China’s Exceptionalism in International Relations

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INTRODUCTION

This research attempts to identify manifestations of exceptionalism in China’s long history and explain why and how different types of exceptionalism have arisen in different historical periods. The analytical approach is both historical and theoretical. It explores how international structure has interacted with perceptions of history and culture to produce three distinctive yet related types of exceptionalism in China. The implications of contemporary China’s exceptionalism - as characterized by the claims of great power reformism, benevolent pacifism, and harmonious inclusions - are drawn out by a comparison with American exceptionalism. While American exceptionalism has both offensive and defensive faces, Chinese exceptionalism is in general more defensive and even vague. While not determinative, exceptionalism can suggest policy dispositions, and by being an essential part of China’s worldview, it can become an important source for policy ideas, offer the ingredients for the supposed construction of Chinese theories of international relations.

This article begins with a brief analysis of the historical manifestations of China’s exceptionalism before identifying the main elements of the emerging version in contemporary China. It then discusses two questions crucial to understanding any country’s exceptionalism: ‘Why does it arise?’ and ‘How is it constructed?’ It explores the interactions of structural, historical, and cultural factors underlying the rise of particular types of exceptionalism in different historical periods, and contends that while China’s exceptionalism has an undeniable factual basis, it has been constructed partly by mixing facts with myths through selective use of history. The final section draws out the implications of China’s exceptionalism by comparing it with American exceptionalism.

The parameters of Chinese exceptionalism

Professionals of Chinese foreign policy have long recognized that China possesses a distinctive set of foreign policy principles derived from the country’s long historical experience and its complex political and cultural traditions. Sometimes peculiarity of China Excellence is described by such scholars as Barry Buzan (2010), William Callahan (2012), Chris Alden (2011), or when Samuel Kim (1998: 3) distinguishes between American exception in terms of Manifest Destiny and Chinese "exemptionalism ".

2
Recently, Chris Alden and Daniel Large, in the context of China-Africa relations, posit a form of exceptionalism characterized by the rhetorical claims of mutual respect and political equality. But their analysis is limited to a specific case and ignores other and more general aspects of China’s exceptionalism. Regarding them “China’s exceptionalism” is understood as a normative modality of engagement that seeks to structure relations such that, though they may remain asymmetrical in economic content they are nonetheless characterised as equal in terms of recognition of economic gains and political standing (mutual respect and political equality (Alden and Large, 2011: 21)).

If by exceptionalism is meant the unique qualities - from the particular set of political and social values to the special historical trajectory and foreign relations experience - that differentiate one country from another, then China certainly has its own version of exceptionalism. Many other countries, from the United States to Singapore, can also be described as exceptionalist. But because China is a rising great power, the specific character and quality of its exceptionalism matter more than those of most other countries, just as American exceptionalism has long been a prominent topic in the foreign policy literature.

In this work I try to show a Chinese version of foreign policy exceptionalism that contrasts with many key dimensions of American exceptionalism while also sharing some important similarities with it. The main purpose is to stimulate discussion on China’s exceptionalism by identifying and explaining the exceptionalist assertions that can be found in China’s copious historical literature, official documents, and intellectual writings.

These exceptionalist ideals have been in place for a long time, from imperial China through revolutionary PRC (People’s Republic of China) on to the present day. China is usually seen as ”free-riding” on the existing international order without clearly articulating its own visions and approaches (Marshall, 2011). While China’s foreign policy has been held back by a defensive mind set until recently, Chinese views of international relations, in the official, semi-official, and intellectual circles, are being developed at an accelerating pace and with growing originality.

The five years between 2005 and 2010 have marked the appearance of three distinctive sets of literature whose academic and policy influence is likely to grow: Firstly neo-Tianxiaism (tianxia is a Chinese term usually translated as ”all under heaven” (Zhao, 2005)), Secondly the project on China’s pre-Qin thoughts of international relations led by Yan
Xuetong at Tsinghua University, and, Thirdly, the "China model" literature with inputs from Pan Wei (2009) at Peking University and various other scholars.

Future historians might look back and identify 2005 as the year of the beginning of China’s cultural and ideological rise. Although a coherent Chinese vision is still in the making, we can no longer ignore Chinese ideals about international relations and their policy impact. Exceptionalism does not determine policy, but by being an essential part of the worldview of the Chinese government, it can become an important source for policy ideas.

* A historical perspective on China’s exceptionalism

It is impossible to understand the rise and significance of contemporary China’s exceptionalism without recognizing its historical roots and manifestations. An interesting genealogy exists among its varied expressions in three historical periods, as demonstrated by their historical linkages and ruptures. First part explores manifestations of China’s exceptionalism in the imperial era (221BC–AD1911) and the revolutionary PRC (1949–76).

