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# The Confucian Continuities of Chinese Geopolitical Discourse

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Andrew Latham

## I. Introduction

*I*n the existing literature, Chinese foreign policy is typically explained in terms of the pursuit of the “national interest.” Such “realist” explanations assume that these interests are the obvious and unambiguous correlates of China’s location in the regional and global political order, and that Chinese policymakers both understand these interests and pursue them in a rational and instrumental fashion. The problem with such an approach, however, is that the concept of national interest is simply too vague and subjective to provide a useful guide for understanding China’s actual conduct on the world stage. Chinese policymakers, like their counterparts in other countries, do not have an unmediated understanding of the global political-economic order; nor are China’s interests obvious, unambiguous, or simply derivative of China’s place in that order. Moreover, policymakers (in China and elsewhere) are not simply “rational actors” in the sense implied by political realism or sociological individualism—that is, purposive actors seeking to advance their (self-evident) interests through the utility-maximizing selection of the most instrumental means for any given end. Rather, Chinese officials are constituted through, and embedded in, social and cultural systems that produce the discourses, narratives, and frames through which they first make sense of the world and then act in it. To the extent that this is true, realist analyses of Chinese foreign policy simply cannot tell us much about the historically contingent and culturally inflected content of the national interest

as articulated and pursued by state officials. In short, realist analyses typically end up providing little more than incredibly thin accounts of Chinese foreign policy, accounts that ultimately fail to explain the recurring patterns of actual Chinese practice on the world stage. What is needed now is a way of theorizing China's national interests in ways that allow us to move from such thin forms of description to a more satisfying and useful "thick" conceptualization of those interests.

One way of doing this is to adopt the view that state action is, in fact, a form of social *practice* in which the national interest is first constructed as a category of practical consciousness and then put into effect by state officials—rather than reflecting the instrumental pursuit of objective interests by a rational actor. In this view, while the national interest is clearly an important explanatory variable in accounts of state action, it is neither objective nor self-evident. Rather, it is the product of an inherently social *interpretive* process that produces specific and meaningful understandings of what constitutes both the national interest and threats to the national interest. To the extent that this is true, understanding state action requires an understanding of the processes of representation and interpretation through which the national interest is constructed and produced. In this essay, I argue that such an understanding requires a recognition that this representational process is inherently *storied* and that the constitutive representations that govern social life are profoundly narrative in form. More specifically, I argue that the meanings that structure social action are produced through the pervasive and inescapable practice of knowing the world and one's place in it through the construction of *ontological narratives*.<sup>1</sup> These are the stories that actors construct out of available cultural and linguistic resources to create meaning out of the confusion, complexity, and disorder of lived experience. Simply stated, ontological narratives are *constitutive* stories; that is, they actually produce (rather than simply attempt to reflect) social facts. They do this by generating the specific forms of knowledge, consciousness, "common sense," theory, practice, and identity that allow people to understand—and thus act in—the world. At the level of *global* politics, such narratives take the form of *geopolitical discourses*, which can be thought of as meaning-generating stories regarding the social field called "international relations." As Gearóid ô Tuathail puts it, such discourses can usefully be conceptualized as forms of "discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft 'spatialize' international politics in such a way as to represent a 'world' characterized by particular types of places, peoples and

dramas.”<sup>2</sup> Like all ontological narratives, they are constitutive; that is, at the level of practice and consciousness, they organize the world into a meaningful place by populating it with actors, invest those actors with identities and (derivative) interests, and script the defining dramas of global political life. Thus, rather than simply providing a more or less accurate reflection or map of the “objective” realities of a particular world order, geopolitical discourses are in fact profoundly productive of that order.

Ideally, a study of Chinese geopolitical discourse would paint a detailed picture of the people, places, and defining dramas of world politics as narratively defined at both the elite and popular levels. Such a project, however, would be far beyond the scope of this short article. Instead, my rather more modest objective is to map the “root narrative” of Chinese geopolitical discourse. Its main argument is that there are ancient cultural and discursive currents that to this day exercise a powerful influence on Chinese geopolitical thinking and foreign policy practice. For lack of a better label, this current of thought can be labeled the “Confucian-Mencian” cultural narrative.<sup>3</sup> The following section traces the outlines of this discursive tradition, highlighting both its imperial roots and its principal contemporary manifestations. The essay concludes with some thoughts on the limits of a cultural approach to understanding Chinese foreign policy.

