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THE AWAKENING OF THE GIANT: THE CHINESE CIVILIZATION-STATE AND ITS GLOBAL AMBITION¹

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Abstract

This paper presents the basic premises of China as an emerging global actor with all its specificities of civilization-state. The Chinese civilization has an essential and complex body. It is this feeling of civilizational grandeur that generates a conviction in Chinese greatness. Special emphasis is given to the new global strategy of China, as a doctrine of President Xi Jinping. This new strategy is especially highlighted through the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) as the biggest project of the century and its 17+1 framework. The direct investment of China in countries around the world, appear as latent and hegemonic instruments for expansion of its political influence. Both, the BRI and the 17+1 framework represent triggers for achieving the Chinese global ambition.

Keywords: China, Civilization-State, Nation-State, BRI, 17+1

INTRODUCTION

“China is a sleeping giant. Let her sleep, for when she wakes she will move the world.”

— Napoleon Bonaparte

¹ review scientific paper

This is a work of exploratory research conducted upon the content analysis method, comparative analysis method and descriptive method aiming to identify the main attributes of the Chinese exceptionality and the elements of its global or “going-out” strategy. This research seeks to answer the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1) What are the building-blocks of the Chinese civilization-state?

RQ2) What is the essence of Chinese global ambition?

The choice of this research is to present the building-blocks of the Chinese civilization-state and the Chinese global ambition, embodied in the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) and the 17+1 framework, as paradigms for shifting its global political power in an unconventional way - through the use of economy, trade and investments. As for the China, publications of Martin Jacques (2009); Peter Frankopan (2016; 2018); Henry Kissinger (2014; 2016); Samuel Huntington (2010); Tamas Matura (2018) and Zhimin Chen (2013) can be valuable for better understanding of China’s global reasoning, as a manifestation of its new strategy for redefinition of its place and role in the international context. Some compare China's rise to a “climate change” in world politics: long, slow and pervasive.²

THE CHINESE CIVILIZATION-STATE

As far as China the “sense of belonging is rooted in China’s civilizational past, which serves to cohere an enormous population (...) the concept of the civilization-state is fundamental to China” (Jacques 2009, 251). The author Martin Jacques stated that China became a nation-state only relatively recently, but nevertheless:

China is not just a nation-state; it is also a civilization (...) When the Chinese use the term ‘China’ they are not usually referring to the country or nation so much as Chinese civilization – its history, the dynasties, Confucius, the ways of thinking, the role of government, the relationships and customs, the *guanxi* (the network of personal connections), the family, filial piety,

²Joseph Marks, *The Cyber security 202: U.S. officials: It's China hacking that keeps us up at night*. The Washington Post. March 6.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/the-cybersecurity-202/2019/03/06/the-cybersecurity-202-u-s-officials-it-s-china-hacking-that-keeps-us-up-at-night/5c7ec07f1b326b2d177d5fd3/> [2020]

ancestral worship, the values, and distinctive philosophy, all of which long predate China's history as a nation state (...) China is a civilization pretending to be a nation-state.³

RQ1) What are the building-blocks of the Chinese civilization-state?

There are many factors for building China's unity and a strong sense of belonging to the Chinese civilization, with Confucianism being one of the main (primordial) factors. Confucius's stance on morals and ethics, stability and unity, and government importance in human relations have "informed the fundamental values of Chinese civilization ever since",⁴ as Peter Nolan acknowledged in his prominent book "China at the Crossroads". Although officially denied, Confucian principles and ways of thinking were - though in a subterranean manner - quite powerful to some degree of the common sense of the population. Since Confucius, or even before, the government has been considered the embodiment and protector of the Chinese civilization, so that it gained such immense power and prestige in both dynastic and communist periods.⁵ While significant differences exist between the Confucian and Communist periods, important correlations exist too. Chairman Mao Zedong built the Chinese model of communism on the Confucian tradition as Confucius's most hostile Chinese leader. This is not to deny that China has fundamentally changed, but to stress that China also has strong lines of continuity, speaking in the manner of bioscience, its DNA remains intact.⁶ With China emerging as the world's most powerful country, it will feel free to be what it feels it is and behave according to its history and nature, which are those of a civilization-state.⁷

The author John K. Fairbank acknowledged in his prominent book "The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations" acknowledged: "if its belief in Chinese superiority persists, it seems likely that the country will seek its future role by looking closely at its own history".⁸

The theory of China or Chinese civilization is backed by the strong belief that it is not purely social, ideological or historical but the biological that

³ Jacques, Martin. 2009. *When China Rules the World*. The Penguin Press New York, pp. 244-245

⁴ Nolan, Peter. 2004. *China at the Crossroads*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 154

⁵ Jacques, Martin. 2009. *When China Rules the World*. The Penguin Press New York, pp. 247-248

⁶ Ibid. p. 566

⁷ Ibid. p. 567

⁸ Fairbank, John K. 1968. *The Chinese World Order*. Harvard University Press.