* Imperial China

Imperial China’s exceptionalism was embraced in Chinese rulers and elites claim about China’s centrality and superiority in the known world as well as the claim about the benevolent and magnanimous nature of its foreign policy.

A Rather than being only discrete or accidental elements, the sinocentric claim represented the most noteworthy, consistent, and important dimension of the imperial discourse. It might also be labeled Tianxiaism, since China claimed Confucian moral authority over the known world (the tianxia) and since Chinese rulers identified themselves as the “Son of Heaven” (Rossabi, 1983:48).

Imperial China, at least for certain dynasties such as the Ming (1368–1644), also professed to offer peace and benevolence in its foreign relations and thus to confer order and stability in its periphery. Many Chinese scholars argue that the basic international purpose of the Ming and of the Chinese empire in general was to ‘share the fortune of peace’ with other polities by conducting a peaceful foreign policy (Feng, 2009:135). This expression “share the fortune of peace” also indicates another exceptionalist element, namely, China would include all other polities in its foreign policy domain and promote their development and prosperity under the influence and constraints of the Chinese civilization.
Imperial China’s exceptionalism, as epitomized by sinocentrism and Tianxiaism in world order conception, benevolent pacifism in policy conduct, and magnanimous inclusionism in foreign relations, can be briefly illustrated by the first rescript the first Ming emperor Hongwu (1368–1398) sent to Japan in 1369 (Rossabi, 1983:63).

Hongwu’s son the Yongle emperor (1403–1324) went beyond the sinocentrism and pacifism of this statement. He was earnest in giving largesse and hospitality to foreign policies in order to show nothing left out’ or ‘show no outer-separation’ (shi wuwai), thereby implying the admission of all other polities into the family of the Chinese civilization (Wang, 1968:36). This inclusionism, as well as pacifism, will reappear in contemporary discourse, though under new guises and with a different set of contents.

Revolutionary PRC

With the decline of the Qing empire (1644–1911) in the 19th century, China entered the so-called “century of humiliation”(Kaufman, 2011:3), beginning with the Opium War in 1839 until the founding of the PRC in 1949. Clearly, sinocentrism was no more because China was no longer the centre of the known world. But although China was now weak and vulnerable, and although the formal communist ideology was used to justify policy choices in ideological terms, a new form of exceptionalism nevertheless emerged with a new policy agenda. In many ways Mao and his comrades still regarded China as a ‘special country’ in the world, and they sought to re-establish China’s central, if not dominant, position in world affairs, informed above all by a palpable sense of China’s historical destiny and moral superiority.

This exceptionalism, China’s historical entitlement to great power status and moral authority was based on an interrelated set of assumptions and convictions deeply rooted in a particular understanding of China’s history and culture. Mao’s central assumptions appeared in the form of historical ‘lessons’ to be applied to policy formulation, particularly in terms of his strong aspiration to Chinese centrality and autonomy in foreign relations (Kirby, 1994). These were the familiar beliefs that as a great nation, China naturally occupied a central position in world affairs and must be treated as a great power, and that China’s special virtue consisted in the fact that its foreign policy was based not on expediency but on immutable principles that expressed universal values such as justice and equality (Levine, 1994:32).
China could claim moral superiority because it was thought that as a peaceful great power that had fallen victim to Western imperialism, China knew the plight and aspirations of all the oppressed and weak countries and would strive for the alleviation of their poverty and oppression. China’s habitual assault on “power politics” (Kim, 1994:404). The conviction was that China had been and was now again a great power with superior moral qualities and that as such it automatically commanded a moral high ground in world affairs and deserved the respect and deference from other countries.

The exceptionalism of Mao’s China might be seen as revolutionary sinocentrism or Tianxiaism, as opposed to their imperial precedents. Mao attempted to carve out a unique Chinese way of realizing worldwide communism by rejecting Western modernity and by drawing on China’s special historical and cultural tradition a unique mixture of China’s traditional Tianxiaist aspiration and the modern ideology of communism (Xu, 2010:67). In his later years, Mao practically believed that the centre of world revolution had moved to China and that he had become the leader of world revolution (Song, 2009). As a result, China began revolutionary diplomatic offensives on all fronts, promoting a China-centered “world revolution” by supporting revolutionary movements in Asia and beyond. One may note the subtle influence imperial sinocentrism had exerted on this revolutionary sinocentrism/Tianxiaism. Mao’s revolutionary ambition was to turn China into a land of universal justice and equality, while at the same time reviving China’s central position in the world and making it a model for other “oppressed nation” by supporting worldwide revolutions (Chen, 2001).

