Chinese characteristics as well.

What I wish to have challenged most forcefully in this paper are two notions. First, I question the popular view that China's future "place in the world" can be simply read off from some story told by someone not privy to Chinese elite discussions about the "nature" of China. Second, I argue against reproducing any one of the Chinese accounts presented above as "the" single truthful one. As William Callahan (2011, p. 12) has observed: "To take China seriously as an emerging world power, we need to understand how Chinese scholars and policymakers imagine their future on the international stage." Critical examination of what is being imagined then becomes the goal. As Callahan also concludes, the inevitable Confucius can be our inspiration for this, when he tells us: "The asking of questions itself is the correct rite."

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