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# Towards a Confucian geopolitics: A critical remark

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## Abstract

This commentary reviews An et al.'s (2021) article, 'Towards Confucian Geopolitics'. It first acknowledges the article's achievement in highlighting the importance of reading geopolitics by excavating the Chinese traditions and cultural perspectives. However, the commentary also points out that An et al.'s article has failed to understand the complex nature of the Confucian ideology by differentiating between real-world political struggle and cultural idealism. The lack of an evolving political geography has made their reading of Confucianism as either an official ideology or spatialisation unable to correspond with concrete historical realities. Specifically, it has resulted in over-simplification in benchmarking Chinese history and the dichotomous understanding of Hua-Yi division. The commentary further points out that the above problem is a general issue with the culturalist approach to world politics.

## Keywords

Chinese foreign relations, Confucianism, geopolitics, international relations, world order

China's rise is posing both empirical as well as theoretical challenges to mainstream international relations (IR) and social sciences. As Kerry Brown has put it, determining what China is thinking is the 'philosopher's gold' in modern international relations (2017: 21–22). Lucian Pye's (1990) important statement about the nature of the modern Chinese state, that 'China is a civilisation pretending to be a nation-state', has implied the rich historical legacies for envisioning and pinpointing China's contemporary behaviours. Confucianism is certainly a profound tradition from which understanding about Chinese foreign policies and geo-strategic positions could be derived, and this is central to An et al.'s (2021) article.

Like most constructivist or culturalist approaches aiming at extrapolating from cultural legacies, An

et al. are slightly more ambitious. They argue that the Confucian tradition is the key not only to understanding the origins of China's geo-strategic thinking, but also the way that China's contemporary geopolitical practices are expressed and justified. An et al.'s cultural and historical approach builds on a critical awareness of the pitfalls of the extant analysis of Chinese foreign relations, the anachronic account that views China's geopolitics either as a 'communist' tradition or a result of converging with global values. They also imply that the popular

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claim that Chinese geopolitics is nationalistic is theoretically unfounded as the very form of 'nationalism' is not sufficiently unpacked. Their article proposes a 'synthesising' approach by bridging China's historical legacies with contemporary experiences, and it also promises to address the discrepancies between rhetoric and reality. If the concept of Confucianism is sufficiently addressed, the article is well positioned to provide an angle of seeing China's emerging global status from a Chinese vantage point, which is central to the ongoing postcolonial project of 'discovering history in China' (Cohen, 2003: 48; 2010).

An et al. pursue the argument in the article in three parts. First, they extrapolate from the Confucian classics a dimension of spatiality which they consider bears the potential for a geopolitical imagination. They then analyse narratives in contemporary Chinese geopolitics to highlight how Confucian elements have been embedded in different levels. Finally, they propose a 'hybrid-Confucian geopolitical theory' as a cultural explanation of China's geopolitics and foreign policy orientations. The article makes it explicit that Confucianism as a macro-historical ideology operates on both rhetorical and pragmatic levels, while it is fundamentally important that it features a substantial normative dimension for understanding Chinese geopolitics. Interpreting Confucianism is a challenging enterprise and the authors are conscious of the historical variation of the concept itself.

In order to set out the meaning of Confucianism, An et al. have identified a set of key concepts as the constitutive elements of Confucianism. Their understanding of Confucianism is not different from the mainstream narratives derived from the Confucian classics including *The Analects* and *Mencius*. Harmony, hierarchy, and order have altogether constituted the ladder through which a Confucian thinker proceeds from individual morality to world order. The first analytical section of their article has correctly highlighted the Han Dynasty as the historical moment at which Confucianism was centralised as the official ideology endorsed by the emperors. It has also suggested that the act of indoctrination of ideology happened in the meantime as the 'Confucianism-only' ideology was adopted by the state,

namely the idea of 'monarchical authority'. Here is a questionable omission in translation. The so-called 'monarchical authority' is annotated as '*junquan shenshou*' in Chinese, which may potentially be a misunderstanding as '*shen*' (divinity or god) is a concept largely absent in the Chinese tradition. '*Junquan shenshou*' (the mandate of god) is more of a concept for western absolutism (Anderson, 1979) while the Chinese-Confucian understanding is closer to the concept of '*tianyi*' (the mandate of heaven) in which the source of legitimacy comes from a harmonious relationship between human and nature (Zhao, 2006). As '*tianyi*', the heavenly will is a remarkably abstract field, and it has allowed not only the justification of the imperial order, but also the political activism and even military struggle against it mobilised in the same name. The omission of the political under the broad church of '*tianyi*' is what prevents the authors from seeing the discontinuities in Chinese imperial history when they attempt to map out the transformation across a huge historical timespan. In documenting the 'transformation' from Han through Tang-Song to Ming-Qing, the period of political fragmentation has been largely ignored. It is noteworthy that the political history instead of the ideological history is more pertinent to the evolution of Confucianism. The Qing Dynasty was a cosmopolitan empire founded by bordered tribes, and the Manchus were essential for understanding Confucianism's international outlook, given that the Qing Dynasty itself had integrated a number of peripheral polities to the realm of Chinese empire, transforming the external to internal relations (Hevia, 1995, Liu, 2016). The Qing Dynasty was a result of historical accumulation and the process of internalising the externals through endless political struggle. It should be perceived as the foundation of the spatiality in the Confucian cosmology, especially regarding the 'Hua-Yi' (Chinese-Barbaric) separation.