## II. The “Root Narrative” of Chinese Geopolitical Discourse

Historically, the Confucian-Mencian narrative depicted a Chinese world-system that was harmonious, hierarchical, and orderly. In this geopolitical imaginary, China was represented as the cultural center of the universe, entitled to the respect and deference of other polities and peoples with whom it was in contact: “In the traditional Chinese conception, a country’s cultural greatness determined its power in the world, so that a state with superior cultural achievements was entitled to esteem and influence among other states.”<sup>4</sup> Simply put, the Confucian-Mencian narrative created a hierarchical, Sino-centric world in which China enjoyed a “mandate of heaven” to dominate, exploit, and even assimilate those peoples whom the Chinese believed to be culturally backward.

Relations within and between China and its neighbors were depicted in the Confucian-Mencian narrative as essentially harmonious and orderly.<sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest that this narrative was blind to the

possibility of conflict and strife in world affairs. Rather it is to argue that it viewed conflict as unnatural and aberrant, a condition that was brought about only by moral failure or inept leadership. According to the Confucian-Mencian narrative, this essentially harmonious state of affairs could best be maintained through virtuous behavior, moral persuasion, and cultural example. The mandate of heaven could best be preserved if Chinese rulers conducted themselves with propriety and in a manner consistent with *li* (Confucian rules of social conduct). In the Confucian universe, such conduct not only legitimized political rule, it also enhanced the appeal of (subordinate) association with the Middle Kingdom. Similarly, appeals to peoples who had in some measure begun to internalize Confucian moral norms were seen as an effective means of preserving/restoring hierarchy and harmony. Thus, the moralizing that came to characterize China's external relations was "not so much an act of arrogance as [a reflection of] the natural order of things given the Middle Kingdom's opulence" and its narratively derived understanding of power.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, force played only a minor role in the Confucian-Mencian geopolitical discourse. Since harmony could be preserved or restored through moral suasion and example, armed force was viewed as a relatively minor instrument of statecraft. Indeed, the resort to warfare was viewed as an admission of moral failure and poor leadership. Should warfare become unavoidable, the narratively prescribed strategy was one of "maneuver" (*famou*) rather than battle (*fabin*), of defense rather than offense.<sup>7</sup>

It has been argued that the decline of the Qing Dynasty and the onset of the "hundred years of humiliation" triggered the terminal demise of the Confucian-Mencian geopolitical narrative, paving the way for the triumph of the essentially Western *Realpolitik* narrative that has subsequently structured Chinese geopolitical thought and practice. In this view, the relatively sudden transition from unchallenged hegemon to weak semi-colonial state, coupled with subsequent efforts to restore China's power and wealth, simply exposed the internal contradictions and delusions of the Confucian-Mencian narrative. Some also argue that the internalization of this essentially Western global cultural script was powerfully reinforced by the operation of an indigenous discourse (first promulgated by Xunzi) that—like Western Realism—emphasized the corruption of humanity, the conflictual nature of all human affairs, and the imperative of military self-reliance in an imperfect and very dangerous world.<sup>8</sup>

Careful analysis of contemporary Chinese foreign policy discourse and practice, however, suggests that this argument may be overstated. To be sure, the discursive and material realities of contemporary world order have rendered key elements of the Confucian-Mencian narrative anachronistic. For example, the historical narrative construction of China as occupying the cultural center of the world is simply not sustainable in the face of the contemporary distribution of cultural power in the international system. One can also find plenty of evidence to support the claim that the global cultural script of *Realpolitik* has largely displaced the indigenous Confucian-Mencian cultural tradition as the frame through which Chinese foreign policy officials understand and thus act in the world. Nevertheless, it seems that at least part of this narrative, what I call the “root narrative” of Chinese geopolitical discourse, continues to persist, albeit in slightly mutated form.

What are the key elements of this root narrative? At the risk of oversimplification, they can be summarized in the following terms. First, the narrative depicts China as a uniquely pacific, defensive, and non-expansionist power.<sup>9</sup> While almost all peoples would narratively construct their national identity in this way, the Chinese go further than most in that they view their civilization as being *uniquely* pacific. Similarly, the root narrative emphasizes the *defensive* and *non-expansionist* nature of China’s identity. In this geopolitical imaginary, China has never desired an inch of foreign soil. It has never attempted to conquer or colonize the peoples whom it encountered. In this respect, Chinese history is often explicitly contrasted with Western, and the travels of the Ming Dynasty Admiral Zheng Ho are often rhetorically mobilized to “prove” the point. Similarly, China is represented as a defensive nation. In this case, the Great Wall is the discursive touchstone, cited widely as the ultimate manifestation and symbol of the defensive nature of Chinese civilization. One Chinese official pithily sums up this pacific self-representation in the following terms:

