

TRANSFORMING ASIA



Benjamin Tze Ern Ho

# China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism

## International Order and Global Leadership

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China's Political Worldview and  
Chinese Exceptionalism



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Asia is often viewed through a fog of superlatives: the most populous countries, lowest fertility rates, fastest growing economies, greatest number of billionaires, most avid consumers, and greatest threat to the world's environment. This recounting of superlatives obscures Asia's sheer diversity, uneven experience, and mixed inheritance.

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*International Order and Global Leadership*

*Benjamin Tze Ern Ho*

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*Benjamin Tze Ern Ho*  
*Singapore, March 2021*



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# 1 The Rise of China

## Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism

### Abstract

This chapter introduces the concept of Chinese exceptionalism as a framework for studying China's political worldview and international relations. It argues that a discourse of Chinese exceptionalism has permeated Chinese scholarly circles as a mode of political inquiry into China's international relations and vision of global order. Consequently it argues that a framework of exceptionalism provides a more comprehensive explanation of China's international politics and foreign policy behavior. The chapter also discusses the research design of this study, which is based primarily on elite interviews and discourse analysis. It concludes with an outline of the remaining eight chapters of the book, and how they relate to the broader theme of Chinese exceptionalism.

**Keywords:** exceptionalism, political worldview, international relations, global order, foreign policy

The rise of China as a major player in international affairs over the past few decades has generated substantial debate among scholars and policy makers in the field of international relations. As evinced by the Covid-19 outbreak, what happens in China now has international repercussions. More than that, Beijing's economic footprint, growing military presence, and political influence have raised questions and concerns about its long term intentions, whether it will cooperate or challenge the existing global order, and consequently how countries should respond, react, and relate to the current Chinese government.

Following the November 2012 assumption of China's top office by Xi Jinping, China's international prominence has become even more conspicuous, with many suggesting that it is now moving away from the previous "strategy of lying low" (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦) to take up a more active,

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even assertive, stance in international relations.<sup>1</sup> Linked to this is Chinese leaders' frequent emphasis over the last decade that China's rise would be peaceful, and that it would not become a hegemonic power.<sup>2</sup> According to Barry Buzan, this rhetoric of a "peaceful rise" represents an "indigenous and original idea deeply embedded in China's reform and opening up, and effectively constituting the core concept for a grand strategy. While not without its ambiguities and contradictions, 'peaceful rise' represents a potentially workable program, and a distinctive way of marking China's return to great power standing in international society."<sup>3</sup> The key question, as Buzan puts it, is whether China "seeks a stable and harmonious regional and global environment as a desirable end in itself, or merely as an instrumental goal to underpin its own development and rise [... is] peaceful rise just a transitional strategy, to be abandoned now that China is strong, or is it a long-term strategy?"<sup>4</sup> Buzan suggests the likelihood that China's ascension would be better characterized as a "cold peaceful rise," which would be "high in confrontations, alienating neighbors, and reinforcing the US position in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean."<sup>5</sup> This means that China is likely to conduct its international relations in "raw power political terms using threat and intimidation but avoiding hot war."<sup>6</sup> It is also unlikely to conform to the present international system, but will instead seek to refashion that system to its own advantage while also ensuring that it does not end up embroiled in costly conflicts that would affect its internal development and slow down its economic growth.

How do these discussions about China relate to the broader conversation on international order and global politics? According to Robert Gilpin, any change in the international system would inevitably also reflect a "new distribution of power and the interests of its new dominant members."<sup>7</sup> While this by itself does not necessarily lead to war and hot conflict, there is still a body of evidence<sup>8</sup> that suggests China's rise would pose a credible

1 The term *tao guang yang hui* is sometimes also translated as "hide brightness, nourish obscurity." The scholarly literature on this is vast and will not be exhaustively enumerated here. Some selected articles I have consulted include Zheng and Gore, *China Entering the Xi Jinping Era*; Poh and Li, "A China in Transition"; Chen and Wang, "Lying Low No More".

2 Information Office of the State Council, "China's peaceful development."

3 Buzan, "The Logic and Contradictions," p. 384.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 401.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 419.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 403.

7 Gilpin, *War and Change*, p. 9.

8 See Ikenberry, Wang, and Zhu, *America, China, and the Struggle for World Order*; Sutter, *China's Rise*.



challenge to the present international system, not least because of the new prominence of Chinese ideas concerning how the international order ought to be structured to benefit Chinese interests.<sup>9</sup>

What changes would we then expect to see in the existing international order as it adapts to account for China's interests and preference; more specifically, how would we expect China to pursue its objectives, and what are its ultimate goals? This is a topic of deeply divisive debate among international relations (IR) scholars. Realist scholars argue that, given the structure of the international system, China will not rise peacefully but will "attempt to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere."<sup>10</sup> Such a line of thinking assumes that the international system is universal – all countries perceive the world alike – and also that China's interests are fundamentally at odds with Western interests,<sup>11</sup> particularly in the Asia-Pacific region where they are being contested.<sup>12</sup>

