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Is There Such a Thing as a Confucianist Chinese Foreign Policy? A Case Study of the Belt and Road Initiative

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Introduction

China's role in the international order has been changing in the past 50 years; the country has gone from being a non-power, to a regional power (Fitzgerald, 1955: 114, 118), to an emerging global power, to having the second largest economy in the world and ambitions to be considered as a great power. Since Deng Xiaoping's decision to reform and open up the Chinese economy, subsequent leaders have looked to establish China's place within the international order but also within the regional order. As Rebecca E. Karl (1998: 1118) reflects, 'Asianism ... has been a recurrent theme of the twentieth-century Chinese (and "Asian") history'. The concept of Asia, according to Karl, has changed over time from cultural debates in the 1930s linking India and China's Eastern spirituality and pitting it against Western materialism, to Pan-Asianism¹ (as in Sino-Japanese sameness) advocated by, for example, Wang Jingwei to justify his collaboration with the Japanese during their occupation of China in the 1940s and to Mao Zedong's Third Worldism rhetoric. For our argument, however, the most intriguing is China's support of the so-called 'Confucian capitalist

network'. According to Dirlik (1997), this phenomenon is best viewed as a manifestation of East Asia's global postcolonial discourse and the postcolonial revival of the native pasts, which simultaneously contests a Eurocentric global order (Dirlik, 1995: 230). Therefore, considering Pan-Asianism (or Asian regionalism with inherent Asian values) as a constant, stable, ahistorical unit of analysis is problematic. What is more, East Asia as a region is infused with the core values of Confucius philosophy (Shin, 2012: 3).

For China, the 2008 Beijing Olympics demonstrated a rediscovered national pride and China's return as a global actor. It also reiterated the role Confucianism played in this narrative (Cohen, 2007). During the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, over 2,000 voices chanted the Confucian saying, 'You Peng zi yuan fang lai, bu yi le hu?' (有朋自远方来, 不亦乐乎/To have friends come from afar is happiness, is it not?),² to the beat of drums from the Xia (夏) Dynasty (*China Daily*, 2008). Although China's Confucian revival began gradually during the presidency of Hu Jintao, references to Confucius philosophy accelerated under the presidency of Xi Jinping (*The Economist*, 2015). From early on in his presidency, Xi drew on ancient Chinese texts including Confucius and made it 'the hallmark of his political discourse' (Zhang, F., 2015: 198). China has abandoned its former policy of *taoguang yanghui* (韬光养晦/hiding one's capabilities and binding one's time) (Zhang, J., 2015: 7), and under Xi, the time seems to have come to increase its level of regional and international engagement.

International relations (IR) scholars have become increasingly interested in this more assertive and proactive approach (Posen, 2003; Lake, 2011; Mearsheimer, 2014). They have also questioned China's sincerity and wondered what this new embrace of Confucianist discourse might mean for China's foreign policy (Chan, 2014). Some argue that the cultural references in China's new IR were simply an expression of the need to present itself as a unique actor that differs from the dominant Western liberal philosophy; others assert that the Chinese leadership was simply using Confucianism to justify its authoritarianism (Ford, 2015). From this perspective, the Confucian revival is not only perceived as a move *against* the West, but as incompatible with it.

Exploring this Confucian revival in the context of Asian values is our aim within this chapter. The question we are interested in is: how are Confucian ideas utilised for creating new meaning for Chinese foreign policy? We begin by considering how Confucianism fits into the current debates on universal norms and particularly Asian norms and values, engaging with the pertinent discussions in this book about

globalizing the study of regionalism and IR. Second, we reflect on the ways in which Confucianism has evolved over time and maintained its relevance for Chinese contemporary political thought. Finally, we contextualize the Confucian references of Xi's administration by locating them within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has come to define Xi's presidency. In short, we argue that a more nuanced understanding of Confucianist thought enriches our understanding of China's contemporary foreign politics and, specifically, how president Xi tries to appeal to the domestic and regional, as well as global audiences.

Asian values and Confucianism

Are norms universal? Or is there such thing as Asian norms? Some argue that the structural exclusion of periphery regions from the process of formulating norms has inspired and even urged them to develop alternate views on normativity. Acharya calls this 'norm subsidiarity', which is a 'process whereby local actors articulate rules to defend their autonomy from domination, neglect, violation, or abuse by more powerful central actors' (2011: 95). Acharya follows Hedley Bull and other English School scholars in observing that the postwar international system has been largely Eurocentric and, therefore, Western states have narrated fundamental rights, norms and values of the time. Scholars engaged in globalizing IR problematize the lack of regard for history, for value-based assumptions that underpin societies, for context and particular experiences in these narratives and for questions on universality.

China's normative approach with its roots in Asian philosophy and in particular Confucianism, differs from the individualistic, Kantian-based ethics that are fundamental to the liberal approach that is dominant in the West (Freedman, 1996: 137). Nevertheless, given Asia's immense cultural, religious and political diversity, the idea of a shared set of distinctively Asian values is not accepted by all (Acharya and Acharya, 2001). Positioning Asian values vis-à-vis Western or universal ones can also be seen as unhelpful (Acharya, 2014). Such representation of a group or region is argued to obscure its diversity and merely serve the political agenda of the ruling elite, such as the ideological use of Confucianism to justify authoritarianism (Acharya, 2014; Lu, 2014).

However, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, argues there are 'clear and often sharp' differences between the values and traditions of the East and the West (Barr, 2000). Lee Kuan Yew sees principles such as collectivism as characteristics of a Pan-Asian

identity that unifies people for their economic and social good. He contrasted this with the European Enlightenment ideals of individual-oriented, universal rights of man (Barr, 2000). The dichotomy between the individualist liberalism and the more communitarian-based Confucianism reflects diverging views on how to balance the individual and the common good, as well as the social responsibility of the individual within a community. Having said that, both Western and Asian value systems are more complex than this neat dichotomy suggests (Sagoff, 1983), although they do underpin different types of regionalisms and regionalizations that have been developing in parallel to each other and at the same time challenge the European regionalism as a model to be emulated.

Regarding China's official sponsorship of the Confucian tradition, many critics have raised suspicions about ulterior motives behind the endorsement of the alleged peaceful and harmonious doctrine (Brady, 2012). Christopher Ford argues that Confucian political thought is encouraged by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)³ as a political move to discredit Western ideals of democratic pluralism and to justify continued one-party rule in China (Ford, 2015). According to Ford, in the 1980s China found itself locked in a battle for the hearts of their citizens, who were attracted to Western political ideals (2015: 1032). After market liberalization, Confucian political idealisms of 'pacifying the country and regulating the people' offered solace to those with ideological concerns and provided moral foundations for political rule (2015: 1034). As a result, the CCP 're-Sinicized' its legitimacy discourse through Confucian concepts. Ford claims that their 'selective use of Chinese traditional thought' is a propaganda tool to justify and promote a particular political privilege (2015: 1033). Another critic, Peter Ferdinand, describes modern Confucianism as a reactionary impulse to the ideological crisis that followed China's period of economic liberalization, reform and transition (Ferdinand, 2016). We would argue, however, that Confucianism has actually never left the socio-political regime, exemplified by, for example, the social credit system.

The study of Confucianism's influence on Chinese politics has predominantly focused on domestic politics, international justice or on human rights (Kallio, 2016), whereas our focus is on contemporary Chinese foreign policy. It is important to note here that while (foreign) politics and (personal) ethics are typically separated in Western thought, Confucian philosophy is based on value supremacy. Leaders are first and foremost meant to be good, moral persons (Angle, 2012: 26). Having said that, the consideration of Confucianism as an influence

on contemporary foreign policy is problematic as foreign policy as a concept or an object of study is entirely foreign to Confucianism.⁴

Scholars of China's foreign policy have generally interpreted the Confucian influence in Western terms (Fan, 2011: 2). For example, Anja Lahtinen describes 'Confucius institutes' as key ingredients of China's soft power (Lahtinen, 2011). Others have interpreted China's rise in relation to the Organski's world system theory, focusing on the extent to which China is perceived as a military threat (Mearsheimer, 2001: chapter 3). Alistair Johnston has studied China's military strategic culture, concluding that it is based less on Confucianism but rather *realpolitik* (Johnston, 1995: 249). In this view, the lack of a consistent pacifist pattern in China's strategic culture suggests that China prefers offensive uses of force, mediated by a sensitivity to relative capabilities. However, Feng Huiyun criticized Johnston's interpretation of the classic Chinese philosophical works, arguing that the selection of primary materials is disproportionately focused on the Seven Military Classics (Feng, 2007). In short, the study of China's foreign policy (especially by Western scholars) is still dominated by liberalist and realist approaches, typically interpreting the rise of China in terms of what is known from the political dominance and hegemony of the United States (US) (Mearsheimer, 2014). While both theoretical perspectives still represent conventional IR thinking, their limits have been widely examined. Realism is largely confined to explaining security concerns whereas liberalism is to China's economic development but neither have much to say about the wider political, cultural and ideological foundations of China's recent foreign policy (Zhang, F., 2015).

Scholars engaged in discussions on post- and non-Western IR and their focus on the concept of relationality (Jackson and Nexon, 1999) offer some opportunity to go beyond these limitations. Utilizing relationality seems to be a more fruitful way of examining how China engages in world politics as well as contextualizing how its role has changed overtime. Zhang Feng's examination on Chinese hegemony during the early Ming period and *in* and *through* relations with its neighbours provides an important contribution on Chinese practices of relationality (Zhang, F., 2015). For him, *guanxi* (关系), or social networks, the reciprocal commitment within these networks and reputation explain relationality in Chinese foreign policy rather than legitimacy as posited in the more Western-focused application of the concept.

Most contemporary neo-Confucian scholars– however, have sought to answer modern-day challenges by merging certain Western-based concepts with Confucian principles. They do so without determining

the dominance of either approach, which is also at the core of our effort to globalize the study of regionalism and IR.⁵ Stephen C. Angle groups these most recent Confucian authors under the school of neo-classical Confucianism, arguing that they respond to the modern-day challenges through Confucian political ethics with a sense of ‘ahistoricism’ (Angle, 2012: 15). Rather than looking at the ways in which the Confucian tradition has evolved over the years, neo-classical Confucians ask: if Confucius were alive today, what would he say about democracy, human rights or capitalism?