*Great power reformism*

Because the PRC government and elites have inherited the historical understanding of China as a great power, they take it for granted that, though it may be long and hard to realize, being a great power is China’s historical destiny and that a rising China will once again become a great power, or even a superpower, at least in economic terms. One commentator attributes China’s inveterate “great power dream” to an implicit sinocentric mentality influenced by the myth of imperial China as the “heavenly dynasty” (Ren, 2009:135). But, more importantly, the emerging discourse is more than just a normal claim to China’s great power status; it is increasingly animated by a prominent proclamation about the unique qualities of a Chinese great power.
This attempt to define China as a new great power is part of the larger political and intellectual project to construct China’s national identity, create China’s worldview, and develop a Chinese diplomatic philosophy for its foreign relations. A necessary task of developing such a philosophy is held to be the need to surpass Western theory and practice, that is, to show that China will not repeat the violent and disastrous paths of rising powers in Western history, that a rising China will strive to build a peaceful and harmonious world rather than playing the zero-sum game of power politics, and that China will provide a new ideal for the common development of all countries in the world. A rising China cannot just be a great power, which would make it no different from other great powers in history; instead, it must also become a “knowledge producer” by digging deep into China’s traditional historical and cultural resources, so as to be able to develop unique qualities for playing its role in the new era (Zhang, 2007).

Benevolent pacifism

The essential claim of contemporary pacifism is no different from its imperial predecessor. However, imperial Chinese foreign policy, having now been presented as an alternative to Western models, is utilized as the most important evidential support for pacifism today. It is frequently asserted that imperial China was peaceful and defensive and viewed wars only as a last resort. Chinese culture is usually held to account for China’s unique peacefulness. Traditional culture stabilized China’s internal and external relations through assimilation and integration of different peoples and cultures. Contrasting Chinese with Western culture, he claims that the former has contributed to ethnic integration inside China while the latter has given rise to numerous wars and conflicts in the global expansion of capitalism (Li, 1999:30).

Having established imperial China’s pacifist tradition, emphasized China’s agonizing experience in the modern world, and professed China’s intention to never inflict similar sufferings on other countries, the PRC claims that it will always adopt a peaceful foreign policy, will never threaten anyone, and will help to maintain world peace through its own development. This discourse pervades official and semi-official statements. A particularly famous example is China’s “peaceful rise” thesis propagated by the official articulations is the government’s 2005 and 2011 White Papers on “China’s peaceful development” (PRC State Council, 2005, 2011).
Specifically, the idea consists of a set of interrelated propositions. First, rejecting the legitimacy of the domination of one country, ideology, or approach in world politics, it advocates international cooperation and accommodation by adopting an open, tolerant, and inclusive attitude toward the multiplicity and diversity of political and cultural traditions in the world. China itself will seek further integration with the international system. Second, inclusionism refers not just to the acknowledgment of the legitimacy of different political and cultural traditions and the need to incorporate them into global governance, but also the position that all countries need to be included in a process of achieving common security, development, and prosperity based on open multilateralism and mutually beneficial cooperation. The objective is to realize common and universal security and development for all countries, not just for one or a few great powers. For its part, China offers to share the benefits of its development with other countries, accommodate political and cultural differences, and strive to create a “harmonious world.” This new inclusionism is already noteworthy and given that it is still in the early stage of conceptual evolution, it might become the most profound among China’s special claims about international relations once the associated ideas are fully developed. At this stage, it can be most effectively examined by tracing three recent discourses in China’s intellectual circles: the application of the ancient idea of “harmony with difference” (he er butong), the ongoing official discourse on the “harmonious world” (hexie shijie), and the popular “neo-Tianxiaism” (xin tianxia zhuyi) (Fei, 2001:1).

The term “harmony with difference” is often traced back to a famous passage in the Confucian Analects: junzi he er butong. In Confucian thought, he means harmony whereas "tong" means sameness. Thus the above passage can be rendered as “the exemplary person harmonizes with others, but does not necessarily agree with them.” Chinese scholars frequently argue that China’s holistic mode of thinking suppresses the assertion of individualism and promotes the harmonious coexistence of differences and is thus tolerant of other cultures and open to the inclusion of other traditions in a process of harmonizing differences. According to the distinguished sociologist Fei Xiaotong, the “harmony with difference” idea reflects Chinese respect for mutual understanding, mutual tolerance, and symbiosis of cultural diversity. This can certainly be seen as China’s exceptionalist problem-solving approach (Fei, 2001).
The current Chinese leadership has effectively exploited this idea for policy discourse. According to an official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chinese officials have extended and innovated the meaning of “harmony with difference” in applying it to the field of international relations. Now he refers to a state of harmonious and non-confrontational relationships and tong refers to the sameness in viewpoints. Thus he er butong can be presented as the principle that countries should conduct harmonious relations with one another while maintaining differences in views; at the same time, these differences should not compromise their harmonious relationship, friendly interaction, or mutually beneficial cooperation (Ding, 2005:29).

