

An End to Harmony? The Rise of a Sino-Centric China



Andreas Bøje Forsby
Danish Institute for International Studies
afo@diis.dk

Abstract

The rise of China is one of the key challenges to Western Liberal Order. What are the foreign policy interests of China and thereby the implications of rising Chinese power? Following a constructivist approach this paper will derive the overall foreign policy interests of China from its self-understanding. It is claimed, however, that we should go beyond the official Chinese government parlance of “peaceful rise/harmonious world” and direct attention to China’s underlying identity structure. At this level, four so-called identity markers seem relevant: Sino-civilization, Confucian philosophy, dynastic authoritarianism, and Han-ethnocentrism. The paper examines the identity logics and societal anchoring of each identity marker arguing that these markers form the basis of a particularistic, non-Western Chinese self-understanding that will gain increasing prominence in the coming years. With communist ideology on the wane an ascending China thus seems likely to embark on a more Sino-centric foreign policy course, which may put an end to the relative harmony of great power politics in the 21st century.

Key Words: China’s rise, Chinese identity, Chinese foreign policy, constructivism, the Liberal Order

The Non-Western Challenger

The rise of China and other emerging powers seems to be a defining moment of the 21st century, as it holds the potential to fundamentally redefine the centre of gravity in international politics. Much to the uneasiness of the United States, the newcomers are not simply embracing

the whole package of Western values, norms and institutions, upon which the current international liberal order builds. As the frontrunner of the emerging powers China is by far causing the most concern. Officially, Chinese policy-makers have coined phrases such as 'peaceful rise' and 'harmonious world' to reassure the outside world of China's benign and responsible intentions (see Bijian, 2005; Zheng, 2007). But due to the illiberal, non-democratic nature of the Chinese polity and China's frequent use of an assertive rhetoric towards its neighbours, the lingering question remains: Will China turn out to be a revisionist state?

One thing that seems to be dawning upon an increasing number of Western China-observers is the extent to which China represents a non-Western challenger in not merely a political, but also a cultural sense (e.g. Callahan, 2008; Jacques, 2010, Kissinger, 2010). Politically, China stands out from the Western liberal democracies as an authoritarian regime firmly in control of all instruments of political power. However, there is also a cultural dimension to the differences, which engenders, it could be argued, the political differences. 'The Middle Kingdom' – as China is metaphorically called by the Chinese themselves – has existed as a vibrant and in many respects superior civilization for several millennia dating back to the Xia-dynasty in 2100 BCE. During all these years of relative isolation from the West a distinct cultural system has evolved thereby instilling a strong sense of self in the Chinese population at large. In the words of Lucian Pye, a renowned scholar on China: 'What binds the Chinese together is their sense of culture, race and civilization' (Pye: 1992: 235). This civilizational distinctness has so far been downplayed officially in order not to fuel Western concerns. But as China's rapid rise and the wane of communist ideology are bringing identity-related questions to the fore, it seems reasonable to expect that Chinese civilizational distinctness will play an increasingly prominent role in this "self-investigative" process.

This paper will pinpoint the identity-generated cultural differences between China and the West and discuss how they might translate into fundamental lines of political difference with potential implications for international order in the coming decades. Even though China has long relinquished its revolutionary Communist agenda, Beijing still tends to place itself on the outskirts of Western international society particularly in matters of international security (Buzan, 2010: 14, 31-34). Insofar as an ascending China increasingly finds itself in a key position internationally, its tendency to follow its own course raises far more important questions than back in the 20th century, when China was weighed down by an underdeveloped economy. Chief among these seems to be the question of what a Sino-centric version of international order will look like. To be sure, the current Liberal Order should not be regarded as a coherent monolith, nor is it coterminous with the Western countries, but it does possess a number of hallmarks that originated in the West and that are still most firmly embedded in the United States and Europe. These include not only the general openness, rule-based character and multilateralism

enshrined in international organizations such as the WTO and the UN, among others, but also the human rights regime informing most of the multinational interventions being carried out on behalf of international society (Ikenberry, 2011a: 56, 60; see also Ikenberry 2011b: 279-360). It is argued in this paper that a Sino-centric world order would differ from a liberal one in several respects.