Building on the debate on Asian values as well as on the limitations of mainstream IR theories in analysing Chinese policy, we argue that a neo-Confucian perspective can enrich and complement existing approaches for theorizing China’s international engagement as well as our understanding of regionalism and IR. Our analysis of Chinese foreign policy from a neo-Confucian perspective contributes to the endeavour of engaging with theoretical conceptions from the non-Western or post-Western world. Next we examine some core concepts within Confucianism before turning to how they are applied by President Xi Jinping when he discusses his most prominent foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Core concepts in Confucianism

We argue that having a better understanding of some of the core Confucian concepts is crucial for understanding Chinese foreign policy including the BRI. One of these classical political concept is *tianxia* (天下), which refers to the entire world under the heavens. China’s world conception does not define clear state boundaries, but rather holds a more holistic understanding of the world as organized along concentric circles of influence based on the tributary system. This Sinocentric system was ruled by the emperor that held the mandate of heaven (天命). The emperor had to accept Confucian codes of morality and propriety for his legitimacy to rule and could appeal to subjects from the outer fringes through ‘attraction’ (Hsu, 1991: 15). Although this Sinocentric system was based on the belief that Chinese culture was superior, there was no conception of sovereignty in the contemporary Western sense. Differentiations in this system were not rigid or exclusive: external zones could become internal zones if they became culturally assimilated or politically incorporated (Hsu, 1991: 15–16).

Therefore, interpreting Confucianism as a moral philosophy is still predominant among many scholars. For example, there is a classical

understanding that the moral character of a leader was of superior importance to his applied leadership (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 9–10). But morality in Confucianism is defined by one's behaviour towards others rather than to one's self. In particular, Confucianism honours the institutionalization of the Zhou Dynasty's religious, political and ethical codes (Yao, 2015: 435). Confucius believed that the way to bring an end to the chaos of his time and re-establish social and political stability would be to reanimate the traditions of the ancient sage kings, whom he credits for having ruled by observing ritual propriety and custom, rather than by rule of law and force. Indeed, the qualities of a virtuous leader hardly differ from the qualities that Confucius claims virtuous persons possess. This is because Confucius believed that virtuous governance (*zheng*/ 正) was preferred over ruling with penal methods or law as it would inspire the people, while punishments would not deal with the root of the problem (Hu, W., 2007: 481). Thus, through non-coercive means, excellent rule was meant to inspire correct behaviour by setting the right example. Confucius compares governing virtuously to being like the North Star, which 'dwells in its place and the multitude of stars pay it tribute' (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 76). Although many critics raise concerns about a system that relies on an individual leader's morality, the Confucian precepts rely on a role-based system of ethics that conditions both the governed and the governor to respect and protect each other's place so long as each fulfils their role. The ruled are only subservient to the ruler so long as he rules in accordance with the mandate of heaven (天命) and fulfils the duties of ensuring livelihood, shelter, education and security (Harper, 2010: 150–1).

In the *Analects*, the pertinent notion of seeing the essence of man beyond its organic being is a recurring theme. Unlike Western philosophers and their theories of worldly substances such as Descartes' dualism and Spinoza's monism, early Chinese thought did not perceive such distinctions. Instead, process and change are prioritized over stability (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 27). There is no urge for one ultimate truth or reality, as in Plato's theory of forms. What is more, Confucianism does not distinguish between heaven and earth as in the Judo-Christian tradition (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 27). Rather, as in Daoism or in Buddhism, *tian* (天), or heaven, is the world (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 47). It is anthropomorphized, and described to be more like an ethos than an accumulation of things or substances.

Other core Confucian concepts, such as *dao* (道) and *ren* (仁), are equally difficult to translate. For Ames and Rosemont *dao* is: 'the totality of things, is a process that requires the language of both

‘change’ and ‘persistence’ to capture its dynamic disposition’ (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 26). To interpret *dao* simply as ‘the way’ glosses over the importance of personal interpretation, influence and the dynamism of *dao* in making the journey one’s own, or even to lead (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 45). *Ren* is another core Confucian concept with many translations. It is, however, most commonly interpreted as ‘benevolence’ or ‘virtuous human’ but importantly also understood as ‘authoritative person’ or ‘authoritative conduct’ (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 48–9, 71). *Ren* encompasses one’s entire person, both physical and mental. In addition, *ren* suggests an understanding of humanity as shared, essential and inherent. It is not static. Rather, *ren* sees the (moral) character of individuals as continually growing, following individuals’ development with themselves and their communities.⁶ *Dao* is fundamentally linked to *ren* for Confucius. *Rendao* (人道) is a way of becoming accomplished but at the same time authoritative; as explained in 15.29 in the *Analects*, ‘It is the person who is able to broaden the way, not the way that broadens the person’ (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 46, 190).