Starting with President Jiang Zemin’s 2002 speech, “harmony with difference” has found its way into major speeches Chinese leaders have made abroad, and has apparently been developed into the more wide-ranging concept of the “harmonious world” since 2005, heralding, as some observers call it, a new era in Chinese diplomacy (Ruan, 2006:3).

President Hu Jintao’s September 2005 speech to the United Nations summit is widely seen as the occasion when China articulated “harmonious world” as a unique Chinese concept and theory of international relations. His April 2006 speech to Yale University continued this theme and embodied elements of both pacifism and inclusionism. Scholars have quickly followed suit and begun to argue that “harmonious world” represents a new Chinese paradigm for world order (Wang, 2007:56). In this sense, it can be viewed as an important component of the emerging exceptionalism. Indeed, it is the clearest example yet of China’s harmonious inclusionism at this stage.

Almost concomitantly, at the unofficial level a neo-Tianxiaism has emerged with a similar though far more sophisticated proposal for the future world order. Zhao contends that the tianxia ideal has created the most peaceful and inclusive principle by seeking the maximization of cooperation and the minimization of conflict on the basis of acknowledging the world’s diversity. The tianxia is inclusive of every cultural or spiritual system, acknowledges the independent role of every culture, rejects seeing any other culture as the enemy, and creates universal values on the basis of cultural inclusion (Zhao, 2009).

Why China’s exceptionalisms arise

Looking back at the history of China’s exceptionalism, one can find interesting similarities and differences. Imperial China and the revolutionary PRC share different kinds
of sinocentric assumption, while revolutionary PRC and contemporary China share the claim to great power entitlement. As for differences, sinocentrism gradually lost its appeal and legitimate standing after the end of the imperial era; and revolutionary PRC, notwithstanding its professed adherence to the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, did not place great value on peace in its actual behaviour. But there is a striking similarity between imperial and contemporary China’s claims about pacifism and inclusionism. This demonstrates the historically and culturally bounded nature of China’s exceptionalism: a historical understanding of China and an allegedly culturally derived holistic mode of thinking which privileges peace and harmony. But history and culture, while exerting profound and subtle influences, do not by themselves determine the peculiarities of China’s exceptionalism.

Imperial China’s perception of its superiority and centrality may date back to the Shang period (c. 1600–1100BC), and the notion of a radiating civilization was part of a worldview that existed during the Zhou (c. 1100–256BC) (Di Cosmo, 2002:12). Two factors were most important in contributing to such a perception: the early development of the Chinese civilization and the absence of any rival civilization in its vicinity. Size and wealth all made China the natural centre of this East Asian world. Geography kept the whole region separate from West and South Asia and made it the most distinctive of all the great culture areas.

On the other hand, demilitarization was an important part of imperial ideology to hide the value or coercive effectiveness of war as a political, cultural, or social tool, contributing greatly to the myth of a peaceful China governed (Chen, 2001).

Moving on to the modern world and Maoist China, the greatest change was the transformation of China’s position from the center to the periphery of international politics. This put severe limits on the range and ambition of foreign policy, perhaps best revealed in China’s subordinate status in its relationship with the Soviet Union in the 1950s and early 1960s (Chen, 2001). Mao and his comrades were first concerned with gaining China’s great power status and restoring its autonomy that had been lost in the previous century. It was the first time in Chinese history that such a task had dawned on Chinese leaders, and this was above all informed by the wrenching contrast between China’s past greatness and its recent suffering, as well as a profound sense of China’s historical destiny as a great power.

Mao had imperial precedents in mind when devising policies for the new China, his desire for China’s centrality in world affairs was often explicit, particularly in his later desire
to lead the world proletarian revolution. The revolutionary sinocentrism of Mao might be interpreted as a new stage in China’s drive toward the center of the world, now intensified by revolutionary violence, in the larger process of the radicalization of China in the 20th century, which was itself a result of the loss of China’s centrality after the 19th century (Yü, 1993:125).

Today’s China is again facing a changing international structure. Although since the mid- to late 1990s Chinese analysts have characterized the world power configuration as “one superpower (the United States), many great powers (Europe, Japan, China, and Russia)” (Deng, 2001:348), they expect the rise of China and other countries to transform US unipolarity into some sort of multipolarity in which China would play a greater role. Maoist China’s quest for great power entitlement is now seen as being fulfilled.

