

## Some Observations on China's Promotion of Confucianism

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## Abstract

In the aftermath of the Cold War, China has faced significant challenges to its powerbase, both conventional and unconventional. While the former arose as a result of the unipolar system created by US hegemony, the latter stems from a phenomenon commonly referred to as the 'China threat theory'. That is, China has been portrayed as an aggressive threat rather than a valuable emerging voice and great power. Constrained by both these challenges, Beijing has begun to promote *he*-based neo-Confucianism through the establishment of Confucian Institutes (CIs) abroad. With the use of unconventional means, the Chinese government is extending its 'soft power' in order to gain acknowledgement of its status as an emerging great power interested and capable of supporting global peace.

**Keywords:** China, Confucianism, Confucian Institutes, soft power, harmonious world

## บทคัดย่อ

ภายหลังสงครามเย็นจีนเผชิญกับความท้าทายสำคัญต่ออำนาจของตน ทั้งความท้าทายรูปแบบดั้งเดิมและความท้าทายรูปแบบใหม่ ในขณะที่ความท้าทายแบบแรกเกิดจากผลของระบบหนึ่งขั้วอำนาจที่ถูกสร้างขึ้นโดยการครองอำนาจนำของสหรัฐ แต่ความท้าทายแบบถัดมาเกิดจากปรากฏการณ์ที่มักอ้างถึงกันว่า “ทฤษฎีจีนที่เป็นภัยคุกคาม” (China threat theory) กล่าวคือ จีนถูกวาดภาพในฐานะภัยคุกคามที่ก้าวร้าว มากกว่าที่จะเป็นมหาอำนาจและสุรเสียงอันทรงค่าที่เพิ่งปรากฏขึ้นใหม่ ด้วยข้อจำกัดจากความท้าทายข้างต้น จีนจึงเริ่มส่งเสริมลัทธิขงจื้อแนวใหม่แบบเหอ (*he*) ผ่านการก่อตั้งสถาบันขงจื้อในต่างประเทศ ด้วยวิธีการดังกล่าวจึงเป็นการที่รัฐบาลจีนแผ่ขยาย “อำนาจอย่างอ่อน” เพื่อที่จะให้ได้รับการยอมรับถึงสถานะของตนในฐานะมหาอำนาจใหม่ที่จะให้ความสนใจและมีความสามารถในการสนับสนุนสันติภาพโลก

**คำสำคัญ:** จีน, ลัทธิขงจื้อ, สถาบันขงจื้อ, อำนาจอย่างอ่อน, โลกแห่งความกลมเกลียว

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## Introduction: conventional power versus unconventional threat

[T]he peaceful development of China is deeply rooted in its 5000-year culture. Confucianism lies at the core of the Chinese culture, whose essence is the emphasis of ‘preference of peace’ and ‘attaining harmony while reserving differences’. It means keeping harmony and variety at the same time.

Ambassador Zhang Yishan (2006)

Confucianism is deeply rooted in Chinese civilization, and the influence of its philosophy on Chinese lives is widespread. Therefore, it is clear that a meticulous examination of its tenets is required in order to understand the complexities of Chinese society. What is less clear, however, is its influence on Chinese foreign policies. A literal reading of what Confucius said may not at first glance appear noteworthy. However, the Chinese government has selectively applied Confucianism to support and nurture its position within the global hierarchy, that is, the Chinese state’s international status (see Figure 1). In this regard, Zhang’s statement above, in which he emphasizes the concepts of ‘peace’ and ‘harmony’, clearly and concisely captures the essence of selective Confucianism as well as the neo-Confucianism later promoted by Beijing. Nevertheless, before elaborating on these neo-Confucian concepts and functions, an examination of the international environment is required to consider Beijing’s motives for selecting Confucian principles as an imprint of China.

From a systemic perspective, following the end of the Cold War, the international system shifted to a unipolar one in that the US became the dominant nation with relatively unrivalled military and economic capabilities. Yet, by the 1990s, the rise of China had become apparent. Deng Xiaoping’s new development strategy for the 1980s, a ‘socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics’, had spawned a fast-growing economy (Naughton, 1995: 53-57). Meanwhile, in terms of military capabilities, the Chinese acquired nuclear power in 1964 (Rusk, 1968: 255-257), and Beijing’s spending on the military has risen significantly (Roy, 1996: 760). These developments not only fuelled US concerns over China’s potential challenge to its own international status, but also sparked anxiety among neighbouring states that worry about China’s influence over the region. As Goh Chok Tong, the former Prime Minister of Singapore noted, ‘It is important to bring into the open this underlying sense of discomfort, even insecurity, about the political and military ambitions of China’ (Roy, 1996: 760). These security concerns stem from China’s previous strategy of exporting revolution characterized as ‘armed struggle’ or ‘people’s war’, especially during the Mao era (Hinton, 1995: 350-352). Furthermore, to some extent, China is also considered untrustworthy by