Furthermore, in Confucianism our personhood can only be expressed through different relationships according to what is appropriate, or more precisely filial, such as son, mother or leader (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 48–9, 71). Confucianism also rejects an essentialist understanding of morality, and, unlike Kantian-based liberal ethics, does not present a moral practice. Rather, what is considered ‘good’ or ‘right’ behaviour is fundamentally relational and defined by what is considered appropriate in the very occasion (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 57). Despite this apparent rejection of essentialist morality, Confucianism allows for certain practices that are associated with an exemplary person or *junzi* (君子) (Wu, 1915). First, an exemplary person adheres to *li* (礼), translated here as ‘rules of proper behaviour’ or ‘customs’ (Wu, 1915: 3). *Li* is similar to social norms that give members of our societies a distinct role within their community. It includes all those meaningful roles, relationships and even institutions that facilitate interaction and foster a sense of community. A (authoritarian) leader must be a ‘road builder’ or a participant in creating one’s own path through the process of internalising *li*. Thus, to observe ritual propriety also means to engage in the personalization of the rituals, customs, institutions and values of the community. Having said that, personal refinement is impossible, and individual expression is arbitrary in the absence of such formalized roles, behaviour and institutions, according to Confucius. In addition, behaving in accordance with *xiao* (孝) or ‘filial piety’, is regarded as

a condition for attaining *ren* or becoming a person. Therefore, *xiao* demands more than just performing duties and having respect for elders. *Xiao* is obligatory and has to be unconditional.

Lastly, in Confucianism a community is understood quite specifically as a political entity with a vertical, rather than a horizontal, composition, as opposed to the traditional Western conception of a community based on social contracts and connection. The core of Confucian society is *guojia* (国家) or the state. The relationship between family ethics and political ethics can be observed from the definition itself, *guo* (国) being the state and *jia* (家) an enlarged family (Hu, W., 2007: 476). The vertical composition of the state begins with the smallest *jiating* (家庭/family), then *jiazu* (家族/kin), and then moves on to *guojia* (state), and finally to *tianxia* (the world) (Hu, W., 2007: 476).

China's contemporary foreign policy: a new type of IR?

China's foreign policy remains to be based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual, and peaceful co-existence. However, Xi Jinping is seen to have abandoned Deng Xiaoping's principle of 'laying low', in favour of a more proactive, cooperation-centred stance, especially in domestic politics (Wang, L., 2017). According to Zhang, this stance reveals that China has already adopted a Confucian-inspired strategy of inclusive relationalism to guide its foreign policy (Zhang, F., 2015). Furthermore, the current president has amassed a disproportionate amount of power in relation to recent and former presidents. President Xi has made a lot of references to Confucian concepts throughout his reign. Some have even likened his position to that of an ancient 'sage king' from the dynastic era and described him as having enlightened moral principles (Kallio, 2016: 3). Regardless, the core themes of China's contemporary foreign policy are embedded in what the Chinese Foreign Minister called China's 'new international relations' during a speech at the China Development Forum. Wang Yi (2017) declared that the 'new type of partnership' China advocates is deeply rooted in China's history and culture.

Wang's emphasis on increasing mutually beneficial and friendly relations can be viewed from the Confucian emphasis on establishing 'proper' relationships. *Ren* after all, was considered the highest relational quality (Zhang, F., 2015). We can also interpret the focus

on non-interference as aiming for harmonious living in relation to the Confucian value. Lastly, the preference for defensive strategies over offensive can be understood with regard to a Confucian-based preference for non-coercive strategies over violence and war (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 47). This 'new international relations' prefers a win-win, instead of a zero-sum game approach between states. The emphasis on partnerships based the principle of sovereign equality attests to that (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 47). Chinese foreign policy has also been advocating for openness and inclusiveness in global affairs. It welcomes all joint cooperation, in the form of exchanges, predominantly economic, and mutual learning. It also prefers a common and inclusive, over an exclusive 'circle of friends,' in spite of ideological or political differences. These latter points are reflected in Xi's prevailing advocacy for establishing 'a community with a shared future' (人类命运共同体).. Moreover, he highlights the benefits of such policy for all. More specifically, he refuses the 'benefits for one', 'winner-takes-all-approach' that is associated with the cold war mentality (Xi, 2017a). Arguably, the type of partnerships China advocates are meant to advance common interests so that the fruits of successful development can be shared. This point has also been stressed by Wang Yi (2017), who argues for valuing cooperation over an individualism. According to Wang, 'seeking self-interests to the neglect of others is both obsolete and counterproductive'.

Referencing Japanese aggression and its contribution to the war against fascism, China has learned from history that 'peaceful development is the right path, while any attempt to seek domination or hegemony is against the historical trend and doomed to failure' (Wang, Y., 2017). This point has been also made specifically, but not exclusively, in response to the debate on prospective Sino-US relations, by President Xi: 'those who want absolute security will find themselves only less secure' (Xi, 2017a). He also stressed that to avoid becoming a victim of hearsay, or self-imposed paranoia, judgments on this front should be based exclusively on facts (Xi, 2017a). For him the complementarity and interdependence of economic relations is key to Sino-US relations (Xi, 2017a). To illustrate this, he uses the imagery of the Chinese character *Ren* (人), or people, which is in a shape of two strokes supporting each other to explain the strategic, cooperation-based, view of China's relationship to the US. Therefore, China's increasing economic and political power should not be perceived as a threat to the US but as an opportunity (Xi, 2017a).

China's policy of mutually beneficial cooperation and global development accumulates in Xi's BRI project. BRI is built on the

Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road. Described as a public good provided by China to the world, this project is said to have benefits across the world and has become a symbol of China's trade governance. BRI refers to a collective of initiatives including development of ports, roads, railways, airports, power plants, oil and gas pipelines as well as Free Trade Zones. Alongside the infrastructural development, China also offers IT support, telecommunication and financial infrastructure projects. According to China Central Television news reports, the initiative is put forward by China to proactively cope with the profound changes of the current international state of affairs in the context of globalization (Wang, L., 2017). Through these projects BRI aims to link at least 60 different Asian, European and African countries. It purposefully evokes memories of the ancient Silk Road, which linked Europe and China as a major trade route over a thousand years ago (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2015).