Constructivist scholars who take Chinese culture and ideas (particularly Confucianism) seriously question the extent to which Chinese culture is inherently peaceful and is therefore able to constrain the Chinese government's actions. Those who are wary of Chinese intentions argue that the Confucian culture so frequently touted as antimilitary actually masks the Chinese practice of *realpolitik* and the government's expansive grand strategy, which is ultimately power-seeking.<sup>13</sup> Others perceive China's history (as shaded by Confucian culture) to have been largely peaceful before Western interference, and argue that the rise of China will herald an international order that is not Western dominated, but instead features China at the apex of the system.<sup>14</sup> Such an interpretation is also favorably disposed towards the tributary system, in which China "stood at the top of the hierarchy" and other neighboring countries sought to develop stable relations with it through assiduously copying "Chinese institutional and discursive practices."<sup>15</sup> As noted by Acharya and Buzan, Western IR scholarship was seen as arising from the European experience following the peace

9 Kupchan, "Unpacking Hegemony", pp. 19-61.

10 Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 360-413.

11 For purposes of this book, I will define the West in its broadest sense, one which places a strong commitment to liberal institutions, the rule of law, and the adherence to high standards of individual human rights. For a scholarly discussion, see Kurth, "Western Civilization, Our Tradition."

12 Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*.

13 Wang, *Harmony and War*.

14 Kang, *East Asia Before the West*.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 2.



of Westphalia in the seventeenth century, and thus should not be applied to non-European/Western states or entities which do not share the worldviews that order the Western experience.<sup>16</sup>

Liberal institutionalism sees China as taking advantage of existing global institutions and argues that its rise is in part due to the present Western-led international order, one that is “open, integrated, and rule-based, with wide and deep political foundations.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike previous hegemonic powers, the present international system has encouraged the entrance of other major powers and accommodated their presence. It is further observed that while the US “unipolar moment” would eventually end, the international order would likely continue. Such an arrangement is premised upon the role of international institutions as being able to “in various ways bind states together, constrain state actions and create complicated and demanding political processes that participating states can overcome worries about the arbitrary and untoward exercise of power.”<sup>18</sup> Under these arrangements, China’s rise would not necessarily lead to an unraveling of the international system, and there are a number of available bilateral and multilateral measures that could help ameliorate the possibility of some of the worst-case scenarios.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly none of the above schools of thought are able, in and of themselves, to adequately account for the complex dimensions of interactions between China and the rest of the world. While realist logic predicts with certainty that there will be conflict and war between the current hegemon and a rising power, Chinese leaders have frequently vowed to avoid that outcome and the increased frequency of Sino-American interactions over the past few years have gone some way to ameliorate its inevitability.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, with its emphasis on the construction of global norms that could limit China’s ambitions, liberalism assumes that Chinese elites have thoroughly “bought in” to the established global order and are willing to concede that the broader “good” of international society should take precedence over what they perceive to be the national interests. Yet, domestic interests – and the paramount goal of maintaining Communist rule – mean that Chinese leaders’ are sometimes required to act in an aggressive manner, particularly

16 Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*.

17 Ikenberry, “Rise of China.”

18 Ikenberry, *After Victory*, p. 35.

19 Liff and Ikenberry, “Racing toward Tragedy?”

20 The ongoing trade war between China and the United States may yet sway the pendulum back to the realist logic of the certainty of conflict. However, as of this writing the trade war has not led to actual hot conflict.

when China's international status and reputation is being challenged.<sup>21</sup> While constructivist arguments provide useful insights into how certain ideas and norms have contributed to Chinese thinking about international politics, their polarized predictions about China's behavior (i.e., it will be either benign or aggressive) suggest considerable ambiguity about whether ideational elements are sufficient in and of themselves to account for China's political behavior.

## The Argument: The Chinese Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism

Given the limitations posed by mainstream international relations theories for explaining China's behavior, this book seeks to examine China's political worldview, its vision concerning the international order, and its preferences regarding the rules and norms that underlie international relations.<sup>22</sup> To do so, this book introduces the notion of "Chinese exceptionalism" as a framework or lens that can better account for China's international politics and foreign policy. I argue that the Chinese political worldview (i.e., how it sees itself and how it sees the world) is that it perceives itself as being *exceptional*, that is, it is *good* and *different*, and that such a *perception has influenced its approach to the practice of international politics*. Such an exceptionalism *mindset*, I argue, provides us with a better understanding and more comprehensive interpretation of China's international relations compared to mainstream IR theories.<sup>23</sup>

In studying the Chinese worldview and its claims to exceptionalism, I am not suggesting that there is only one worldview, Chinese identity, or voice. Far from it. Nevertheless, given strict state (party) controls about what the "official" narrative of China should be, it seems appropriate to examine those narratives and, more importantly, how China's top leaders and key opinion

21 Deng, *China's Struggle for Status*. This is most clearly fleshed out in the "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy in the course of the coronavirus pandemic.

22 In this book, I define the term "worldview" (or *weltanschauung*) as the fundamental cognitive orientation of an individual or society, encompassing the whole of the individual's or society's knowledge and point of view. It involves both the perception of themselves (self-identity or self-view) and also how they see the outside world.