An et al. argue that Confucian geopolitics is built upon a spatial dichotomy between the Chinese middle kingdom and the barbaric territories. This spatialisation was largely based upon the notion of Confucian cultural superiority and other normative values. This division is fundamentally Sino-centric, seeing the rest of the world outside of the Han-

Confucian cultural heartland as the fringe of ‘Yi’ (barbarians). This is certainly a correct observation for many dynastic generations, but it is not necessarily geopolitical. In fact, we could find ethnocentric ideologies underlying many foreign relations thinking which are ultimately notions of ‘self and other’. There is hardly any geographical dimension in this account of ‘Confucian geopolitics’ apart from a conventional perception of insiders and outsiders. The authors have omitted the fact that the history of political struggle has actually preceded the history of ideology. Conquerors, whether they originated in the northern frontier or were Han agrarian groups, only resorted to Confucian ideology when they faced the question of governing a continent and a vast agrarian population for which they had to rely on an immense scholar-official class (*shidafu*) (Moore, 1967). It was the scholar-officials who upheld Confucianism as their moral principles with which they were eager to sell their knowledge and service to the emperors, and not that emperors followed or did not follow the Confucian principles to visualise geopolitics. Historians have already found that the Qing rulers, who were originally hunter-gathering tribes, had long been tossed between preserving their tribal identity and adapting to the Confucian scholarship (Elliott, 2001; Rawski, 1998). The Qing Dynasty was a Janus-faced organisation. They addressed the traditional scholar-official class using Confucian rhetoric while addressing bordered ethnic groups, such as the Mongols, the Tibetans, and the Uighur Muslims using other religions. The Hua-Yi division will certainly need to be further scrutinised to avoid simplicity. Over-simplification of the division is not only a challenge for the authors of the anchor article in this issue, but also a challenge for most people who want to decipher China’s geopolitical thinking via cultural approaches. In the authors’ own words, there are always differences between ideal-types and realities.

The ethnic and geographical complexities of the Qing Dynasty could hardly be abstracted as a form of Confucian geopolitics even if Confucianism had played its role throughout the state-formation of the Qing Dynasty. Most importantly, the Qing Empire’s relationships with all its bordered neighbours were established through multiple techniques and

diplomatic channels (Hevia, 1995; Perdue, 2005, 2009; Waley-Cohen, 2000). It is important to note that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has inherited not only the territory and ethnic relationships but also the basic crisis of the Qing Dynasty, without which it will be difficult to correspond the CCP’s practice directly with the Confucian tenets. The authors have made a rough periodisation of the CCP’s foreign history by dividing it into the Communist period (1949–1979) and the Socialist period (1979–present), and they have made an effort to show how intertwined the Confucian ideology has been with the communist ideology. It is correct to argue that communism, as a political teaching as well as a way of imagining the world order, has come on and off in the history of the PRC, but it is hard to tell whether the not-so-communist periods could be characterised as Confucianism (Chen, 2001). The authors have attempted to show that Zhou Enlai’s ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’ and Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping’s socialist moralities are spiritually in line with Confucianism, which is an interesting comparison. However, this could be largely misleading as Zhou Enlai’s thoughts have particular origins and contexts; he was establishing the ‘Five Principles’ mainly for the newly independent and postcolonial nations, and he did not really see those partners through the lens of ‘cultural hierarchy’ (Chen, 2008). Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping’s thoughts are mostly for domestic consumption, and they have almost no bearing on foreign relations or geopolitics.

Perhaps the most challenging task that An et al. have taken on is interpreting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is as confusing to most scholars as it is practically inconsistent and theoretical ambiguous. I always believe that to conceptualise the BRI is an overambitious project because the programme is only an ‘initiative’ on the current stage and its immediate, practical, and material consideration might have outweighed its strategic and ideological thinking. There is an important contradiction in the authors’ analysis of the BRI. While they attempt to emphasise its geostrategic aspect by referring to Mackinder’s heartland theory, they still believe that there is a Chinese-Confucian idealism that emphasises the connection of ‘minds’ instead of

material interests. Isn't it the case that any material competition may be dressed under a certain form of cultural idealism, if we just go back to Edward Carr's cynicism a century ago?

Overall, I believe that An et al.'s (2021) article is a very provocative attempt to approach non-western strategic thinking from a cultural vantage point, and they are certainly courageous enough to reach out for the 'philosopher's gold' in IR – namely, interpreting China's mentality. However, studies along this line have been attempted many times in the last decade from the concept of Chinese exceptionalism (Zhang, 2009, 2011, 2014) and 'tianxia' (Zhao, 2006) to the very ambitious 'Confucian Long Peace' (Kelly, 2012). The main danger with the concept of 'culture' is that it can be so easily regarded as a 'unmoved mover' of history, and the politics, traumas, and hypocrisies under its name are likely to be neglected.

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