BRI has also received a lot of disapproval owing to its involvement with countries such as Pakistan, Iraq, Syria and Myanmar. One key criticism is China's tendency to ignore human rights violations in order to pursue its economic interests (Maplecroft, 2012; *The Economist*, 2017). Another is that the BRI is seen as an example of neomercantilism. Those who belong to this group argue that China is pursuing a government-led globalization strategy that mostly accumulates wealth and capital for the Chinese nation through state-owned enterprises (*The Economist*, 2017). There have also been some concerns about how BRI enables China's authoritarian political system to flourish, having no opposition to its lack of sensitivity towards cultural, environmental and ethnic minorities issues. It has, however, also been compared with the Marshall Plan that revitalized Western European countries left weakened by the Second World War. China is critical of such historical comparisons: BRI comes with no political conditionality and it does not promote a (military) alliance according to the leadership (CLSA, 2015).

Zhang Yunling, a leading scholar of China's top public think tank, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, describes the project as yet another attempt by China to integrate into the global economy. He sees the BRI as an expression of China's grand strategy and long-term ambition to address regional inequalities (Zhang, Y., 2015) Zhang also claims that whereas the international system ought to facilitate China's effort to improve the infrastructure of developing economies through projects like the BRI, states such as the US are actively hindering

these efforts. He cites US opposition to the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a prominent example of such opposition, and US policy makers' belief that the AIIB is China's multilateral tool to facilitate BRI investments. Zhang claims that the disapproval of the AIIB is essentially a rejection of the global power shift towards China (Zhang, Y., 2015: 11).

An analysis of Confucian ideas in the BRI

In light of all the criticisms levelled at BRI, our analysis enriches the current understanding of Xi's foreign policy with reference to (neo-)Confucian concepts and ideas. Criticisms such as the Chinese government's handling of human rights concerns, the dominance of Chinese state-owned enterprises and profit-losing projects reflect the challenges faced by the Chinese governments and companies involved in BRI. These are in addition to the sharp domestic economic slowdown, the shrinking Chinese foreign exchange reserve and external opposition against BRI by powerful Western states such as the US, all of which make BRI undesirable. Thus, the Chinese government is highly motivated to beef up support for BRI projects through its foreign policy and to make it appealing to the countries involved in the project. We argue that Xi's use of Confucian concepts and his subsequent framing of China's foreign policy serve exactly that purpose.

To illustrate our point, we analysed all of Xi's 166 formal speeches at important diplomatic occasions between 2013 and 2019 aptly titled 'Database of Xi Jinping's prominent speech series' on the CCP's official website.⁷ These speeches reflect China's main foreign policy objectives and its self-image in world politics. Forty-eight of these speeches directly addressed the BRI in which Xi quoted various Confucian phrases and sentences 102 times. He used a total of 26 Confucian phrases from eight different Confucian classics.⁸ In particular, we examine China's perception, aspiration and ambition for the BRI and how Xi has framed them through these Confucian phrases. There are inherent limitations to such analysis. We focus on rhetoric and not on the implementation of BRI projects, nor on the way the audience receives this rhetoric. In turn, we aim to understand the utilization of Confucian thought rather than testing its application. We follow Michael Shaprio's framework of discourse analysis when analysing these speeches (Shaprio, 1989). By doing so, we focus on intertextuality, how these rhetorical devices shape the social world and global politics and thus, how Confucian thought is utilized to provide meaning for the BRI.

We divide the next section into five themes following Xi's speeches. These themes are: peace and harmony; a shared world; allowing and appreciating differences; virtuous governance or the 'kingly way'; and, finally, education.⁹

Peace and harmony

In Confucianism, harmony and a harmonious social setting is paramount. Only through that can one pursue *ren* most effectively (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 56–7). Although originally Confucianism emphasizes personal as opposed to public harmony, the lack of clarity or even territorial definition of a harmonious society could well be applied to a harmonious coexistence between states or even to world order (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 58). Therefore it is no surprise that two most frequently quoted Confucian phrases by Xi are 'in practising the rules of propriety, harmony is the most valuable (礼之, 和为贵)' (Xi, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2017b) and '(pursuing) harmony among ten thousand states (协和万邦)' (Xi, 2014a, 2015a, 2015c, 2017c).

Promoting 'harmony among states' and objecting against 'beggar-thy-neighbour policy (以邻为壑)' (Xi, 2014a, 2018a, 2019) often go along with advocating peace. To advance this, Xi quoted 'a warlike state, despite the large size, will eventually perish (国虽大, 好战必亡)' (Xi, 2014a, 2015e, 2015f, 2015g, 2018b) during his visit to Singapore, Pakistan, the Philippines, India and the US. By doing so, he attempted to ease smaller states' as well as other global and regional actors' apprehensions concerning the rise of China and its military expansion. Moreover, Xi also rejects hegemony. Instead, he promotes peaceful cooperation that is mutually beneficial. The Confucian phrase that is used by Xi to advance this point in the international arena is 'do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself (己所不欲, 勿施于人)' (Xi, 2014a, 2015g, 2017b). This is to demonstrate that China will neither pursue hegemony nor endorse any hostile actions against other states. Its rise will be peaceful.