During this structural readjustment, an important question as seen by Chinese analysts is how to prepare China intellectually for its new and expanding international role. Furthermore, the role of history does not simply lie in reminding Chinese elites of their country’s past greatness and future prospects, but also in providing a perceived contrast between China’s supposed peaceful foreign policy and the aggressive modern Western one. This has led to a strong desire to proclaim a Chinese development route different from that of the West. And it is why it is claimed that China would reform world politics in a more peaceful, cooperative, and harmonious direction by utilizing its own unique historical and cultural resources.

Confucianism is perhaps the most effective cultural resource that can be used to substantiate this claim. In addition to elevating China to the moral high ground, it is needed to dissipate the fear and suspicion about a rising China and to create a friendly regional and international environment for re-emergence.

Having explored why different types and manifestations of China’s exceptionalism arise, we must also briefly consider how they arise. The current exceptionalism arises in great part from Beijing’s desire to provide a strategic discourse, ideological justification, and intellectual support for China’s re-emergence as a great power in the modern world.

Implications of China’s exceptionalism

We shall now consider what the emerging exceptionalism might mean for China’s foreign relations. This may be best accomplished by comparing China’s exceptionalism with
the much-noted American exceptionalism. Moreover, just as “American exceptionalism cannot be understood without well-chosen comparisons” (Jervis, 2011:43), so the significance of Chinese exceptionalism cannot be grasped without comparison with other prominent examples.

American exceptionalism is the idea that, being morally and politically exceptional, the United States has a destiny and a duty to expand its institutions and beliefs - freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and capitalism. Its origins can be traced to at least four sources. The first is the religious idea of America as ‘the redeemer nation’ chosen by God to spread the blessings of liberty, democracy, and equality to others, and to defeat, if necessary by force, the sinister powers of darkness (Hodgson 2009, Kissinger 1994, Madsen 1998, Schwartz 2011). The second source is the perceived superiority of its liberal ideology and institutions. Great importance has America’s “geographically privileged position: far enough away from Europe and Asia to be able to be safe and uninvolved, yet capable of extending into contiguous territories easily and without much of a contest.” A related source is the so-called “American frontier” and the material and social “plenty” afforded by the country’s abundance of free land and the opportunity to settle and expand (Hoffmann: 2005: 226). These four sources - religion, liberty, geography, and material abundance- combined to produce American exceptionalism.

The most obvious difference between China and the United States, as many Chinese like to point out, is that theirs is a very old country, indeed a civilization, that measures itself in millennia, whereas the United States is a quite new country with a history not yet spanning a quarter of one millennium. The United States’s history is nevertheless quite long compared to many other contemporary states, including many in Europe. And although the United States is definitely a recent start-up compared with China, in one important sense, the United States is the oldest state in that it has a good claim to be the first modern state (Charles, 2013:51).

Since China aspires to modernity it is in this key sense younger than the United States. This difference is closely related to another one, that China rests on the cultural homogeneity of a people who have been in situ for a long time. China’s nationalism is therefore of the ethno-cultural type, which differentiates it strongly from the rest of the world in terms of “Chinese characteristics”. The United States, in contrast, is mainly a country of immigrants. Its nationalism is civic rather than ethnic, and combines with a multicultural identity. America’s civic nationalism also gives it a unique identity that differentiates it strongly from
the rest of the world. This differentiation is open and potentially inclusive, rather than closed and exclusive. For all of its many faults and hypocrisies, America’s exceptionalism and commitment to individual freedom does have considerable worldwide appeal. And alongside this exceptionalism is the fact that America’s multiculturalism allows many parts of the world to see them in some sense as represented in America. The American melting pot both homogenizes its citizens into Americanness, while allowing them to keep hyphenated identities as Mexican, Chinese, German, Korean and many other national types of American. In this area of identity and ideology, therefore, the US and China could hardly be more different.

On top of this deep intrinsic difference, lie equally big ones in the timing and historical conditions under which the two have conducted their exceptionalism. The trajectory of the United States began more than a century before China’s recent start, and the nature of international society has changed profoundly between the two periods of rise. In terms of modernity and industrialization, the United States was a late developer, along with Germany and Japan coming in the second round after Britain. China is a late developer, arguably in a fourth round, meaning that it is rising in a context in which the world economy as a whole is much more developed, and there are many other industrialized and industrializing countries rather than just a handful.

Most obviously the United States’s exceptionalism rose during a period in which great power wars were normal and regular occurrences, commitment to maintaining a global economy was thin and episodic, and empire building and racism were legitimate practices. China’s exceptionalism, in contrast, has risen into a world where nuclear weapons have made great power wars irrational, when empires and racism are neither legitimate nor fashionable, and when commitment to maintaining world trade, and a stable world economy more broadly, is stronger and more uniform.