communist states. For example, because of its dependence on Beijing, Vietnam has suffered negative backlashes affecting its national security. For the US, the Chinese economic boom and military modernization combined with China's natural attributes, namely an enormous population and expansive geography, have repeatedly provoked the notion of potential threat (Bunyavejchewin, 2011a: 387). It should be mentioned that concerns over China are not new and can be tracked in International Relations literatures since the first half of the twentieth century. Power transition theory, first introduced by A.F.K. Organski in the 1950s, has become increasingly more relevant to the issues studied by contemporary scholars and policy-makers. In 1958, Organski predicted that if industrialized, China would become a challenger to the US, '[g]iven the huge Chinese population, the power of China ought to become greater... through internal development' (Organski, 1958: 322). According to Organski, by the 1950s, China had already entered the stage of transitional growth, that is, the process of industrialization, and he warned that 'the rise of China... promises to be equally spectacular [as the Soviet challenge]' (Organski, 1958: 304). Moreover, the legacy of Cold War sentiments, namely anti-Communism, has never completely faded away (Bunyavejchewin, 2011b: 163). Instead, I suggest that it remains deeply instilled not only within US politics and society but also within the states characterized during the Cold War as members of the 'Free World'. Consequently, apart from its military and economic capabilities, it can be said that China's image as a threat is more or less tied to Chinese differences with the 'West'. These differences are values tied to ideologies passed through political regimes and expressed in development models, ultimately producing perceptions of 'otherness'. In other words, they result in what Hans J. Morgenthau called 'the demonological pattern of thought and action', which is not realistic but superstition (2006: 8-9). The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s made China the only existing 'other' power. Unlike the Soviet Union, China has been steadily developing its military and economy, despite domestic unrest, including the Tiananmen Square protests. In light of the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was inevitable that it would stand as the challenger to the American New World Order. Yong Deng (2008) argues that during this period, China's image as a threat intensified, and the phenomenon was later conceptualized as 'the China threat theory'. Deng (2008: 105) discusses the theory in terms of its analysis of international security and China's rapid economic growth:

On the security front, they focused on China's threat of force against Taiwan, irresponsible arms sales, claims to contested territories, military buildups, and a lack of transparency. Also, in more general terms, a dangerous Chinese expansionism is said to have manifested itself in power, intentions, and behavior. The aggregate material

power accruing from its phenomenal growth, coupled with an illiberal regime and nationalism, would lead to greater military prowess and aggressive foreign behavior. On economic front, its spectacular growth alone means that the PRC would out-compete other countries in areas where it enjoys comparative advantage, particularly labor-intensive manufacturing industries, and absorb much of the foreign direct investment that would otherwise be destined elsewhere. China's economic gains would be attained at the expense of its economic partners. Its mercantilist trade policy would undermine the international liberal economic regimes. At the outset of the new century, China's surging demand for natural resources has added fuel to international concerns about global competition over these finite goods. Its growing economic presence in Asia, Africa, and Latin America has also raised questions about the political, economic, and security implications of China's ever-expanding global reach.

This article asserts that China's struggle to achieve the status of a great power while conserving national characteristics has been the driving force behind Chinese foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Beijing's ability to meet this goal has been constrained by the China threat theory as well as systemic conditions. In terms of systemic conditions, the unipolar system narrowed Beijing's options. Rational choice models suggest that military force is no longer a favourable option since China's military capabilities are relatively inferior to those of the US and its allies, despite its progressive development. More importantly, the use of force would result in the deterioration of China's image and reaffirm the China threat theory. As a consequence, I argue that Beijing's priority is to search for any means to neutralize the threat image and instead produce what Joseph Nye calls 'soft power' by utilizing Chinese cultural resources. These resources, including neo-Confucianism, have provided China a means to achieve its goal within the international arena.

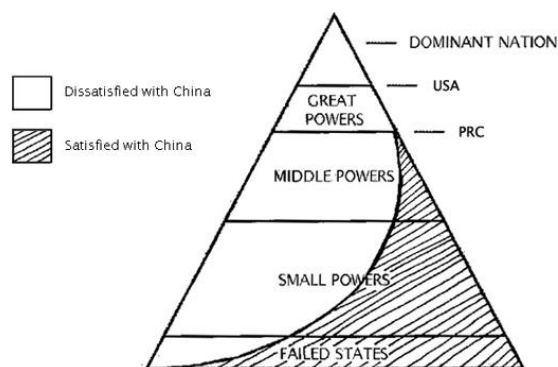


Figure 1 : China and the international hierarchy

Source : Adapted from Organski (1958)