The main part of the paper is devoted to identifying the so-called identity markers of Chinese self-understanding with the following four sections each presenting a basic identity marker, its historical roots and its present stature in Chinese thinking. The identity markers comprise 'Sino-civilization', 'Confucian ideology', 'dynastic authoritarianism' and 'Han-ethnocentrism' each of which contains specific norms and values that guide societal behaviour. The basic contents of the identity markers will be explicated with a view to illustrating their particular 'Chineseness' in relation to core elements within Western self-understanding. It is not implied that these identity markers are the only building blocks of Chinese identity construction, or that all four markers have continuously been part of the hegemonic identity narrative. However, it is claimed that the four identity markers represent the most important *internally* generated dynamics in the constitution of Chinese identity and that they are likely soon to shape China's foreign policy interests in important ways. A fifth section argues that an identity shift is currently underway within China gradually sidelining communism as well as "peaceful rise globalism" and thus paving the way for a new Chinese self-image more clearly in line with the four identity markers. Finally, the last section tentatively explores what the implications for international order will be, if a rising China adopts a more Sino-centric self-understanding.

The rest of this introductory section outlines the theoretical premises of the paper. The debate on China's rise has so far been dominated by realists and liberals with much of the debate based on standard theoretical arguments (see Friedberg, 2005: 12-33; Glaser, 2011). In short, both realists and liberal institutionalists generally take the interests of China for granted or deduce its interests from systemic variables – such as relative power or institutional incentives – in what is basically a top-down generated story of state interests (cf. Legro, 2007: 518-22).¹ Unlike this, constructivists seek to endogenise, i.e. to explore from within, the interest formation of states by relating interests to socially constructed variables on either the systemic or unit level. By analyzing Chinese self-understanding this paper adopts a constructivist 'inside-out' (unit level) perspective on Chinese interest formation. Given not only the sheer gravity of China, but also its cultural distinctness it seems crucial to take its internal ideational dynamics into account.

¹ It should be added that some liberals approach interest formation by focusing on domestic politics rather than systemic institutions, while some realists such as neo-classical realists include the unit level as an intervening variable.

Constructivism is usually divided into a critical and a mainstream variant with the latter being engaged in theoretical dialogue with realists and liberalists (see e.g. Adler, 1997; Price & Reus-Smit, 1998). As this project adopts a mainstream approach let me specify three of its theoretical premises that are relevant in this context. Firstly, constructivists study the socially constructed, rather than materially conditioned, nature of international relations; and they emphasize how social meaning is structured within specific identities, norms, beliefs, cultures etc. (Jeffrey Checkel, 1998: 328; Wendt, 1999: 130-36). Secondly, collective identities encompass fundamental, ideational logics such as beliefs about legitimate membership or the role of the community, and these logics generate the motivational disposition – or simply put: interests – of its respective communities (Reus-Smit, 1999: 29; Wendt, 1999: 225). Thirdly, state identities are usually relatively stable in the sense of being deeply structured, but competing identity narratives with alternative ideational logics always exist (Hansen & Wæver, 2002: 20-49). Accordingly, Chinese self-understanding is conceptualised here as a structural formation of identity markers some of which are combined into a hegemonic narrative of the ‘Chinese self’ for a certain period of time. Furthermore, it is claimed that the ideational logics within the hegemonic narrative function as a “navigation compass” guiding Chinese policy makers in their foreign policy making.²

Broadly speaking, the existing constructivist debate on China primarily revolves around the social role aspect of China’s identity in relation to international society: Is China a developing nation, a responsible stakeholder of the Liberal Order, a revisionist rising power or something else (see e.g. Kurlantzick, 2007; Johnston, 2008; Buzan, 2010: 16-22; Liqun, 2010: 37-47; Shambaugh, 2011: 10-21)? The problem is that this debate unfolds without much appreciation of the deeper identity-structural disposition of ‘the Chinese self’, that is, from an inside-out perspective the debate becomes somewhat detached from the underlying reasons for taking on a specific international role. There are a few constructivist scholars, who have studied specific elements of the identity-structural foundation of ‘the Chinese self’, emphasizing primarily the so-called “century of humiliation” discourse, its ideational logics and the way it is being translated into current political manifestations (Gries, 2004; Callahan, 2010). However, with the partial exception of Martin Jacques (2010) no one seems to have undertaken the task of systematizing the basic Chinese identity markers and their respective ideational logics.³ This paper aims at taking the first steps in this direction.

² The idea of “state identities as navigation compasses” is elaborated in Forsby (2011a).

³ Martin Jacques provides a multifaceted, general overview of the identity markers discussed in this paper.