Both the United States and China rose in a context where other large powers were also rising. But beyond that, the differences are great. The United States rose in a context in which there were major ideological differences amongst the great powers, and several of the rising ones were making extreme military and ideological challenges to the liberal status quo. Although the United States did not start any of the consequent wars, it was drawn into both of them as a key player. In a sense, the United States was the major beneficiary of the First and
Second World Wars, where it joined late, suffered relatively little damage or casualties, and was able to pick up the pieces after the other great powers had been destroyed or depleted by the conflicts. China is rising in a context where ideological differences amongst the powers are much lower, the institutional framing of international society is much stronger, and none of the rising powers seeks to overthrow the existing order by force.

Both China and the United States have experienced a shift from being relatively insulated from the core of the international system by distance and geography, to being inescapably enmeshed in it. While this might at first look like a similarity, it is in fact more of a difference. For the United States, the end of its insulation, although foreshadowed by the First World War, took place relatively late, during the Second World War, by which time the United States was already the leading great power. So during its rise, the United States had real choices about the degree to which it would engage or not with the rest of international society, and for the most part it chose isolationism. For China, this shift took place in the middle of the 19th century, when outside intrusion burst in on it and exposed its weakness. China suffered a major fall from power between 1840 and 1945, a traumatic experience that influences its current outlook heavily.

The United States has never had that experience, and even on the worst declines scenarios would have only a relatively mild version of it should it fall from global primacy during the coming decades. Since the foreign intrusions began, China has never had the choice to engage or not. It had only the choice about how and on what terms to engage, and sometimes, as during the period up to the 1940s, not even that. During its Maoist period China engaged by being oppositional to Western-global international society. Under Deng it chose engagement and peaceful rise, and has so far stayed with this choice.

A similar caveat, perhaps turning an apparent similarity into a difference, applies to the point argued in the previous section, that both China and the United States have benefitted from a relatively benign international environment and help from the leading power. While this similarity remains valid, the United States was always part of the Western identity and project, whereas China, despite its adoption of some features of modernity, remains culturally and politically strongly non-Western. This difference matters in any consideration of exceptionalism. The US took over from Britain, its nearest kin country in terms of ethnic stock, culture and ideology. This was perhaps a unique transition in that Britain could let its
world leadership go without feeling deeply threatened by the likely nature of the new global order led by the United States. If it came to such a transition between China and the United States, China would have to take over from a hegemon with a culture and a political order deeply different from its own. China’s adoption of capitalism would help a bit, making it easier than a transition involving a profound ideological difference, such as one from the United States to the Soviet Union would have been.

Both China and the United States exceptionalism rose in the context of a liberal economic order in which they were embedded. Neither rose in isolation. But while there are some similarities the differences are greater. In domestic terms, the United States has always had a foundational commitment to a free enterprise system. This is part and parcel of its liberal commitment to individualism and the market. China’s conversion to capitalism is very recent, and comes in authoritarian form (Witt, 2010). It remains unclear how deep its commitment to the market actually is, and this uncertainty plays into the doubts about what a risen China would be like. In this regard, China’s recent drift back towards favouring State Owned Enterprises is worrying. The Chinese Communist Party clearly has no interest whatsoever in liberal individualism, and feels deeply uneasy about the capitalist society that its hugely successful economic reforms are inevitably creating.

In systemic terms, the United States experience was rather mixed. The United States was unquestionably part of the world economy during the period of its rise, but it could be argued that the world economy before 1945 needed the United States more than the United States, with its vast resources, technological know-how and large market at home, needed the rest of the world. After decades of denying its responsibilities, the United States had eventually to take on the role of liberal hegemon after the Second World War. China has risen into a well-established and highly institutionalized liberal economic order. But China’s policies of reform and opening up made it far more dependent on the more advanced world - for a market for its goods, for inward investment, for political support, and in its own region, for successful examples it could follow, if not necessarily imitate. In this sense, and ironically, although both were dependent on foreign capital, markets and technology, China as a formally communist-led country seemed to lean on the capitalist world far more than democratically-led America with its special mission to spread the gospel of free enterprise.
In line with politically isolationist policies, both states were extremely reluctant to take on international leadership responsibilities commensurate with their rising power. This reticence was easier to pull off when their power was relatively small during the early phases of peaceful rise, but increasingly difficult as their relative power began to weigh significantly in the global balance. In the case of the United States, this policy left international society seriously under-managed during the first half of the 20th century, when the United States had for long been the biggest economy and Britain, especially after the First World War, was no longer strong enough to lead effectively. The United States was a reluctant entrant into both the First and Second World Wars, and having taken the lead in setting up the League of Nations, then abandoned it. China has only just arrived at the point where the question of matching its responsibilities to its power is becoming pressing, both for China itself and for international society (Buzan, 2010).