### ***He-based neo-Confucianism as China's soft power resources***

Soft power, according to Nye, is 'the ability to shape the preferences of others' (2004: 5-17) by using 'a different type of currency (not force, not money) to engender cooperation – an attraction to shared values and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values' (2004: 7); hence, it is an attractive power. Not all great powers can acquire soft power, since it hinges upon soft power resources which, Nye explains, can be separated into three categories: 'its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority.)' (2004: 11). This article suggests that these resources are not disconnected, but rather reciprocally interrelated, as demonstrated in the case of China. Moreover, these resources do not always transform into soft power because both the effectiveness of any power resource as well as power itself depend upon the context of 'who related to whom under what circumstances – but soft power depends more than hard power upon the existence of willing interpreters and receivers' (Nye, 2004: 16). Notwithstanding its limits, the importance of soft power theory should not be underestimated since this unconventional power is even recognized by classical realists. For example, in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (1939), E.H. Carr discussed what he called 'power over opinion', which is 'not less essential for political purposes than military and economic power, and has always been closely associated with them. The art of persuasion has always been a necessary part of the equipment of a political leader. Rhetoric has a long and honoured record in the annals of statesmanship. But the popular view which regards propaganda as a distinctively modern weapon is, none the less, substantially correct' (2001 [1939]: 120). Organski refers to this type of power as 'persuasion', and he noted that 'persuasion is particularly popular with small nations who lack the power to coerce the great nations and whose ability to reward and punish is also somewhat limited, but great nations, too, may benefit from the judicious use of the arts of persuasion. They are always widely used, because they are so effective – and so cheap' (1958: 105). Given that China's foreign policy has been constrained by both systemic conditions and its negative reputation, neo-Confucianism—representative of China's political values and primary cultural resource—has been deployed to enhance Chinese soft power abroad. It is a low-cost but high-profile strategy that can be claimed as an apolitical project since, in a general sense, it has nothing to do with politics.

The section above discussed the environment from the perspective of the international system and the China threat theory. It argued that these constraints provided the motivation for Beijing to promote neo-Confucianism as part of its foreign policy, and that this move was predicated upon the idea that spreading its values and cultural resources would

advance its goal of becoming an acknowledged great power. Nevertheless, the question is why Confucianism and not Taoism or Buddhism, since China has an abundance of cultural resources. This article suggests that the reason derives from the characteristics specific to the Confucian canon. According to Qing Cao, there are two important elements of neo-Confucianism in Beijing's international strategy: *he er bu tong* (harmonious but different) and *he wei gui* (peace as the ultimate objective) (2007: 435). I contend that both the former and the latter are based on a principle of *he* (harmony); hence, the concept of neo-Confucian harmony should be carefully examined. In order to elaborate on the *he* concept, this article draws upon Ian Holliday's work (2007), which offers a comprehensive picture of *he*. The nature of *he*, according to Holliday, is 'a form of unity in diversity' (2007: 379) and thus keeps social order. In regards to cultural values in traditional China, Holliday cites Henkin, '... the ideal was not individual liberty or equality but order and harmony, not individual independence but selflessness and cooperation, not the freedom of individual conscience but conformity to orthodox truth' (2007: 379). According to Holliday, politics in China requires "unification of thought". While this did not entail total conformity, it did necessitate considerable social control'; thus *he* 'is to be built more from the top of society than from the bottom' (2007: 380). From this point of view, in terms of international politics, the *he*-based concept implies that China's foreign policy is enshrined within a universal norm of sovereignty rights, based on the Westphalian synthesis, rather than a liberal norm of individual human rights. Beijing respects socio-political differences amongst states since all states share the universal norm of sovereignty rights and, as Cao points out, is therefore implicitly adverse to the US-defined binary opposition of the world in terms of 'good' and 'evil' (2007: 440). *He*-based neo-Confucianism is concretely manifested in President Hu's proposal for a 'harmonious world', which includes the following ideas:

*Politically*, all countries should respect each other and conduct consultations on an equal footing in a common endeavor to promote democracy in international relations. *Economically*, they should cooperate with each other, draw on each other's strengths and work together to advance economic globalization in the direction of balanced development, shared benefits and win-win progress.

*Culturally*, they should learn from each other in the spirit of seeking common ground while shelving differences, respect the diversity of the world, and make joint efforts to advance human civilization.

*In the area of security*, they should trust each other, strengthen cooperation, settle international disputes by peaceful means rather than by war, and work together to safeguard peace and stability in the world. (Xinhua News Agency 2007)

As the above statement demonstrated, the *he*-based neo-Confucianism promoted by China's government tallies with peculiarities of the non-Western states whose domestic issues are regarded as their national security. Beijing has assured other states that the rise of China is peaceful; President Hu said, 'China will never seek benefits for itself at the expense of other countries or shift its troubles onto others' (Tao, 2007). At home, the Chinese government can represent neo-Confucianism with the label 'harmonious society' and promote it as a Chinese socio-political value, but wider audiences are crucial to make *he*-based neo-Confucianism a global value; hence, Beijing endeavours to make its soft power resources effective abroad. The concrete manifestation of this endeavour began in 2004, with the initiative to establish Confucius Institutes (CIs), non-profit public institutions that aim to promote Chinese language and culture worldwide.