Sino-civilization: Furnishing Chinese history with cultural depth and distinctiveness

‘China is not just another nation-state in the family of nations. China is a civilization pretending to be a state’ (Pye, 1992: 235). The widespread tendency to refer to China as a ‘civilization’ rather than merely a nation-state derives from China’s specific developmental path. First of all, China is able not only to trace its historical roots further back than most other nation-states, but also to identify strong and distinct lines of cultural continuity throughout Chinese history. Furthermore, for centuries dynastic China exerted an enormous cultural influence on the Asian continent that extended far beyond the shifting territorial boundaries of ‘the Middle Kingdom’ – China’s historic name. The nation-state category was in effect imposed on China during the 19th century by the Western powers, which dismantled the Chinese empire piece by piece and forced it to eventually adopt a Western-style, sovereignty-based, territorially demarcated nation-state model.

What is Chinese civilization then? A good starting point for capturing the identity constitutional potential of the Chinese civilization will be to emphasise its distinctness, longevity and greatness. First, its *distinctness* rests on several elements that together form a particular Chinese heritage:

- The Confucian moral philosophy (see below, second section)
- The strong dynastic state (see below, third section)
- The ethnic homogeneity (see below, fourth section)
- The Chinese *language* dating back more than three thousand years and comprising all the various Sinitic dialects by means of a standardised idiographic writing system. The vast majority of the Chinese speaks the Mandarin dialect (>800 million).
- The historic Chinese *homeland* usually defined as the central plains around the Yangtze and the Yellow river systems that formed the cradle of an advanced agrarian civilization. From its northern heartland the Chinese civilization gradually spread outward to absorb the surrounding mainly southern territories through migration, cultural assimilation or outright conquest.
- The ritualised honouring of *forefathers*, which entails a widespread mythological belief in a common Chinese descent reaching back to the “Yellow Emperor”, who – as legend has it – was born in 2704 BC. This belief also rests on a popular assumption that the so-called “Peking man” discovered in 1929 is the ancestor of a specific mongoloid and thus Chinese race (Jacques, 2009: 236-37).
- The imperially organised *tributary system* that constituted a specific Sino-centric world order on the East Asian continent for more than two millennia. With the Chinese emperor at the apex, neighbouring states and tribes were indirectly ruled by virtue of a tributary system, where each subject was given a number of rights and duties according to its respective

status, which primarily reflected its degree of similarity with the Chinese civilization (Fairbank, 1968: 4-14).

The second essential characteristic of Sino-civilization is its longevity and continuity providing a stable frame of reference for Chinese self-understanding (Pye, 1992: 12). Wang Gungwu has described it this way: 'what is quintessentially Chinese is the remarkable sense of continuity that seems to have made the civilization increasingly distinctive over the centuries' (Gungwu, 1991: 2) China's civilizational continuity is based on several factors. Its dominant position in East Asia and its virtual isolation from peer civilizational rivals allowed it to develop a distinct pattern of its own. To be sure, the Chinese dynasties did face mighty military rivals like the Mongols and the Manchus – and were at times even defeated by them – but since they did not possess a competitive civilization of their own they instead ended up being Sinicised (Fairbank, 1968: 9). In other words, during millennia of consecutive dynasties a civilizational fabric evolved that was not seriously challenged until the middle of the 19th century with the advent of the Western powers.

The third fundamental trait of Sino-civilization is its historical greatness compared to the outside world. On the one hand, Chinese greatness was an indisputable fact, as the Chinese displayed scientific and practical excellence within many fields. Major inventions such as paper, gun powder, the wheel barrow, the compass, the spinning machine and the wood-block printing were all of Chinese origin, and for centuries the Chinese were the most literate and numerate people in the world (Jacques, 2009: 76-77). Moreover, from around the Han-dynasty (206 BC onwards) the Chinese public examination system and bureaucracy became increasingly sophisticated enabling the Chinese state to exert administrative control and create political unity to a degree that was unparalleled in the rest of the world for a long time. On the other hand, civilizational greatness also rested on a more subjective feeling of superiority generated by the numerous encounters with what was perceived as barbarian tribes and peoples along the dynastic borders. In fact, the gradual incorporation and Sinification of these neighbouring peoples into the Middle Kingdom served to consolidate the Chinese' belief in their own superiority (Gungwu 1968: 36-38). To sum up once again in the words of Lucian Pye: 'The most pervasive underlying Chinese emotion is a profound, unquestioned, generally unshakeable identification with historical greatness' (Pye, 1992: 50).