Despite their reluctance to take a leading role in international society, both a rising United States and a rising China nonetheless took firm positions in relation to it. Both joined the general framework of international society, but took dissenting positions on key points.

The United States, along with most of the Americas, was happy to assume the status of sovereign equality and thereby to convert European into Western international society. But the United States rejected the institution of balance of power, and via the Monroe Doctrine tried to set itself up as hegemonic in the Western hemisphere, not least by sponsoring the first International Conference of American States in 1889. It led the building of a regional international society in the Americas distinctive for its high degree of legalism and commitment to intergovernmental institutions. Because of their highly radicalised societies, the states of the Americas were also laggards in the early human rights campaigns against slavery (Charles: 2007: 66-74).

Since 1978, China has likewise sought to integrate itself into Western-global international society. Like the United States, it has taken a very strong line in favour of sovereign equality and non-intervention: both states are strongly sovereignties in their attitude towards international society. And like the United States it has resisted those parts of the prevailing international society that disagreed with its internal makeup, in this case most obviously the Western understanding of human rights. There are signs that China would like also to follow the United States in establishing regional hegemony, for example in its support
for narrower memberships of Asian regional institutions. But as explained above, China’s neighbourhood is much more complex than that faced by the United States, and it has so far had little success with this strategy (Buzan, 2004).

Perhaps more curiously given their isolationism, both countries projected rhetoric of international harmony, albeit of profoundly different types. The United States one was based on Universalist liberal ideas about harmony of interests through a market economy, and the peaceful effects of trade and democracy and individual freedom. Put simply, the United States view was that if all countries became like America, there would be a peaceful world. American exceptionalism was thus outward looking and open (Buzan, 2004:154). As noted above, American liberalism gave some reassurance, especially to Britain that once raised the United States would remain relatively benign. China meanwhile has retreated from the ideological universalism of its Maoist period based on Marxian notions of structural conflict rather than on harmony. Now it projects ideas of harmony based loosely on Confucian prescriptions about “all under heaven” (*Tianxia*) (Zhao, 2006:29). This has been allied to a strong interpretation of non-intervention, non-discrimination and the right of peoples to determine their own political and social development. In China’s case, harmony seems now more to be based on the respect for, and preservation of, differences, rather than the cultivation of homogeneity along some particular ideological line. Chinese exceptionalism is inward looking and closed, broadly summed up in the much used phrase “with Chinese characteristics” when describing almost any social, economic or political policy (Buzan, 2004:20). Again as noted above, this poses the problem for China that other powers will be suspicious about what happens after China has risen.

Rather less surprisingly, both China and the United States practiced protectionism during their period of rise. The United States practiced protectionism throughout its rise until the Civil War. In short, throughout its rise before 1914 the United States accorded high tariff protection to its economy, manufactures in particular such as textiles, iron, steel, glass, and tin plate. Nor did the situation change at all in the inter-war period. If anything, the situation deteriorated in the 1920s and got even worse in the 1930s with the onset of the depression. This kind of overt protectionism was further reinforced between the two wars when the United States became less open to inward FDI and a battery of legislation was passed to ensure that Americans retained control over an increasingly American economy (Jacques, 2012).
China has been more constrained by the rules of what is now a much more highly institutionalized global economy than that faced by the United States, and also by its need to keep export markets open. But China has never fully bought into the notion of an “open door“ broadly associated with the Western ideal of globalization. On the contrary, many of its instincts remain protectionist. Furthermore, though it may practice competition at home, its own economy and its own leading corporations remain very much under the direction of an all-powerful dirigisme state. Indeed, state-led enterprises continue to command the heights of the Chinese economy. Finally, as Western economists have for long been pointing out, China engages in more subtle forms of protectionism: not by putting up tariff barriers but rather by demanding technology transfers from Western investors for being allowed access to the Chinese market.

Despite their massive cultural differences, which might broadly be summed up as being individualist versus collectivist societies (Qin, 2011:117), American and Chinese societies have much in common including amongst other things a strong sense of patriotic pride (often verging on the chauvinist) married to a much-commented upon commitment to materialism and materialist measures of success. This may in part help explain America’s very real fascination with a modern entrepreneurial China that might have much more in common with the United States than some Americans would care to admit. It would certainly help explain China’s very deep respect for American power and American exceptionalism. In fact, one of the more obvious measures of this respect is where the new Chinese elite now seem to prefer to send their children (to the United States) to get a “gold standard“ education.