Xi's stance can also be understood in reference to the Confucian concept of 'just war'. As Ni claims, the Confucian idea of peace emerged in a context of a non-ideal world (Ni, 2009). In chaos, the Confucian view is that war and violence are unnecessary because a sage king will rule with benevolence and in an exemplary way. However, in chaos, self-defence is allowed. So wars launched by virtuous and capable rulers whose aim is to restore 'the rightful order' and defend their territories with the support of the people against

hostile hegemons are allowed (Ni, 2009). This anti-hegemonic stance can also be seen as a response to the military interventions waged by Western powers in the name of human rights. This Confucian concept recurs in Mencius' reflections in the Spring and Autumn Annals where he claims that 'a hegemon uses force under the pretext of benevolence' (Lau, 1984: 287). In contrast, the Chinese president's harmony and peace rhetoric on the BRI implies a promise of a peaceful China that focuses on economic cooperation and development of the other states.

A shared world

Within a Confucius reading, the BRI can be understood as an ideal harmonious order that exists without any state boundaries (Wang, Y., 2017). The BRI is to increase China's 'circle of friends'. Chan argues that in Confucianism state boundaries can be conquered by the moral power of a sage king whose view of the state is based on an extended notion of the family (Chan, 2008: 65). Such emphasis on these filial relationships affirms that society is organized like a family: 'if being a good son makes a good subject, then being a good father makes a good ruler' (as explained in 12:11 in the *Analects*, Ames and Rosemont, 1998). In this paternalistic conception of the state and society, there is no real conception of state boundaries; therefore it could (hypothetically) include the whole world or even *tianxia* (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 47; Chan, 2014: 60). For this Xi uses 'all people in the four seas (here referring to the world) are brothers (四海之内皆兄弟也)' (Xi, 2015a), which vividly captures China's vision of the world as an entire family. BRI is set to implement and realize this vision. By October 2019, 137 countries and 30 international organizations signed various documents with China concerning the BRI (Liu, 2019). In addition, Xi encourages North American organizations and countries that are not part of the original route to also participate (Xi, 2015f).

In referring to the ideal world where justice prevails and where everyone receives social welfare, Xi often uses the Confucian quote 'when the great *dao* (道) way [here translated as social justice], is in practice, the world, *tianxia*, is common to all (大道之行, 天下为公)' (Xi, 2017c, 2017d, 2018c). Although the narrowness of this definition of 'justice' has never been explained in Xi's speeches, he has been explicitly raising it when discussing Arab countries' place within the international system, and also China's contribution to development. In both instances, Xi's aim is to highlight a Chinese view of a world order that could be equally shared by everyone (Xi, 2017c, 2017d,

2018c) Following on from this, Xi advocated a ‘*tianxia* outlook’ at the 18th Shanghai Cooperation Organization Qingdao summit, encouraging states to view the world from ‘the top of the mountain’ (so that the world seems smaller)¹⁰. Rather than explicitly claiming China’s central role in the world, Xi’s speeches imply that China plays a key and constructive role in creating a desired world that we can all share. In this context, the BRI could be regarded as China’s tool to bring all human beings together to form ‘the great unity in the world, *tianxia* (天下大同)’ (Xi, 2017c).

Allowing and appreciating differences

A world that is ‘shared by us all’, or a ‘great unity’ of human beings, certainly does not mean a homogeneity. Through the BRI, Xi encourages cooperation. He envisages such cooperation predominantly through economic means, based on inclusiveness and openness. At the same time he argues for peaceful coexistence that respects diversity. When Xi expresses China’s desire to create a world ‘truly shared by all’, he does not refer to the universalization of a particular political ideology or culture (Xi, 2015h). In contrast to Francis Fukuyama, who famously predicted the end of history and the victory of liberal democracy as the victorious ideology, China defends an understanding of ‘a shared world’ that does not require the homogenization of political systems or ideologies (Zhang, F., 2015). Xi often uses the Confucian term ‘harmony without homogeneity (和而不同)’ to express this viewpoint in his speeches on the BRI (Xi, 2014a, 2015c, 2017b).¹¹ To understand the preference for harmonization over homogenization, one must understand the Confucian rejection of absolutism in favour of the belief that what is ‘good’ (善/*shan*) is relational, and depends on what is ‘appropriate conduct’ (义/*yi*) on a given occasion (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 188–9). Therefore, Confucianism does not prescribe a kind of ultimate, finite form of government in the way suggested by Fukuyama, but rather encourages states to focus on their common grounds (Li, 2006). Although there are limits to this for global governance, acknowledging that values develop in specific historic contexts undermines the logic of spreading values. In turns, it challenges the UN for intervening in states under the pretext of defending universal human rights (Zhang, F., 2015).

Xi is not the first Chinese president to use ‘harmony without homogeneity’. In fact, Xi’s two predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, and the former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, have all used the term, yet for different audiences and in different international

political contexts. Jiang Zemin used it in his speech at the opening ceremony for the George Bush Senior Library in Texas in 2002 (Jiang, 2002). It was meant to encourage American audiences to accept and endorse China's political regime and social structure, which were both different from those of the US, instead of imposing the Western values and norms on China. Jiang's idea was echoed by several Chinese scholars as noted by Cao (2007). Wei Zonglei even claimed 'harmony without homogeneity' to be the guiding principle of the Sino-US relationship.¹² In his speech at Harvard University in 2003, Wen Jiabao went a step further, suggesting the use of the concept as an approach to solving conflicts among neighbouring countries within the international community (Wen, 2003). Hu, in his speech at the City of London, used it to point to China's claimed long-lasting pacifist tradition (Hu, J., 2005).