To fully capture the identity constitutional logic of the civilizational identity marker it is necessary to emphasise how the Sino-civilization was ridded of its glorious status during the so-called "century of humiliation", which followed the first major confrontation with the Western powers in 1839-42 (the First Opium War). Not only did the British defeat numerically superior Chinese forces, they also imposed the treaty of Nanjing setting the stage for an unequal and humiliating

relationship between the Qing dynasty and the Western powers. The Chinese defeat was succeeded by numerous others leading to a whole array of unequal treaties with the great powers and – even worse – with a rising Japan that for centuries had been a vassal state. Not until the Communist revolution of 1949 did China finally expel the foreign intruders and establish a sovereign state, but the century had left an impoverished people and a dismantled Chinese empire (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006: 201-05).

There is little doubt that the distinctness, longevity and greatness of Sino-civilization have instilled in the Chinese a strong sense of ‘exceptionalism’. That is, a belief that the Chinese civilization constitutes a unique culture in some senses superior to that of other civilizations (Pye, 1992: 50-52). At the same time, however, the ‘century of humiliation’ inscribed on the Chinese soul an inferiority complex that has mostly manifested itself as revanchism directed at the Western powers and in particular Japan (Gries, 2004: 43-54). Combining these two identity constitutional tendencies, one may argue that they together create the following impetus: To promote the glory and distinctness of the Sino-civilization and thereby to revive the ‘Middle Kingdom’ to its historical position at the centre of the world order.

Confucian philosophy: Imbuing the Chinese community with a collectivistic creed

‘Working to ensure social harmony among the common people [...] this might be called wisdom’ (Confucius, 2003: 6.22). Confucianism has variously been dubbed “a civil religion” (Berling, 1982: 5), “a political philosophy” (Hsü, 2005: 1), “the cultural DNA of Southeast Asia” (Merkel-Hess & Wasserstrom, 2011) and a “feudal relic of the past” (Dotson, 2011: 4). Notwithstanding the latter phrase, which stems from the Communists’ intended break with China’s dynastic past, Confucianism still plays a strong role within Chinese self-understanding. It was conceived by Confucius (Kǒng Fūzǐ, 551-479 BC) during “the Warring States Period”, where political fragmentation and rivalry between independent warlords pervaded the Middle Kingdom. In this way Confucianism is a deliberate praise of societal order and harmony.

Even if Confucianism over the years has developed into a composite mode of thinking incorporating elements from various philosophers and even other ideologies, the original ideas of Confucius and his disciple Mencius (372-289 BC) remain by far the most important. Spanning more than two millennia and encompassing seemingly inconsistent elements, the Confucianist legacy in Chinese thought is not easily defined. However, it seems relatively uncontroversial to emphasise the following four moral-philosophical tenets that are relevant in this identity-constitutional context:

- Human nature is considered to be malleable, and for that reason *human beings are teachable and improvable* through personal and societal endeavour. Indeed, every human being should strive for moral virtue – such as deference, loyalty, benevolence – and constantly seek to educate, discipline and cultivate him- or herself to the greater benefit of society. Adapting the individual to the roles and institutions of society thus becomes the overriding concern within Confucianism (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006: 51-53).
- It is *the collective unit* and its well-being – not the individual *per se* – that is given precedence within Confucianism. The family constitutes the basic collective unit, and the primary socialization of individuals takes place within a paternalistic family structure. Society itself is modelled as a hierarchical and organic extension of the family with ancestor worship providing a crucial link of historical identification with the Chinese people. In this sense, the cohesion, solidarity and self-perpetuation of the Chinese people are main Confucian guidelines for exemplary state governance (Lal, 1998: 46; Nisbett, 2003: 15-20).
- *Social harmony and order* are key priorities within Confucian societies. At the individual level, differences of age, sex and status are managed by virtue of a complex system of rituals and moral precepts for how to behave properly within social relationships such as those between husband and wife, elder and younger, ruler and subject. At the societal level, harmony is attained not only by every one knowing their place in the social order, but also by the morally informed governance of the state. Hence, the state – embodied by the ruler – becomes an intrinsic part of Confucian societies, as it holds a moral high ground that enables it to embrace and harmonise the various differences and factions of society (Pye, 1992: 15; Nisbett, 2003: 51-56).
- Intrinsically, the philosophical guidelines of Confucianism are *universalistic*, providing Confucianist societies with a considerable potential for inclusiveness. On the one hand, this universalism applies within society, insofar as access to basic societal institutions like the bureaucracy has been based on meritocratic standards from the Han dynasty (206 BC) onwards. On the other hand, the universalistic nature of Confucianism has historically implied that non-Chinese groups or states could become affiliated to or even assimilated within the Chinese empire, if they adhered to the main tenets of Confucianism. This is exactly what happened for centuries in East Asia with China at the centre as the promulgator of Confucian norms and values (Fairbank, 1968: 6-7).