23 To be sure, Chinese exceptionalism is not the only way China seeks to distinguish itself from other major powers. For instance, the adjective "Chinese characteristics" is often used by Chinese leaders and policy makers to differentiate the Chinese worldview from others. However, this book emphasizes the importance of Chinese exceptionalism in China's political worldview.



makers use them to tell the story of China to themselves and to the world. By taking material, ideational, and structural factors seriously, this book seeks to *locate the key driver behind China's international politics as the sense of exceptionalism within the Chinese Communist Party*. By looking at the views of its top leaders and key opinion makers as expressed in their speeches and writings, I argue that a deep sense of exceptionalism is highly pervasive within the Chinese worldview, and that these dynamics of exceptionalism have shaped how China seeks to relate with the world. To be sure, Chinese exceptionalism is not the only factor contributing to the Chinese worldview concerning the global order, nor does it provide an exhaustive explanation that accounts for China's political behavior. Indeed, other factors such as political ideology, threat perception, and historical experiences have also deeply shaded Chinese thinking on international relations. However, I argue that none of these factors have had a more profound effect on China's political worldview than Chinese exceptionalism. This is especially so in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when China is seeking not only parity with other major powers, but also to surpass them (particularly the United States). By seeing itself as good and different, China not only seeks to emphasize its own brand of distinctive practices towards international politics, but also to differentiate its practices from and establish their superiority to those of the West. To this end, China perceives the existing international order as ripe for change and believes that it ought to play a more influential role while having others acknowledge its interests.

To clarify, I am not suggesting that I believe China is indeed exceptional in the manner of which it conducts its international relations and foreign policy. On the contrary, China has acted in a very un-exceptional way in various international political affairs. Is claiming exceptionalism then merely a strategy that Chinese leaders and policy makers utilize to promote Beijing's own interests? In my view, such an argument is also overly simplistic, for it assumes that the pursuit of national interests is devoid of any ideational basis. My view is that Chinese exceptionalism is an important element of China's worldview (although it is not the only factor, as I have highlighted earlier) that frames how Chinese leaders and opinion-makers think about the world. My objective in this book is not to build a new IR theory (exceptionalism or otherwise) that proposes to explain everything about China's international relations, but rather to use Chinese exceptionalism as a lens for comprehending China's political worldview and the extent to which this worldview is indicative of the thought-forms and ideas permeating Chinese society at large. Hence the importance of Chinese exceptionalism lies not in its ability to provide a singular explanation for Chinese political



behavior (indeed, counterfactuals and counterarguments naturally exist) but rather *as a paradigm for considering and evaluating the meaning and significance behind Chinese political narratives and international relations*. As observed by Deng Yong, China's international relations are best considered in terms of "interaction between domestic and international politics, between China and other great powers, and between China's rise and evolution of the world order at large."<sup>24</sup> In other words, China's views of itself and the world are closely intertwined. Instead of isolating one aspect of China's ascent as a great power (for instance its military growth or economic might) and using it to explain China's international relations, this study of the Chinese worldview hopes to incorporate a more *holistic explanation* in which Chinese interests are seen as interwoven with other political, social, and cultural factors which subsequently play out in Chinese domestic politics and international relations.

As a branch of Chinese political thought, Chinese exceptionalism (*zhongguo liwai lun*, 中国例外论) has also been the subject of Chinese scholarly analysis.<sup>25</sup> According to the Chinese sociologist Kang Xiaoguang, Chinese exceptionalism is manifested in two ways: first, through China's success in large-scale institutional change and growing international status; and second, by the successful preservation of the power of the Communist Party and the increasing stability of its political situation.<sup>26</sup> Kang further observes that in China the government (or the Party) wields a position of absolute dominance (*juedui zhudao diwei* 绝对主导地位) over society.<sup>27</sup> Kang is careful to clarify that while social behavior is not insignificant, to "understand the motives and behavior of China's performance" there is a need to "understand the Chinese government's way of motivation and behavior."<sup>28</sup> In a study of China's foreign policy Feng Zhang noted that Chinese exceptionalism represents an "essential part of the worldview of the Chinese government and many intellectuals [and] it can become an important source for policy ideas."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Chris Alden and Daniel Large espouse Chinese exceptionalism as a theoretical framework in their

24 Deng, *China's Struggle for Status*, p. 15.

25 See Cheng, "Zhongguo Qianjing"; Kang, "Zhongguo Teshulun." Kang uses the term *zhongguo teshulun* to describe Chinese exceptionalism, but using *teshu* (特殊) to mean "special" can be problematic, given its negative connotations in Chinese (i.e., "special" as "mentally challenged"), so the preferred term is *zhongguo liwai lun*.

26 Kang, "Zhongguo Teshulun."

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*

29 Zhang, "The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism," p. 307.

discussion of China-Africa relations, terming it a “normative modality of engagement that seeks to structure relations” that is geared towards ensuring “mutual benefit” and “win-win” outcomes at continental and bilateral levels.<sup>30</sup> This is seen to be on fairer terms compared to Western-African relations, which are perceived to be conducted on terms more favorable to the West.