At the political level these broader similarities may also help us explain why both states are much inclined to bean counting in terms of their military and economic strength. This quantitative approach to power plays easily into zero-sum, realist, materialist ways of thinking about international relations, and could easily reinforce the views of those on both sides who either want to, or think they have to, construct their relationship as one of rivals or enemies. It perhaps also plays into some of their current policy similarities. Most obviously both have been obstructionist at global environmental negotiations on the grounds that they are unwilling to put restraints such as commitments to pollution control in the way of maximizing their economic development and GDP growth.
The key ideals of China’s emerging exceptionalism are peace and accommodation, and in themselves they are indeed very noble. They suggest, as various Chinese scholars are quick to assert, the pacifist and cooperative nature of China’s foreign policy. China is said to be able to become a new kind of great power different from the Western model. It would allegedly see other countries as the object of varying degrees of cooperation rather than that of conquest and domination as in Western history. It claims to reject the imposition of a particular ideology or value system to the exclusion of others, and such respect for diversity is said to derive from China’s traditional cultural principle of “li bu wang jiao” (The Chinese do not go to foreign lands to teach ritual) (Zhao 2009:124).

The “harmonious world” discourse is seen to embody China’s effort to develop itself into a sort of self-sacrificing great power for world harmony: the purpose is not to transform the world, but to create an attractive model through self-improvement so that others may be moved by China’s call for harmony and emulate it.

Furthermore, China’s exceptionalism can also be moralistic in its assault on “hegemonism” and the professed desire to uphold peace and justice in the world, though this moralism, having its source in perceptions of history rather than religion, is different from American moralism that tends to see world politics in dualistic terms. The comparison between American and Chinese exceptionalism should therefore not be read to suggest that the former is negative and the latter positive: both have their own promises and problems.

This leads to a further comparison on the stability and change of American and Chinese exceptionalism. American exceptionalism seemed to have had a stable foundation since the first century of the country’s existence. Each of the four main sources identified above - religion, liberty, geography, and material abundance - has a reasonable or even high degree of stability. Of course, in the course of ideological construction America also needed to create historical myths and go through several stages of national debates (Hunt, 1984), but by now the central ideas of American exceptionalism have become more or less stable. Structural or contextual factors may occasionally give American exceptionalism a different face, such as the blunt unilateralism and militarism under the George W. Bush administration, without, however, producing fundamental divergence from its core tenets represented by the historical offensive or defensive character.

The sources of Chinese exceptionalism seem far less stable. For example, China has never had the good fortune of America’s geopolitical advantage, not even during the imperial
age when most dynasties had to confront nomadic threats from the northern and western frontiers. The apparently stable factors of history and culture have influenced the exceptionalism of imperial, revolutionary, and contemporary China, but that does not mean that they have produced the same sort of exceptionalism. The richness and vastness of China’s historical and cultural experiences have created ample space for later generations to interpret their significance and relevance according to the needs of the time.

It is important to point out a different value of exceptionalism ideas for the construction of Chinese theories of foreign policy and international relations, which is a rising intellectual trend in China. The ideas of peace, harmony, and “leading by example” that are part and parcel of contemporary China’s exceptionalism derive from a very powerful intellectual tradition in Chinese history.

While American exceptionalism has created contradictions and complexities in their foreign policy (Hoffmann, 2005). Chinese exceptionalism, due to its developing nature, seems to be more reflective of the problems and tensions internal to China’s foreign policy. One problem is its overall defensiveness and self-righteousness, indicative of a self-centred view of how China’s foreign policy should be conducted and how the outside world should view it. The exceptionalist discourse betrays a persistent desire to present a particular view of how China has been in the past and why the outside world should accept such a view as the true representation of Chinese history and culture. There is a palpable sense of self-protection against perceived foreign misunderstanding, prejudice, and misapprehension.

CONCLUSION

This working paper has explored a main research questions about China’s exceptionalism in international relations: ‘What are the main elements of the historical manifestations of China’s exceptionalism and how different types of exceptionalism have arisen?’ I argue that historically China has not displayed a consistent type of exceptionalism. Rather, imperial, Maoist, and today’s China each displays its own type of exceptionalism, related in certain principles but distinctive in form. A historical-theoretical approach has enabled me to explore how international structure has interacted with perceptions of history and culture to produce distinctive forms of exceptionalism in different historical eras.
By identifying China’s exceptionalism, this working paper challenges the notion that China, after the disappearance of the formal ideology of communism from its foreign policy, does not have a new ideology to justify its policy.

Exceptionalism reveals a prominent aspect of China’s foreign policy traditions and provides a first window into the historical and emerging Chinese international relations ideals. By being an essential part of China’s worldview, exceptionalism becomes an important source for policy ideas, offer the ingredients for the supposed construction of Chinese theories of international relations, and provide a lens through which to view emerging Chinese visions of international relations. In fact, we can see exceptionalism as one among several competing intellectual schools for the ideational construction of China’s foreign policy, one that may become increasingly influential as a result of the continuing revival of tradition in today’s China.
REFERENCES