#### **Confucian Institutes and Beijing's soft power plan**

Beijing's initiative to establish CIs is not apolitical. Rather, as Rui Yang points out, it is 'the most systematically planned soft power policy so far' (2010: 237). In addition, he indicates that 'the network of such institutes is a significant tool China has used to expand its international influence and promote its model of governance via the promotion of Chinese language and culture' (Yang, 2010: 235). The Confucius Institute Headquarters or Hanban, a public institution affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education, officially denies interconnectedness between CIs and soft power projection. In 2008, its director, Xu Lin stated that 'CIs are not projecting soft power, nor aim to impose Chinese values or Chinese culture on other countries. China just hopes to be truly understood by the rest of the world. CIs are designed to be an important platform to promote Chinese culture and teach Chinese language. In contrast, the soft power concept has been enthusiastically taken up by the Chinese government'. However, such a claim is far from the reality since Chinese political leaders have strongly called for enhancing the 'cultural soft power of the nation' (Jisi, 2011: 75). CIs are a tool for Beijing to promote *he*-based neo-Confucianism, its soft power resource, which is a part of China's directional strategy: struggling for acknowledgement of its status as a respected, emergent great power.

According to Hanban's website, by the end of 2010, 322 CIs had been established across the world. What is most interesting, however, is the spread of CIs across anti-communist states. For instance, 25 CIs have been established in democratic Southeast Asian states, and this tendency is increasing. The rapidly increasing demand for CIs, stoked by China's increasing economic strength and growing influence in international affairs through both bilateral and multilateral frameworks, surprises not only other great powers but also Beijing itself (Yang, 2010: 239).

Measuring the efficacy of CIs as a soft power resource is difficult because, as mentioned above, it is dependent on particular actors and contexts. However, it is plausible to assert that it has helped China to begin to change its image. A study conducted by Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang (2006) suggests that the perception of China as a threat has been gradually reduced in many states such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia (23-26). Currently, the CIs are functioning as a soft power project, in which *he*-based neo-Confucianism is utilized to achieve Beijing's goal. This article predicts that CIs will become an increasingly influential tool of Beijing's soft power strategy in the future.

### Concluding remarks

This article examined the Chinese government's motives behind promoting what the author has referred to as 'neo-Confucianism', a philosophy based on the *he* (harmony) principle. It argued that the motives derive from two core conditions of the international system. The first is the post-Cold War environment, which presents two distinct challenges: a unipolar system of US dominance and the prevalence of the China threat theory. The latter was a result of the former, that is, an outcome of the Cold War in which the US was the victor. Hence the domination of American values from capitalism through liberal democracy to the liberal norm of human rights has resulted in the construction of China as the 'other'. Thus, Beijing's priority is to escape from these constraints while struggling for international acknowledgment of China's status as a respected, emergent great power. The second is a characteristic of the Confucian canon—the concept of *he*. *He*-based neo-Confucianism promoted by Beijing in both official and unofficial tracks helps China enhance its international image as a peaceful rising great power. If *he*-based neo-Confucianism becomes a global value emphasizing a 'harmonious world', it will function as soft power and will help Beijing reach its goal. Nevertheless, the limitations of China's soft power in the near future should also be noted. In terms of the domestic sphere, public opinion, as Sittiphon Kruarattikan points out, could work against China's official foreign policy: 'emotional outbursts during the anti-American and anti-Japanese protests in 1999 and 2005 respectively remind us that China's



“Peaceful Rise” has been challenged by the violence and anger of its own people’ (2010: 6). Meanwhile, in terms of international affairs, despite Beijing’s insistence that *he*-based neo-Confucianism is an apolitical value, Samuel P. Huntington’s concept of the ‘clash of civilizations’ argues that Confucian China would be a threat to the West. This theory has become overwhelmingly powerful amongst scholars, policy-makers and populations in the US and Western European states. Finally, it should be kept in mind that the promotion of neo-Confucianism and the use of *he*-based rhetoric in Beijing’s foreign policy language does not necessarily guarantee the ‘peaceful rise’ of China; rather the *he* image serves to soften the realist nature of states (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Differences in *he*-oriented image of China foreign policy and its reality**

<i>He</i> -oriented image	Reality
Moralist	National security and interest
Idealist	Realist
Promoting ‘harmonious world’	Coping with anarchy
Explicit harmonious value	Implicit power politics

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