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## Traditional Chinese Philosophy in China's Modern International Relations

R Philip Reynolds

5/4/2011

Since gaining power in 2002 Hu Jianto and long-time ally Premier Wen Jiabao have been digging deep into the Communist-Chinese canon as well as ancient Confucian, and other traditional philosophical themes and practices to articulate President Hu Jianto's foreign policy message "the Three Harmonies". This message of the peaceful rise of China rang hollow in the ears of many politicians and analysts. (Lam 2006) Was Hu Jianto a leader who based his foreign policy on traditional Chinese philosophies such as Confucianism, or is China's foreign relations ; as Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro put it "driven by nationalist sentiment, a yearning to redeem the humiliations of the past, and the simple urge for international power..." to become the dominant power or a new hegemonic power in Asia? (Zhimin 2005, 35)

China's rise in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is unprecedented in world history. Scholars and politicians scramble to find a framework to describe, predict, and suggest responses to this success. Political scientists attempt to apply existing International Relations (IR) theory developed in the West that seemingly to only apply to western powers. In this paper I will attempt to demonstrate through the speeches and publications of Chinese officials that the current foreign policy of China is indeed guided by traditional Chinese political philosophy and that it is conveyed using traditional forms of Chinese political rhetoric. (Lu 2002, 98) I will start with the Beijing Olympics.

In 2008 China for the first time hosted the Olympic Games in Beijing. Observers noted that "The Chinese consider the games an opportunity to herald China's emergence as a major world power on many levels. The importance of Beijing 2008 in this regard simply cannot be exaggerated." (Jinxia and Mangan 2008) During the opening ceremonies the traditional messages and symbolism conveyed by the Chinese to the world included a prominent quote from the Analects emphasizing "ren" "仁" ("*Friends have come from afar, how happy we are.*"), coupled with the concept of harmony "He" "和" ("One World One Dream") and reinforced through public ritual "Li" "礼" (the Olympic opening ceremonies). (Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad 2008) This message and the means used to deliver it, was misunderstood by many western viewers. East Asian viewers and commentators with a better or shared understanding of Chinese culture, and by extension Confucianism recognized these messages instantly. Audiences and commentators from the west were often critical in their interpretations. (Finlay and Xin 2010, 877) (Bianco 2008) For many this

recognition of shared values reinforced China's policy of "reassurance" and its special relationship with its East Asian neighbors. Likewise the games displayed the peaceful rise of China as a viable alternative to western dominated international organizations and regimes codified by western nation-states. (Finlay and Xin 2010, 893)

Chinese reformer and leader Diang Xiaoping evoked traditional Confucian ideals during his speech to the United Nations as early as April of 1974. "China will never seek hegemony. Should one day, our children and grand children decide to seek hegemony, from this podium, I want people around the world to unite to defeat Chinese hegemony." (Jianmin 2009, 2) Diang Xiaoping reiterated an idea articulated by the Confucian philosopher Mencius "to seek domination by force (economic or military) will simply turn the world against you" (Feng 2009, 21)

Recent Chinese foreign policy statements are rife with traditional Chinese ideas and symbols. These statements along with the spectacle of the games reinforced President Hu Jianto's foreign policy message of "the Three Harmonies" or "三和" (San He). Peace in the world, Reconciliation with Taiwan, and Harmony in Chinese Society. (Zhu 2010, 13) Simultaneously China "...tries to present a soft power message that promises harmony, but that, at the same time, presents its own soft rise as evidence that international harmony need not be synonymous with global conformity." (Finlay and Xin 2010, 886) Again we find traditional Chinese themes and practices expressed in a modern context. Under the Imperial system China interacted with other states through the tribute system. The tribute system did not require that a state be dominated or ruled by China, but was often a reciprocal relationship, that at times served as a vehicle for foreign trade. (Fairbank and Goldman 2006, 112-113)

While the United States neglected its relationships with South East Asia, China moved ahead with improving its image with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. (Lum and all 2008, 3-4) One can see indications of pragmatism or even opportunism in China's dealings with its neighbors. (Zhu 2010, 165 - 166) However, China continues to reinforce its strategic goals through its traditional role as a non-aggressive state. Despite disputes over islands with Japan, Taiwan and in the South China Sea, China signed treaties resolving 20,222 kilometers of land border disputes with all of its neighbors except India. (Shambaugh 2004/2005, 66) In order for China to successfully integrate into the international community it is also necessary for China to clearly differentiate itself from its neighbors, not only geographically but also culturally.