With the expansion of the Chinese economy, Xi's mentions of 'harmony without homogeneity' reach a larger audience. He has used it in several speeches at the UN and when addressing Indian, German, Burmese, Indonesian, Malaysian and British audiences (Xi, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2015c, 2017b; *People's Daily Online*, 2013). Hence, Xi calls for embracing the differences among all political regimes, economic models, social structures and cultural values.¹³ This matches China's consistent advocacy of 'non-interference', as well as BRI's overarching objective to connect different regions and cultures. With BRI, Xi promises to abide by the local rules and practices of the countries with which it cooperates and to respect their right to independently choose social systems and development paths (Xi, 2013).

Virtuous governance or the 'kingly way'

China associates its sponsorship of foreign and global economic development with the (self-)requirements for virtuous governance. The idea of virtuous governance originates from the Confucian concept of *ren* (仁). Xi often emphasizes the prominence of 'moral excellence (德)' and virtues, such as 'living up to one's promises (信)', 'righteousness (义)' and 'honesty (信)' in establishing interpersonal relationships, as a metaphor for interstate relationships in his speeches on BRI.¹⁴ These are not dissimilar to the list of priorities such as the common people, sufficient food, mourning practices, and the sacrifices devised by Confucius for heads of state (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 227). While excessive, self-serving economic interest is not justified in Confucianism, it is a misconception that Confucianism promotes a particularly conservative, inward-looking or provincial stance (Ames

and Rosemont, 1998: 126). By quoting the Confucian phrase ‘a person with virtues, *ren*, who wishes to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; who wishes to prosper, seeks also to help others prosper (己欲立而立人, 己欲达而达人)’, Xi demonstrates China’s intention not only to further its own economy but also to assist others’ economic development through the BRI such as in Pakistan and India (Xi, 2014a, 2015g). He stresses the significance of mutual benefit, ‘righteousness (义)’, above self-serving interest and ‘profit (利)’.¹⁵

Moreover, BRI is promoted as a strategy to remedy regional inequality. This economic interest is in accordance with the duties of a sage king to ensure the material wealth and well-being of his subjects (rather than being concerned with the desire to accumulate personal wealth) (Xinhuanet, 2016). In addition to collective memory of foreign encroachments during the Age of Humiliation, the notion of spreading *ren* through having good relationship with neighbours helps us in explaining China’s self-proclaimed role as regional power (Kaufman, 2011).

Seizing *ren* is also important for global governance. In his speech at the UN, Xi quoted ‘without bias and collusion, the kingly way is the good order (无偏无党, 王道荡荡)’ to demonstrate China’s determination to be fair in global affairs (Xi, 2017b). Here, being *kingly* (王道) refers to an international order that ought to be guided by moral forces such as rule of laws and fair regulations, in contrast to governing through hegemonic ways (霸道) (Hu, S., 2007). In this context, Xi focuses particularly on the importance of law in global governance.¹⁶ In his speech at the Arab League Headquarters, Xi promised to ‘stand at the right position and walk on the big way under the heaven [translated as doing the right thing by following fair rules] (立天下之正位, 行天下之大道)’. He spoke of commitment from China to fairness in global governance in general and to solving political and security conflicts in the Middle East in particular (Xi, 2016d). Playing a constructive, or virtuous role in global governance can only help China to achieve its desirable norms. Consequently, these are the standards China harnesses in the BRI.

Education

Besides trade and infrastructure constructions, the BRI intends to offer cooperation within the educational sector. This is done through the promotion of cultural exchanges (Xinhuanet, 2016). This desire relates to the Confucian emphasis on education, and on the understanding that teaching is the highest virtue of any influential person (Ames and

Rosemont, 1998: 161; Wong, 2001). In addition, Xi also endorses the Confucian commitment for studying (and practising)¹⁷ and for meritocracy (Hu Shaohua, 2007). In 2014, during his visit to India,¹⁸ Xi used two Confucian phrases on studying: ‘When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them (三人行，必有我师焉。择其善者而从之，其不善者而改之。)’ and ‘[pursuing] the extensive study of what is good, accurate inquiry about it, careful reflection on it, clear analysis of it, and earnest practice of it (博学之，审问之，慎思之，明辨之，笃行之)’ (Xi, 2014a). Through these, Xi shows the willingness of China to learn from India’s experiences and culture. This is a very humble gesture. Xi believes it to be necessary to ensure for the success of the BRI in South Asia, especially with rising scepticism about the initiative, particularly in India.

Conclusion

China’s foreign policy has seen a significant shift under Xi, Jinping to a more proactive set of policies that advocate mutual cooperation and global development. In this chapter, we have sought to broaden the understanding of this new Chinese IR by exploring how Confucianist concepts shape it. While some may argue that such principles are simply used by the Chinese leadership to justify an authoritarian system of rule, or to present itself at odds with Western ideals, we have shown that the dynamic and diverse philosophies of Confucianism reinforce the new Chinese IR but without completely opposing the West. The challenge, however, is inherent within the changing nature of the global order that contests Western hegemony and allows regional and global actors such as China to pursue a new form of IR. Therefore, citing foreign policy principles that are embedded in Confucianism and not in Western-dominated universalists norms is already problematic. It introduces new principles, new boundaries, new types of governance and different ways to consider relations between states.