A worldview emphasizing Chinese exceptionalism has historical antecedents. One study shows that during late imperial China such an understanding was used as a “cultural strategy to confront and appropriate the hegemonic representation of modern democratic power and Occidental civilization that was articulated on the basis of Tocqueville’s exceptionalist image of America and imposed by Western imperialism.”<sup>31</sup> What is different today is that China, is far better connected to the outside world than in its imperial past, its global reach going structurally much deeper, which holds wide-ranging implications.<sup>32</sup> As such, Chinese exceptionalism represents not just a cultural strategy to cope with the external imposition of hegemonic foreign ideas, but also, I argue, a means for Chinese elites to actively espouse their worldviews and promote China on the international stage. Chinese exceptionalist discourse possesses both defensive and offensive elements. As a defensive strategy, it allows Chinese leaders to defend Chinese actions on their own terms, rather than being compelled to respond according to universal rules that are considered Western-centric; as an offensive strategy, it legitimizes Chinese actions by emphasizing the positive aspects of China’s worldview. Such a worldview (and the use of “Sino-speak” discourse) frequently reference the past – and China’s history – as a starting point in order to express how Chinese elites see China’s future.<sup>33</sup> As observed by Callahan, “the discourse of Chinese exceptionalism is hardly unique; as articulations of American exceptionalism show, part of being a great power is celebrating the moral value of your new world order.”<sup>34</sup> Upon what basis, then, should the moral value of China’s purported world order be evaluated? To what extent does a Chinese world order offer a unique alternative – in that there is something about China, whether its history or its current position in the global order (or both), that marks the Chinese world order as utterly different from others? Or is it simply synonymous with a Sino-centric worldview, in which China’s

30 Alden and Large, “China’s Exceptionalism.”

31 Chen, “Reflexive Exceptionalism.”

32 McNally, “Sino-Capitalism;” Ajami, “China’s Economic Arrival.”

33 Callahan, “Sino-Speak.”

34 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

growing power enables it to coerce other nations to accept its view of the international system? These are the questions discussed over the course of this book.

## Exceptionalism in International Relations

A discourse of Chinese exceptionalism has gradually gained traction in scholarly circles both within and outside China as a mode of political inquiry into Chinese international relations behavior. Skeptics of this approach may pose the question: Do not all countries, with few exceptions, consider themselves exceptional in some sense? If that is the case, how would the concept of a specifically *Chinese* exceptionalism offer us new insights into Chinese political behavior? To this, I argue that this is precisely why Chinese exceptionalism is important. Unless we are prepared to argue that all countries consider themselves exceptional in the same way, then the differences that constitute the reason(s) for their self-perceived exceptionalism have to be accounted for. In other words, different countries consider themselves exceptional for *different* reasons. Some appeal to history; others allude to their superior model of governance; while still others see themselves as enjoying the favor of divine providence. In this book, I look specifically at China and how its exceptionalism is considered and how these considerations in turn shape China's political worldview. To this end, I argue that a country's sense of exceptionalism is crucial as both a means of *fostering national identity* (i.e., who are we) and the *framing of its international relations* (i.e., what should we do). In other words, the idea of exceptionalism is not simply a rhetorical device used to legitimize political leadership, but is also intimately concerned with the social, cultural, and political characteristics of states and their relations with others. Given the primacy of the United States in global affairs since the Second World War, much of the *existing* scholarly literature on exceptionalism alludes to the American experience.<sup>35</sup> Notwithstanding the challenges to the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one might view American exceptionalism as an "interwoven bundle of ideas that together represent an American creed or ideology" that continues to wield substantial traction in both the American public and American political culture, shaping how everyday Americans

35 Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*; Tomes, "American Exceptionalism;" Brooks, *American Exceptionalism*.



think about US power and influence.<sup>36</sup> American exceptionalism, as one study puts it, was not caused by “wealth, military force, or the capacity to influence events far from its shores” but instead by the “features of the human condition that arose [...] that became associated with the *idea of America* [emphasis mine].”<sup>37</sup> What were these “features?” According to Stephanson, they were rooted in religious sources, specifically in biblical notions of what it means to be God’s people in a promised land in which Providential destiny was manifesting.<sup>38</sup> He points out that “visions of the United States as a sacred place providentially selected for divine purposes found a counterpart in the secular idea of the new nation of liberty as a privileged ‘stage’ for the exhibition of a new world order, a great ‘experiment’ for the benefit of humankind as a whole.”<sup>39</sup> Very early in American history, Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* suggests that Christianity had exerted a deep and profound impact among Americans, particularly in how the notion of freedom was understood.<sup>40</sup> Of course, exceptionalism, as applied to the American experience, has also frequently been used as a point of critique; in Stephen Walt’s words, “by focusing on their supposedly exceptional qualities, Americans blind themselves to the ways that they are a lot like everyone else.”<sup>41</sup>

Be that as it may, there are important differences between political regimes, their respective systems of governance, and the outcomes (or consequences) of these systems. As Brooks puts it, “unless we are prepared to argue that all belief systems and institutional arrangements are equally likely to produce desirable outcomes in terms of affluence, population health, human dignity, and life satisfaction, then we must acknowledge that some are better than others.”<sup>42</sup>

What, then, can be said for Chinese exceptionalism? Following from the earlier discussion of the literature, I argue that Chinese exceptionalism – in the broadest sense – is associated with the *idea of China*. Seen this way, Chinese exceptionalism *can be defined as an interwoven bundle of ideas that together represent a Chinese creed or ideology that continues to wield substantial traction among the Chinese public and within Chinese political culture, shaping how Chinese think about China’s power and influence*. Such a

36 Tomes, “American Exceptionalism,” p. 46.

37 Brooks, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 3.

38 Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

40 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 43.