The defensive nature of China’s national defense policy...springs from the country’s historical and cultural traditions. China is a country with 5,000 years of civilization, and a peace-loving tradition. Ancient Chinese thinkers advocated ‘associating with benevolent gentlemen and befriending good neighbors,’ which shows that throughout history the Chinese people have longed for peace in the world and for relations of friendship with the people of other countries.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the root narrative of Chinese geopolitical discourse continues to construct and represent China as a “Great Power,” with a world-historical role to play on the global stage. Historically, of course, the Confucian-Mencian narrative constructed China as a benevolent world power exercising hegemony over the pre-modern East Asian world-system. In this discourse, China was *the* regional power, superior materially and culturally to most, if not all, of its neighbors. Contemporary Chinese geopolitical discourse differs from this historical narrative in that it does not depict China as a current, or even future, hegemon. Rather, it portrays China as a nation in the process of recovering the Great Power status it lost as a result of a century of victimization and humiliation, when it was reduced to a semi-feudal, semi-colonial vassal state of Western and Japanese imperialists.<sup>11</sup> On the surface, this appears to be a dramatic change. However, while the narrative recasting of China as a non-hegemonic state is an important discursive shift, in fact it masks a deeper continuity in China’s dominant geopolitical discourse: a self-representation of China as a past and future Great Power destined to play a major role in world affairs. Put simply, while the dominant geopolitical discourse continues to depict China as a regional power with limited global significance, it also portrays China as a rising power entitled by virtue of its size, culture, and economic power to a place of pre-eminence in global politics. Significantly, military might is not thought to be part of the equation; rather, power is conferred by wealth and moral example. Ultimately, this is not that different from the self-representation of China at the heart of the historical Confucian-Mencian imaginary.

Finally, the root narrative of the Chinese geopolitical imaginary continues to emphasize the importance of morality as a source of power. In the Imperial era, this took the form of a belief that morality (virtuous behavior, moral persuasion, ethical example) was the single most important source of state power. In contemporary Chinese discourse and practice, morality is still viewed as a source of power and prestige. Thus, in ways that might well have been comprehensible to Chinese officials at any point during the last millennium, China’s foreign policy continues to be characterized by both a tendency to moralize on the international stage and a strong desire to be perceived as member in good standing of the international community. The tendency to moralize was perhaps most evident in the foreign policy of Mao during the 1950s–1970s, although it has by no means disappeared.<sup>12</sup> The impulse to play the role of member-in-good-standing of the international com-

munity has gained greater force since the 1980s, as evidenced by China's growing (and increasingly constructive) engagement in a range of multilateral fora (such as the U.N., WTO, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization). Viewed through a Realist lens, neither China's moralizing nor its constructive multilateralism is readily comprehensible. Viewed from a more cultural/constructivist perspective, however, the latter policy in particular makes considerably more sense. The convergence of a narratively derived (and essentially Confucian-Mencian) understanding of the nature of power, on the one hand, with a narratively derived (and essentially Confucian-Mencian) self-understanding of China as a Great Power, on the other, has produced a foreign policy "script" that inclines Chinese officials to pursue the current foreign policy of "generally status-quo-oriented constructive activism."<sup>13</sup>

### III. Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this short study has been to illuminate some of the cultural and discursive roots of China's dominant contemporary geopolitical imaginary. Its main argument is that Chinese foreign policy discourse today is powerfully conditioned by a root narrative that can trace its lineage to the Confucian-Mencian geopolitical discourse of the Imperial era. The way in which China's foreign policy officials understand China's national interests and subsequently pursue those interests on the international stage are largely derived from this narrative.