<https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674333482> , p. 62

differentiates China from other cultures. At the same time, the legitimacy of the Chinese state “remains a highly competent institution, probably superior to any other state-tradition in the world and likely to exercise a powerful influence on the rest of the world in the future (...) as an embodiment of Chinese civilization”.⁹

Therefore, I compare the concept of civilization-state with that of the nation-state concept in order to identify its basic elements – the building-blocks of the Chinese civilization-state (see: Table 1).

Table 1. Civilization-state vs. Nation-state¹⁰

	CIVILIZATION-STATE	NATION-STATE
Identity	Identity stems primarily from culture such as language family values, social relations, etc.	Constitutional identity
Unity	The unity of civilization is (Chinese) politics' defining priority	National unity
Responsibility	The maintenance and preservation of the unity is sacred responsibility and duty of the state	Constitutional responsibility
Diversity	Racial homogeneity: subordination and dissolving of ethnic differences (Hanization / ‘Chineseness’)	Racial and ethnic diversity
Historical Coverage	Past as a reference and the standard for today	National tradition, customs and myths
Geographical Coverage	Exclusiveness: China as a Middle Kingdom holds a completely different	Constitutionally guaranteed national

⁹ Jacques, Martin. 2009. *When China Rules the World*. The Penguin Press New York, p. 571

¹⁰ Own depiction referring to data collected from the analysis of China civilization-state model based on Martin Jacques views expressed in the book “When China rules the world”, 2009.

	place from all other countries as the center of the world	borders
Centralization	Omnipotent government: paternalism as a desirable and necessary characteristic of government	Substantial state control over the political, economic, and social life; tendencies of centralization
<i>Raison d'état</i>	Emphasis on the civilizational inheritance and on the defense of megastate interests (followed by cultural and racial hubris)	Emphasis on the nation-state and on the defense of national interests (instead of values or norms)
International Law	Skeptical about international law; predisposed to shaping the established international system and to using force in international relations	Skeptical about international law; predisposed to use force in international relations

Taking into account the Chinese ambivalent nature, when China sometimes acts as a nation-state and at other times as a civilization-state, it is logical to conclude that it might appear on the surface as a nation-state, but its “geological formation is that of civilization-state”¹¹. In that sense, both internal features of China’s modernity must be considered, and given China’s global importance, how this could shape China’s global reasoning (outlook and relations) and subsequently structure it. As Martine Jacques acknowledged, China is “not really a nation-state in the traditional sense of the term but a civilization-state (...) China’s acquiescence in the status of nation-state was a consequence of its growing weakness in the face of the Western power from the late nineteenth century”¹². The victories over China and Russia, especially Taiwan and Korea, have extended the Japanese sphere of influence. China become an object of Japanese colonial expansion, and thus, this also contributed

¹¹ Jacques, Martin. 2009. *When China Rules the World*. The Penguin Press New York, p. 565

¹² Ibid. p. 564

to the creation and strengthening of Chinese feeling of national coherence, national pride and the need for a strong (and omnipotent) state with sacred responsibility and duty for maintenance and preservation of the national unity.

The various historical circumstances have dictated Chinese exceptional behavior in the (new) international context. Several features of Chinese exceptionalism can be underlined according to Jacques Martin's typology.

First, "China is not really a nation-state in the traditional sense of the term but a civilization-state"¹³. China is more likely to be influenced by the tradition of the "tributary-state" instead of the nation-states model in its interactions with East Asia as a Chinese-centric order, that it represents an informal system in which Chinese ascendancies are properly acknowledged, explicitly acknowledging its dominance and embracing it.¹⁴ Therefore, China "is fast joining the world but, true to its history, it will also remain somewhat aloof, ensconced in a hierarchical view of humanity, its sense of superiority resting on a combination of cultural and racial hubris"¹⁵. Furthermore, the nature of the Chinese polity is highly specific.