41 Walt, “The Myth of American Exceptionalism.”

42 Brooks, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 3.



creed or ideology conceives of China as being good and different: good in the sense that China's international politics and foreign policy are *superior* – *in a moral sense* – to others'; and different in that China has a distinct way of perceiving the world, one that is shaded and influenced by its cultural traditions and history. As such, Chinese exceptionalist rhetoric is frequently espoused to emphasize that China is different from others and that it is destined to be the center of the world (*zhongguo* 中國) while at the same time also celebrating the moral quality of China's international influence. For instance, the idea of *tianxia* ("all-under-heaven") promulgated by the Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang (whose thought I consider in the next chapter) features prominently in Chinese scholars' understanding of China's place in the world. Crucially, this difference is often emphasized as a *unique* Chinese contribution to global politics and is used to call into question the normative rules governing present-day international politics while presenting Chinese alternatives as morally better. According to Callahan, Zhao's attempt – as an instance – to present the Under-Heaven system as "the solution to the world's problems [entails a system] that values order over freedom, ethics over law, and elite governance over democracy and human rights."<sup>43</sup> Thus Zhao's desire to transcend the historical limits of Chinese tradition has the goal, as Callahan puts it, of "rethink[ing] China" to "rethink the world."<sup>44</sup>

This rethinking of China, I argue, takes place today through attempts to present China as an exceptional power, one which does not emulate the West but instead utilizes the cultural and ideological repository of its own traditions and history to distinguish itself from the West.<sup>45</sup> More importantly, Chinese exceptionalism serves to justify Communist party rule in a country that, despite its global reach and presence, remains a "partial power" in terms of influence.<sup>46</sup> In other words, the promotion of a Chinese world order (whether *Tianxia* or not) and the preservation of China's domestic order are intertwined vis-à-vis a single institution: the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP would be unable to articulate what an international order would be like if it could not achieve its domestic objectives; likewise, in order to achieve its domestic objectives, it has to ensure that the international order is favorably disposed towards China.

43 Callahan, *China Dreams*, p. 56.

44 *Ibid.*

45 See Callahan, "History, Tradition and the China Dream" for a critique of modern Chinese political ideology.

46 Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*.

One way to do this is for Beijing to present itself as an exceptional power that it is both different and good: different from the West (by being “inherently peaceful”), with a goodness derived from claiming moral superiority (by being the most virtuous, including first in whatever it does).<sup>47</sup> Given China's pursuit of national rejuvenation and international status, a moral (or ethical) basis is needed to avoid the criticism that China is pursuing growth at all costs. Chinese exceptionalism therefore provides a *conduit of discourse* for the Chinese government to achieve its objective of casting itself as a morally upright nation. This is done in two ways: first, by promoting a positive image of China which is peace-seeking, non-hegemonic, and therefore different; and second, to preserve the identity of “Chinese-ness,” which is desirable or good, against what it sees as subversive values (such as the rule of law, liberal democracy, and civil society) that have the potential to undermine the Communist Party's hold on power.

## The Chinese Worldview and the Global Political Order

The central question of my study is *what is the Chinese worldview concerning the global order and what are the norms and principles that China seeks to promote seeing itself as an exceptional power?* How does Chinese exceptionalism influence Chinese debates concerning China's role in the global system? To what extent can China claim to be different and good (i.e., exceptional) in international relations, and how successful has China been in utilizing such a strategy to both boost its international image and preserve Chinese identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

To answer these questions, I argue the following: first, that ideas have consequences; second, that interests influence choices; and third, relations (that are not necessary defined by power) affect conduct.<sup>48</sup> While this viewpoint places the study in the constructivist camp in terms of taking Chinese ideas and culture seriously, I also argue that the importance of the international system in both framing and possibly limiting China's choices of actions is also an essential point of analysis. Nor does it minimize the importance of power dynamics (informed by a realist worldview) in Chinese international relations. Indeed, the importance of political power features prominently in Chinese elite politics and frequently manifests

47 Callahan, *China Dreams*, p. 156.

48 Wendt, *Social Theory*, see pp. 92-135 and 313-366.



in China's foreign policy.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, it can also be argued that China's international politics entail much more than the pursuit of wealth and power; symbolic issues including Beijing's search for respect, status, and national pride also drive its foreign policy.<sup>50</sup>

This study's goal is therefore to locate the "recombination of processes," as Katzenstein puts it, that result from China's increased engagement with the world and the influence that these interactions subsequently have in China's international relations.<sup>51</sup> Chinese exceptionalism involves an interplay of forces (both ideational and material) that is aimed not just to legitimize Communist Party governance within China, but also to celebrate China (and the Party's) standing in the world – and with that the possibility of changing the global order. Further, there is a deep and ambivalent tension between the structure of the international system (which is largely Western-dominated) and Chinese thinking about what the international system ought to be like (i.e., less Western-dominated, with the introduction of more Chinese indigenous ideas). In addition, China wants to be like the West in terms of scientific knowledge and technological know-how without emulating the values of the West. Is this possible? Is it possible for China to achieve the former and not to some extent appropriate the latter? As highlighted earlier, many Chinese scholars seem to draw a distinction between China and the West in their articulation of Chinese identity, but are such differences "real" or imagined? Likewise, ideas and material structures are not inherently opposed, but instead interact with each other in a creative/dialectical manner where each influences, and in turn is influenced by, the other.