By way of conclusion, I would like to register two qualifications to my argument. First, nothing I have argued should be interpreted as suggesting that Chinese foreign policy officials are merely "bearers of culture" who automatically enact the geopolitical scripts entailed in this root narrative in specific diplomatic settings. Clearly, this is not the case. To begin with, it is not always obvious which scripts are to be enacted in any given setting. Social actors are invariably embedded within multiple, contested, conflicting, competing, and even contradictory discourses (e.g., the Confucian-Mencian and *Parabellum* paradigms) that shift over time and thus preclude categorical stability of action. As a result, while those warranted to act on behalf of the imagined community might enact one script in one set of circumstances (because it is required by their narratively derived sense of being at that particular time and in that particular setting), in another set of circumstances alternative narratives might be triggered that involve a different sense of identity/interest and that entail different scripts of

appropriate action. Additionally, state officials do not enact narratively derived scripts without reflection. Rather, they approach the social world *reflexively*, acting in terms of their *interpretation* of the relevant cultural rules rather than being governed directly by them. This means that social action cannot simply and unproblematically be read off a given script. Instead, understanding action requires a recognition that situated actors actively interpret both scripts and the circumstances within which they find themselves.

Second, nothing I have argued should be construed as denying the role of what some have called the *Parabellum* tradition in the definition of China's national interest. As J. D. Yuan argues, within the broader Chinese cultural tradition, there are in fact two discourses related to world order and foreign policy. The first, discussed above, derives from the philosophy of the Confucian scholar Mencius, who saw the world as harmonious, hierarchical, and relatively peaceful. The other, derived from the philosophy of another Confucian scholar, Xunzi, portrays the world as disharmonious, dangerous, and inherently conflictual. This latter discourse, typically referred to as the *Parabellum* or *Realpolitik* tradition, has clearly exercised a powerful influence over Chinese geopolitical discourse and foreign policy practice in both pre- and post-revolutionary China. To argue otherwise would be intellectually dishonest. But my argument does not depend on making such a move because the point I am trying to make is that the Confucian-Mencian geopolitical discourse does in fact continue to exercise a powerful influence over the thinking and conduct of the Chinese policy establishment, contrary to the arguments advanced by many Realist observers of Chinese international policy. Ultimately, then, I am not making an either-or argument. Rather, I am suggesting that a full account of the cultural and discursive framing of China's national interest and foreign policy practice requires an understanding that the two narratives are not mutually exclusive, but dialectically fused within the Chinese geopolitical imaginary. While this imaginary is necessarily constantly evolving in response to historical transformations both within China and at the level of world order, it is the constant *reinterpretation* of these *yin* and *yang* discursive threads against the backdrop of concrete historical circumstances that gives China its distinctive geopolitical discourse in any given era. ●

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## Notes

1. For an extended discussion of the ontological, as opposed to merely descriptive, nature of narratives, see Carr 1986.
2. ô Tuathail and Agnew 1992, p. 192; and Agnew and Corbridge 1995, p. 48.
3. The Mencian branch is sometimes referred to as the “idealistic” strand of the Confucian tradition. In contrast, the branch founded by Xunzi is sometimes viewed as the “realist” strand. See Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (London: Free Press, 1948), chap. 7 and 13.
4. J. D. Yuan, “Culture Matters: Chinese Approaches to Arms Control and Disarmament,” in *Culture and Security*, ed. Keith Krause (London: Frank Cass, 1999), p. 88.
5. For an extended discussion see, *inter alia*, John K. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).
6. Regarding the connection between morality/ethics and Chinese foreign policy, see Cho-yun Hsu, “Applying Confucian Ethics to International Relations,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 5 (1991); and Chih-yu Shih, *China's Just World: The Morality of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Col.: Lynne Rienner, 1993).
7. Yuan, “Culture Matters,” p. 89.
8. For the now classic statement of the argument that Confucian “realism” rather than Confucian “idealism” has always structured Chinese geopolitical thinking and strategic practice, see Iain Johnson Alistair, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
9. See Andrew Scobell, “China and Strategic Culture” (Carlisle, Penn.: U.S. Army War College, 2002).
10. “White Paper on China's National Defense,” Beijing Xinhua Domestic Service, 27 July 1998, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Reports-China Daily Report, 29 July 1998. Originally cited in Scobell 2002, p. 5.
11. Regarding this narrative and especially the pursuit of recognition and respect in Chinese foreign policy, see Yong Deng, “‘International Status’ in Chinese Foreign Policy,” in *China Rising: Power and Motivation in Chinese Foreign Policy*, ed. Yong Deng and Fei-Ling Wang (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); and Fei-Ling Wang, “Self-Image and Strategic Intentions: National Confidence and Political Insecurity,” in *In the Eyes of the Dragon: China Views the World*, ed. Yong Deng and Fei-Ling Wang (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).
12. See Yuan, “Culture Matters,” pp. 118–120.
13. Deng, “‘International Status,’” p. 62.