Despite this differentiation China continues to integrate with Asia economically and culturally through the emphasis of ancient cultural roots and the espousal of a set of traditional set of shared "Asian Values." (Lum, Morrison and Vaughn, China's "Soft

Power" in Southeast Asia 2008) These "shared values" originate in Chinese civilization from philosophies such as Confucianism and Daoism. The ideation of what it means to be Chinese or part of China extends to the creation of a cultural awareness of what it means to be Asian. While China and other Asian countries adopt western ideas relating to democracy, socialism, capitalism etc. they modify them with "Chinese (or Asian) Characteristics." (Lomparis 2010, 6)

This good neighbor policy is not only strategic but an inherent part of Confucianism reflected in China's foreign relations with its Asian neighbors. While much is made of the paternalistic nature of the state, or the vertical relationship from the ruler down to the individual, Confucian philosophy also emphasizes the importance of horizontal relationships. (Nosco 2002, 354) In Confucianism the individual (and by extension the state) is "born" into a web of relationships and obligations. (Ng 2010) These include horizontal relationships and obligations to neighbors based on equality and mutual benefit. The Analects record the following exchange "Tsze-kung asked, saying, "Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?" The Master said, "Is not RECIPROCITY such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."" (Confucius, Mencius and ching 1867, 226)

These traditional values of harmony, cooperation and reciprocity appear repeatedly in the speeches given by Chinese leaders. Chinese leaders base these political decisions not just as a moral or ideological decision but also as a Strategic one. The Chinese foreign minister Li Zhaoxing used the 2006 10+3 ministerial meeting in Malaysia said "Internationally, China is dedicated to peaceful, open and cooperative development. This is a strategic choice made by China in light of its national conditions and in response to the calling of the times." (Zhaoxing 2006) China's strategic interests lie in strengthening regional organizations but not dominating them. China's development depends on development in the region. China therefore supports ASEAN leadership in strengthening the relationships of the 10 +1 and 10+3 countries instead of usurping it. (Zhaoxing 2006)

Chinese leaders continue to build ties with its neighbors individually by country as well as collectively through the auspices of ASEAN. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao recently visited Indonesia to strengthen China's good-neighborly relations. His message reiterated China's message of friendship and cooperation. Indonesia currently chairs ASEAN and Premier Wen Jiabao's visit reasserted China's willingness to support ASEAN's leadership in developing the region. He stated that "China firmly supports ASEAN's leading role in regional cooperation," When speaking of China's commitment to a harmonious relations ASEAN countries he said "China will remain committed to this

policy no matter what changes may take place in the international situation." (Jiabao 2011)

Just two days earlier Premier Wen spoke in Kuala Lumpur. He reinforced this message of harmony and cooperation between China and Malaysia. Wen pointed out that "China has become Malaysia's biggest trading partner and biggest market for Malaysian palm oil, while Malaysia is China's top trading partner in ASEAN." Trading between the two countries surpassed US\$6 billion in 2010. Cooperation between the two countries extended to Malaysia's infrastructure including the "Penang second bridge and Bakun power station...." Wen invoked traditional and shared cultural values of reciprocity and harmony in the international community as having strategic importance for China. "Through over 30 years of reform and opening-up, China has made remarkable achievements and undergone profound changes. As China develops further and enters into closer links with the world, it will have a stronger need for a peaceful and stable external environment and enhanced cooperation with other countries." (Jiabao, Work Together to Raise Mutually Beneficial Cooperation between China and Malaysia to a New High 2011)

Chinese President Hu Jintao again emphasized the strategic importance of harmony and cooperation among the Asian states. "As the trend toward multi-polarity and economic globalization deepens, the people of Asia have the major task of maintaining both development and stability," Later during his speech Hu explicitly appeals to the principles of Confucianism and shared "Asian Values" by saying that "Asians belong to one family," and that the "people of Asia have a shared mission to promote common development and build a harmonious Asia." Hu extolled traditional Chinese values and rejected the Zero-Sum approach of the west. By invoking Confucian ideas like "Asians belong to one family," characterizing Asia's response to the Tsunami in Japan as a demonstration to the world that the "Asian people's spirit of showing solidarity in difficult times,". (Xinhua 2011) In his speech President Hu's use of traditional Chinese values and philosophical ideas also originating in China became the linchpin on which the "destiny" of Asia and of the world hung.

Statements like these appear to relate China's foreign relations to traditional culturalism. Traditional culturalism defined what it meant to be Chinese not on one's race but by the general acceptance of traditional Chinese culture, specifically Confucianism. (Zhimin 2005, 37) Despite the fact the West forced China to abandon its worldview as the "Middle Kingdom" and accept Westphalian concepts such as sovereignty and nationalism, China's current foreign policy appears to be in conflict between Cold War nationalism and a retrenchment of ancient culturalism. (Zhimin 2005, 39) We see the process of the resolution of these competing world views through

China's approach to International Relations and through the West's reaction to China's integration on the world's stage.

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