Second, the dynamic of the country's transformation indicates Chinese modernity. This "juxtaposition of different levels of economic development serves to accentuate the importance and impact of the past, the countryside providing a continuous feedback loop from history. It makes China, a country already deeply engaged with its own past, even more aware of its history"¹⁶.

Third, considering that for two millennia Confucian principles have reigned, the Chinese Communist Party needed to find a way of reinventing and recreating these principles, among other things, in order to prevail. Particularly striking is the similarity of the communist view of the state and the Confucian.

Fourth, China "will, for several decades to come, combine characteristics of both a developed and a developing country"¹⁷. The result is a "modernity tempered by and interacting with relative rural backwardness and such a state of bifurcation will have numerous economic, political and cultural consequences" (Jacques 2009, 577). In fact, China will be the first great power coming from the "other side" of the world, one of the colonized rather than the colonizers, of the losers rather than of the winners. In the age of modernity this

¹³ Ibid. p. 565

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 568

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 569

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 575

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 577

experience and the insight it has created, will form an integral part of China's mindset and strongly affect the actions of it as a global power. It can be argued that China has begun changing the world far more profoundly than all other new global powers in the last century.

THE CHINESE GLOBAL AMBITION

To date China has patiently and loyally seemed to be an outsider who is striving to become an insider. As an emerging power, it had to align with existing international norms and adapt to them. During the years of Deng Xiaoping:

China joined or started on the road toward joining all of the key organizations in the UN system that it had once denounced—not only the UN, but the World Bank, the IMF, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and International Atomic Energy Agency, various other nonproliferation organizations aiming at suppressing development of weapons of mass destruction, the GATT/WTO, and the UN's specialized agencies. It ceased to condemn NATO, which it saw as a useful balance against the USSR, and it de facto accepted as benign the US array of security treaties (except for the US-Republic of China defense treaty) in the western Pacific. It also joined an assortment of plurilateral Asia Pacific organizations, including the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).¹⁸

RQ2) What is the essence of Chinese global ambition?

It is important to emphasize that Deng Xiaoping doctrine: “develop capabilities while keeping a low profile” (“*tao guang yang hui*”)¹⁹, paved the way for China's further development and set out the main parameters of its action in international relations, that president Xi Jinping would later use to

¹⁸ Bader, Jeffrey. 2016. *How Xi Jinping Sees the World...and Why*. Brookings: Order from Chaos: Foreign Policy in a Troubled World, Asia Working Group.

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-xi-jinping-sees-the-world-and-why/>, p. 4

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 7

assert himself as the undisputed leader of China and a key player on the international political scene. Quickly after his historical speech held at Nazarbayev University in Astana (Kazakhstan) in 2013, with the title: “Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future”, president Xi actually envisioned the framework for what quickly became known as “One Belt, One Road” (later “Belt and Road Initiative” - BRI) strategy conceived primarily to fund infrastructure projects from “China’s west through Central Asia to the Middle East and Europe”²⁰. Moreover, the full inclusion of China in the international institutions, followed by the BRI strategy development, is an integral part of how China sees the world and how it is preparing for the future while using its economic (trade and investment) assets (see: Image 1).

Chinese foreign policy is first and foremost determined by domestic priorities, such as the need to effectuate sustainable economic growth and to foster the political legitimacy of the Chinese communist leadership without carrying out democratic elections (as understood according to Western political concepts). Besides, China's global trade and rising foreign investments as well as its growing financial and technological capacities position it as the “factory of the world” and a key actor on the global political stage, from Africa all the way to Latin America.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 12