To analyzing what a Chinese worldview might mean, and whether Chinese exceptionalism has been successful in helping the Chinese government achieve its objectives, it is first necessary to examine the climate of ideas pervading Chinese society and how these ideas are incarnated in Chinese politics. Not least because of the opening up, Chinese society is far more ideologically diverse and multi-faceted than a straight-forward explanation of Confucian values or Marxist ideas might suggest. As Richard Madsen reminds us in his study of a Chinese village, the Chinese Communists' official obsession with Confucian ideas only provides "vague hints about how that official obsession might affect the beliefs of ordinary Chinese citizens."<sup>52</sup> Likewise, in Callahan's study of Chinese public intellectuals, it is surmised

49 Lampton, *Following the Leader*; Zhang, "Domestic Sources."

50 Deng, *China's Struggle*; Gries, *China's New Nationalism*.

51 Katzenstein, "China's Rise."

52 Madsen, *Morality and Power*, p. ix.





that China's civil society contains a "broad spectrum of activity that ranges from promoting the fundamentalism of the China model to [encouraging] more cosmopolitan views of China and the world."<sup>53</sup> While Chinese elites may work to project a particular Chinese worldview, how that worldview is interpreted, internalized, and acted upon, both within and outside China, remains open to debate.

## Research Design

My research analyzes how popular notions of the Chinese worldview concerning the global order influence China's international relations, with a particular focus on those informed by the idea of Chinese exceptionalism. By examining the discourse of various key actors and opinion leaders in China and identifying the worldview they bring into their work (speeches, writings), this book seeks to narrate how Chinese exceptionalism is understood and fleshed out in Chinese political practices and international relations. Instead of trying to get to the bottom of what the "real China" is or debating whether China's rise will be peaceful, I ask a more basic question: "what is going on here," and what does it tell us about the Chinese worldview.

In my research, I contend that China's assertiveness about its interests is due to seeing itself as exceptional and, more importantly, as "different" and "good" compared to other major powers, particularly the United States. Given its global prominence, a certain sense of pride and "Chinese entitlement" also color how Chinese leaders comprehend Chinese interests and its political relations with other states, especially those in Asia. In relating to the world order, China – as an exceptional power – wants to challenge and modify the present Western-led international order to suit its preferences and prescriptions concerning the rules and norms of the global system.<sup>54</sup> This may be done through the establishment of initiatives such as the security-related Xiangshan Forum, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, but to what extent are these initiatives able to provide China with the opportunity to not just express its preferences concerning global norms, but also more crucially also to promote what it sees as the proper form of the global system and its norms. Critics of exceptionalism would argue that "exceptionalism" is mostly rhetoric, and most nation states tend to think that way about

53 Callahan, *China Dreams*, p. 39.

54 Christensen, *The China Challenge*.



themselves. The question “how exceptional is China” would be also asked, especially by realist scholars, who generally view the pursuit of power as a goal applicable to all nation-states without exception. Given this, it is necessary to empirically demonstrate that Chinese state behavior is due not only to material interests, but also to a deeper commitment to certain ideational factors that are part of the Chinese exceptionalist mindset. In other words, as the argument goes, does Chinese thinking regarding international relations and global order contain a sense of exceptionalism, and if so, to what extent do these ideas influence how China pursues its international relations?

In this study, I use in-depth interviews and discourse analysis of both primary and secondary sources to test my claims. Areas of convergence in these sources are useful for illustrating exceptionalist ideas and how they relate to Chinese actions. Using in-depth interviews is most appropriate for providing a nuanced understanding of my subjects’ perspective. In-depth interviews give the following advantages: (I) they can pursue questions that are difficult to locate in documentary sources or everyday interactions, and explore such questions in intricate detail; (II) they permit an exceptional degree of flexibility, control, and detail in the pursuit of participants’ understandings; (III) the act to recover and analyze the agency of individuals; and (IV) they allow the mapping of the conceptual world of participants in ways that illuminate both coherence and inconsistencies.<sup>55</sup> I have mostly interviewed members of the Chinese academic community for this study; as recounted to me, Chinese government officials frequently toe the official line in interviews, while the Chinese academics are more inclined to speak their mind, and hence represent a richer source of information and ideas.<sup>56</sup>

Discourse analysis is used to uncover themes of Chinese worldview, global order, and exceptionalism that are prevalent in Chinese sources. These sources include speeches made by the top Chinese government leaders, Chinese scholars, and citizen intellectuals whose voices collectively illuminate China’s socio-political landscape. To take these comments at face-value would be naïve, but to be overly cynical and dismiss these voices as either government propaganda or the voice of a minority anti-government movement would be to jumping to an equally simplistic conclusion. As observed, discourses maintain a degree of regularity in social relations, produce both preconditions for and constraints on actions, and frame how actors think