In this chapter, we have used the BRI as the analytical locus. We have viewed it as the symbol of China’s foreign policy and expansion into global governance, albeit mostly economic. We have argued that peace and harmony, a shared world, allowing and appreciating differences, the promotion of a virtuous governance and the ‘kingly way’, and last but not least the promotion of education and exchange of ideas are the underlying principles not only for the BRI but also for the new Chinese IR. We have also stressed that the rhetorical use of

these principles and concepts go beyond Xi premiership. Xi, however, regularly justifies the tenets of the BRI through citing Confucius. Mainstream IR theorists may dismiss them as just rhetorics used by Xi to either convince his domestic audience to accept China giving financial assistance to other countries, or to offer the international audience a seemingly ideological challenge to Western norms in order to contest the current pecking order. We argue, however, that either way these iterations matter. Rather than relying on liberal, realist or even conventional constructivist understandings of IR, China's norm subsidiarity and interpretation of Confucianism must be taken into account to fully understand its changing foreign policy. Moreover, focusing on these iterations helps us to make sense the changing nature of the global order and to globalize the study of IR and regionalism. Essentially, we practise what we preach.

Notes

- ¹ There are several variations of Pan-Asianism; some trace it back to the 19th century as also examined by Alanna O'Malley in Chapter 2 of this volume. Many argue that it originated in Japan, and was later used as an ideological tool for Japanese military expansion in the 1930s and 1940s. Two famous Chinese advocates of this understanding of Pan-Asianism (or Asianism) were Sun Yat-sen (1920s) and Li Dazhao (1920s). Their positions are, however, different from that of the more commonly cited Wang Jingwei.
- ² The official English translation for this quote is debated. For other suggested translations, see *China Daily*, "Confucius Quotes May Greet Beijing Olympic Guests", or *China View*, "Backgrounder: Cultural Cons in Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony", http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-08/08/content_9053273.htm
- ³ The CCP has not always endorsed Confucianism. Mao strongly bashed Confucianism during the Cultural Revolution.
- ⁴ The same is true for our modern day concepts of statehood, boundaries, democracy and so on (see Chan, 2008: 68–71).
- ⁵ A similar point has also been made by Qin Yaqing and Astrid Nordin (2019: 602).
- ⁶ Although there are two different Chinese characters for the two different meanings of *ren* (benevolence 仁 and person/human 人), they are linked, which is clear from our following point on *rendao*.
- ⁷ The website includes all of Xi Jinping's formal speeches since he came to power in 2013. We analyzed all 166 speeches under the category 'diplomacy', which includes his speeches at big international conferences, hosted both inside and outside China, and during his visits to foreign states, as well as his articles published by foreign press and his interviews with them. They can be found at: <http://jhsjk.people.cn/result?type=108>
- ⁸ These quotes are not all from Confucius himself, but they all reflect various aspects of Confucian thoughts.
- ⁹ Three Confucian sentences do not fit into any of these groups, and thus we coded them under 'other themes', but did not include them in our analysis.

- ¹⁰ The original quote was as follows: ‘When Confucius summited Mountain Dong, the Lu State seemed small to him; when summited Mountain Tai, the entire world seemed small’ (孔子登东山而小鲁, 登泰山而小天下). Mountain Tai was the highest mountain in the Lu State, where Confucius resided (see Zhou, 2018).
- ¹¹ He also uses the term often in other diplomacy speeches that do not refer to the BRI.
- ¹² ‘和而不同’是中美关系长期稳定发展的关键’ (“‘harmony without homogeneity’ is the key to long-term stable development of Sino-US relationship”) (Wei, 2002).
- ¹³ He has also used other Confucian phrases to demonstrate the similar idea, such as ‘it is normal that objects are different from each other (物之不齐, 物之情也)’ (Xi, 2015a) and ‘ten thousand objects grow simultaneously without harming each other, different standards and norms coexist without contradicting with each other (万物并育而不相害, 道并行而不相悖)’ (Xi, 2017c).
- ¹⁴ Xi (2016a) quoted ‘make friends with someone because of his moral excellence (友也者, 友其德也)’; ‘living up to one’s promise is crucial among friends (与朋友交, 言而有信)’ (2016b); and ‘righteousness should be the quality [of a virtuous person], [a virtuous person] should accomplish things with honesty (义以为质, 信以成之)’ (2016c).
- ¹⁵ In three speeches (2015h, 2018d, 2019), Xi quoted ‘give consideration to both righteousness and profit, but take righteousness as the priority (以义为先, 义利兼顾)’.
- ¹⁶ Xi (2017b) quoted: ‘Law is the foundation of governance (法者, 治之端也)’.
- ¹⁷ Xi (2017b) quoted: ‘Those who are good at studying can thoroughly understand the reasons, and those good at practising can accurately detect the difficulties (善学者尽其理, 善行者究其难)’.
- ¹⁸ Among all of his diplomatic speeches referring to BRI, which are analyzed in this chapter, Xi has only used the Confucian quotes about studying during the visit in India.

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