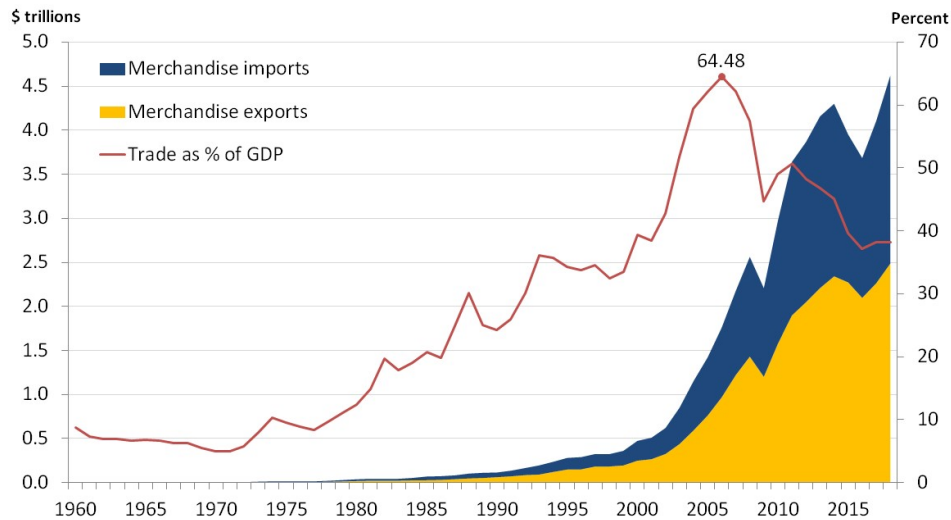


Image 1. China's trade with the world²¹

In her book “The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State”, Elizabeth Economy states that the final aim of Xi Jinping's revolution is his “Chinese Dream”, “the rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation”, which means a repeated reaction of the state in China's domestic politics and economy, as well as a more ambitious and expansive role in foreign policy.²² The Belt and Road Initiative is a strategic means of realising China's and Xi Jinping's global ambitions, claiming the position of a new global centre of power, which finances infrastructure projects “from China’s west through Central Asia to the Middle East and Europe”.²³ Apart from that, China has established the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, or 17+1

²¹ Lee, Yen Nee. 2019. *Here are 4 charts that show China’s rise as a global economic superpower*. CNBC, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/09/24/how-much-chinas-economy-has-grown-over-the-last-70-years.html> [2020]

²²Economy, Elizabeth C. 2018. *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*. Oxford University Press, p. 10

²³Bader, Jeffrey. 2016. *How Xi Jinping Sees the World...and Why*. Brookings: Order from Chaos: Foreign Policy in a Troubled World, Asia Working Group, p. 12, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-xi-jinping-sees-the-world-and-why/> [2020]

cooperation framework, initiated by the Chinese Foreign Minister and founded in Budapest in 2012 as 16+1. The aim of this Cooperation framework is to “provide promising opportunities for both China and Europe (...) covering the fields of infrastructure, transportation and logistics, trade and investment, local exchanges and energy (...)”.²⁴ When Greece joined, the framework was re-labelled 17+1.²⁵ The participant states hold a summit every year, with previous summits having been held in Dubrovnik (2019), Sofia (2018) Budapest (2017), Riga (2016), Suzhou (2015), Belgrade (2014), Bucharest (2013) and Warsaw (2012). On this occasion, Peter Frankopan (2019, 113) concluded: “the expansion of Chinese interests has not just been through loans, but also through acquisitions”. For example, Chinese companies have acquired shipping terminals in Spain, Italy and Belgium either in full or in part (Johnson 2018). Therefore, the president Xi sought to raise China through the expansion of trade and investment, the establishment of new global institutions and the strengthening of the military.

CONCLUSION

President Xi Jinping determined himself to lead the Chinese civilization-state in a new manner, while providing hope in these challenging times and positioning China in the (new) international context as a relevant global actor. Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Le Yucheng sarcastically stated: “we Chinese often say that if you want to get rich, build roads first”,²⁶ emphasizing the Xi’s vision that: “The glory of the ancient silk routes shows that geographical distance is not insurmountable”²⁷. Hence, it is more than obvious that the BRI and the 17+1 framework are essential elements of the new Chinese global strategy for going out of Asia and self-inflicting the

2416+1 mechanism set to bolster China-Europe ties. 2018. The State Council China. http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zdogjhz_1/t1575579.htm [2020]

25The following countries are part of the 17+1 framework: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia.

²⁶ Frankopan, Peter. 2018. *The New Silk Roads: The Present and Future of the World*. Bloomsbury Publishing, p. 93

²⁷ Yan Qiong, Full text of President Xi’s speech at opening of B&R Forum, CGTN, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d59444f33677a4d/share_p.html [2020]

global arena as a relevant actor, using economic (trade and investment) and diplomatic tools rather than military or political tools to achieve its global ambition.

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