55 Soss, “Talking Our Way,” pp. 127-150.

56 Interview with Singaporean diplomat formerly based in Beijing, March 31, 2016, London.



about the world.<sup>57</sup> Further, as identity and policy are constituted through a process of narrative adjustment and stand in a constitutive, rather than causal, relationship, it is important to examine how individuals in China relate to their external environment, and consequently how they think and act about issues.<sup>58</sup> Given that Chinese society is far from monolithic, there are varying levels of beliefs (some stronger, some weaker) about Chinese views of global order and exceptionalism among my research subjects and hence, to uncover the extent to which these different levels of Chinese global order, identity and exceptionalism interrelate with each other in China's international relations. My own fluency with Chinese culture and language provides me with some measure of cultural competence to make sense of the differences of meanings and representations embedded within the Chinese worldview concerning its brand of exceptionalism.

The lack of a quantitative aspect of my methodology may raise questions concerning its replicability or, for that matter, whether claims of exceptionalism are indeed falsifiable and therefore can be considered scientifically rigorous. Recent work on the nature of the self has generally destabilized the concept of the individual as having a "fixed, immutable, identity;" instead, the individual is considered to have a "narrative identity."<sup>59</sup> The stories told about themselves then become the basis for truth-claims by the individual and vividly shape the manner they comprehend the world. This is not to suggest that scientific precision using quantifiable indicators do not matter – where possible, I use quantitative analysis in the form of surveys – but I analyze these findings in reference to narratives, using a "person-centered strategy" to better make sense of what the findings mean to each situated individual.<sup>60</sup> In their study of the leadership patterns of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, He and Feng highlight the importance of leaders' belief systems for understanding the nature and policy of states in the international system. As they note, "leaders' beliefs moreover dictate the policy behaviors of states, as the different policy choices of states are the means whereby leaders achieve their strategic goals within the international system."<sup>61</sup> It is therefore necessary to understand the moral environment that Chinese leaders inhabit and from which they receive cues concerning how they should act. As the Cambridge philosopher Simon Blackburn puts it, "[Our

57 See Neumann, "Discourse Analysis," pp. 62-63.

58 Hansen, *Security as Practice*, pp. xvii-xx.

59 Elliott, *Using Narrative*, p. 1.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

61 He and Feng, "Xi Jinping's Operational Code," p. 217.



moral environment] determines what we find acceptable or unacceptable, admirable or contemptible. It determines our conception of when things are going well and when they are going badly. It determines our conception of what is due to us, and what is due from us, as we relate to others. It shapes our emotional responses, determining what is a cause of pride or shame, or anger or gratitude, or what can be forgiven and what cannot."<sup>62</sup>

Seen this way, one might argue that both Chinese views of global order and Chinese exceptionalism are closely linked to the Chinese moral environment. How, then, do Chinese scholars understand their moral environment (both within and outside of China), and consequently what are the key operating ideas and belief systems that shape how Chinese scholars think about the world? How are these ideas fleshed out and translated in the field of Chinese international relations? Indeed, as discussed here (especially in Chapters 2, 3, and 4), this issue of morality is an important element in China's international relations. Both Chinese leaders and scholars seek to project China as a "good" power and whose international relations practices are justified as morally acceptable. This is contrasted with the practices of the West, which are frequently touted as morally questionable, thus allowing China to legitimately claim superiority over the West. This book therefore seeks to analyze the concept of Chinese exceptionalism with regards to a number of important themes and topics relevant to China's international relations and to see how exceptionalism is being fleshed out, and consequently to evaluate the persuasiveness and usefulness of Chinese exceptionalism discourse to China's international politics.

## Book Overview

It would, of course, be impossible to exhaustively cover every aspect of China's political worldview and its relevance to Beijing's international politics and foreign policy. Instead, I will focus primarily on China's international politics and the events of the Xi Jinping administration (i.e., from 2013 onwards) and use them as a springboard to anchor my broader discussion of Chinese exceptionalism. Each chapter focuses on unpacking some of the key issues in China's political worldview and locating them in the context of the discourses and debates about conceptions of the Chinese worldview and claims to Chinese exceptionalism.

62 Blackburn, *Being Good*, p. 1.



The rest of this book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 looks at the study of the discipline of international relations in China and how Chinese international relations scholars try to explain China's political worldview in the conduct of international politics within an exceptionalist framework, or what is more commonly termed "Chinese characteristics." I examine the ideas promulgated by four Chinese scholars whose engagement in international relations through the use of so-called Chinese indigenous ideas underlies the bulk of present debates in Chinese IR theory. These ideas are underscored by a powerful conviction that existing international relations paradigms are mostly derived from Western culture and history and thus should not be applied to the analysis of Chinese international relations. Instead, there is a need to account for elements of Chinese traditional culture and historical experiences. By privileging a Sino-centric perspective towards international relations while also rejecting the tenets proffered by mainstream international relations theory (which they consider Western), these scholars demonstrate the existence of Chinese exceptionalism thinking as applied to the conceptualization of Chinese political thought and the Chinese worldview.

In Chapter 3, I explore how the Chinese worldview, particularly Chinese exceptionalism, shapes understandings of Chinese national identity. To do so, I use a sociological structure that builds on the concept of "liquid modernity" and explicate how this is played out in Chinese society. More importantly, Chapter 3 seeks to understand how the issue of Chinese national identity is intertwined with China's international relations. How is this national identity constructed to present China as a virtuous or "better" nation than the West? I also look at the relationship between the individual and the state and how the negotiation between national and individual identities plays out in practice. To what extent are these two identities co-constitutive or in conflict with each other, and how does this in turn affect the amount of "social capital" that is necessary for the proper function of Chinese society? I also probe the extent to which Chinese nationalism is able to offer the Party leadership the social capital required to create a shared sense of meaning and cohesiveness (*ningjuli* 凝聚力) within Chinese society. I question whether the Chinese government and the political system it establishes is able to contend with the forces of modernity and the dilemmas it would face in the coming years.

Chapter 4 focuses on China's view of itself (i.e., its national image) and how this view is presented to the outside world. More specifically, I relate how the projection of China's national image has the goal of telling the story of China as an exceptional power, and consequently the legitimacy of its



claim to global leadership. Through an examination of the speeches made by President Xi Jinping, I examine which political narratives and national images Chinese leaders seek to project to the outside world. I study the extent to which such images have been successful in presenting China as an exceptional power to both its domestic constituents and the wider world.

Chapter 5 looks at the high-profile Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) introduced by President Xi Jinping as an example of the Chinese worldview concerning regional/international order. In studying the discourse around the BRI, I uncover the themes that present China as an exceptional power and what these themes tell us about Beijing's political worldview vis-à-vis the West. In addition, studying the BRI will also provide us with important clues about how China – in its quest for global greatness – seeks to challenge the existing international system, and the associated set of ideas it purports to promulgate within its own theatres of influence. Given that China is frequently criticized by Western countries for being a global free-rider, these initiatives to a certain extent vindicate China's actions while simultaneously compelling China to stake a claim to regional, if not international, responsibility. If Chinese foreign policy is an extension of its domestic politics, however, such projects cannot be divorced from the internal prerogatives of the CCP. In this chapter I discuss the importance of economic statecraft in China's global diplomacy and public image, particularly the extent to which economics is understood as a form of Chinese soft power that can both procure political influence and help present China as an exceptional power. I also analyze both official and unofficial sources proffered by Chinese international relations scholars on the Belt and Road Initiative to examine how it is understood within the broader view regarding China's foreign policy and international relations.

Chapters 6 and 7 shift from focusing on the Chinese worldview itself to examining the relationship between this worldview and China's relations with its neighbors. To what extent is Beijing's international behavior accepted, or to phrase it in another way, has China's worldview been bought into by countries in Southeast Asia? How do China's neighbors interpret and understand the Chinese worldview and China's political actions? In Chapter 6, I focus on the two key countries of Vietnam and Indonesia. Given Vietnam's geographical proximity, historical ties, and ideological links with China, it is highly sensitive to Chinese actions within its periphery and thus provides highly contextualized insights into China's regional diplomacy. As one of Southeast Asia's major players, Indonesia is influential in ASEAN's decision-making process and its views of China are taken seriously, especially by Chinese leaders. Through a series of in-depth interviews with

policy-makers from these two countries, many of whom are well acquainted with political-security matters, I explain the complexities of how China is being perceived by its neighbors and the degree to which China's political worldview and ideas about the design of a proper global order are being accepted by others nations.

In Chapter 7, I focus on Singapore, a city-state with a sizeable ethnic Chinese population, and the scholarly discourse on China that emanates from its elite. If Beijing is becoming associated with a benevolent form of global leadership, then we can expect this to be reflected in Singapore's perspective towards China. Further, given Singapore's ethnic majority Chinese population, Singapore represents a good platform for testing and validating claims of Chinese exceptionalism. To what extent are Singaporean ethnic Chinese able to identify with China's political worldview and its claims of exceptionalism? In this chapter, I examine the ideas promulgated by three Singaporean public intellectuals whose reading and appraisal of China's international relations represent the existing views of Beijing in Singapore. I argue that at the crux of Singapore's perspective(s) towards China lies in the contestation of ideational, material, and structural factors that are linked to China's international relations, as well as in the extent to which China is perceived as exceptional – that is, good and different. In Chapter 8, I sum up my findings and highlight the implications of my study to understanding the future of China's international relations and its view of the global political order. I show that three key themes are highly pervasive throughout the Chinese worldview: (I) the Chinese Communist Party continues to wield significant authorship over the master narrative of China's political worldview; (II) much of China's international politics and claims to exceptionalism are defined in opposition to an imagined West (and the United States) that is seen as attempting to contain China's rise; and (III) China considers the international system and its associated rules to be outdated, and therefore wants to seek a greater voice in rewriting the rules to promote its own interests. I argue that for China's worldview to be accepted by others, it would have to demonstrate an affinity with the West and an appreciation of ideological differences in its international relations, instead of constantly presenting itself as non-Western. This would allow it to actualize the positive expression of what it stands for (rather than just highlighting what it opposes). Notwithstanding its claims to exceptionalism and being good and different from the West, I argue that the current Chinese worldview remains highly particularistic (or Sino-centric) and presents limited claims to universality, thus rendering its view of a desired political order questionable and potentially difficult to actualize in practice.



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