These four tenets of Confucianism have come to form the basic creed of the Chinese people subsuming traditional folklore religion (like Daoism) and leaving little room for the established religions. As Confucianism was anchored in feudal customs and dynastic bureaucracy, the Communist regime under Mao officially distanced itself from Confucianism and actively repressed its cultural manifestations during the “Cultural Revolution” (1966-76). However, following Deng’s takeover in 1978, Confucianism has gradually experienced a revival that is not

merely symbolic (Dotson, 2011). Confucian monuments, museums and schools are being established all over China, Confucius' birthday is now again being officially commemorated, two million Chinese have been recognised by the authorities as descendants of Confucius (as of 2010), more than 500 Confucian institutes have been set up abroad to disseminate knowledge about China's Confucianist and civilizational heritage, and Communist leaders are openly paraphrasing Confucian tenets on social harmony among other things.⁴

The extent to which Confucianism still permeates Chinese thinking has been elaborately pointed out by the psychologist Richard Nisbett, whose cognitive experimental research has demonstrated, among other things, that: 'The collective and interdependent nature of Asian society is consistent with Asians' broad contextual view of the world' (Nisbett, 2003: xvii). In other words, it is the very collectivistic nature of Confucianism that marks it out as a significant identity marker to the Chinese people not least in the face of Western values. The individual is taught its social role and accorded its status within its respective community (family, society), while the state assumes a morally ordained power and responsibility of providing harmony and order among its subjects. Last but not least, there is a universalistic drive to the Confucianist creed producing a rather holistic identity-constitutional tendency: To harmonize differences at home and abroad for the sake of order.

Dynastic authoritarianism: Forging the Chinese polity through hierarchy and unity

'...Chinese politics after chaos and revolution has always returned to being elitist and hierarchical in organization, closed and monopolistic in spirit' (Pye, 1992:13). In a similar vein, new rulers have always managed to restore the omnipotent role of the state within society, providing the state with sole responsibility for defining and safeguarding the overall needs and interests of the Chinese people. The authoritarian nature of the Chinese polity can be more fully captured in terms of its hierarchizing and unifying organization.

Throughout Chinese history a *hierarchical*⁵ mode of politics has prevailed, albeit the ruling ideology itself has varied. During the first dynasties hierarchical authority rested rather implicitly on feudal norms of hereditary privileges, which were not seriously challenged until the "Warring States Period" (475-221 BC), when several new philosophical outlooks emerged. Chief among these were Confucianism and legalism, both of which were to exert great influence on

⁴ As to the different elements of the Confucian revival see McGivering (2008), BBC News (anonymous author, 2009); The Economist (anonymous author, 2010); Dawson (2010); Dotson, (2011: 4-21).

⁵ As indicated above, *hierarchy* is also closely related to the Confucianist identity marker, see Suzuki (2009: 36-37).

the wielding of dynastic authority with Confucianist thinking usually holding the upper hand. While legalism grounded authority on rigid enforcement of stringent rules, Confucianism insisted on an equally elitist and top-down, but morally justified reign (Zhang, 2001: 46, 50). The exclusion of the people from political power was regarded as a positive virtue, insofar as it freed the emperor to govern in line with the highest ethical principles. In fact, if the emperor did not heed the stipulated moral obligations, his somewhat ambiguous ruling mandate – known as “the mandate of heaven” – could be withdrawn by the people, as happened on rare occasions. Moreover, from the Qin-dynasty (221 BC) onwards, hierarchical authority was exercised through the establishment of an unprecedented vast and efficient bureaucratic system in order to gradually undermine the hereditary power of local aristocrats. The bureaucratic elite came to enjoy unparalleled authority and the early use of written instructions greatly enhanced centralised ruling power (Pye, 1992:15, 17).

The second element of the authoritarian character of Chinese politics is its totalitarian tendency, reflecting a deep-seated desire for *political unity* and therefore a strong urge to counter any oppositional or fragmentation forces in an empire as vast as the Chinese (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006: 47). It means, on the one hand, that local rulers – be they aristocratic elites or provincial city municipalities – have never enjoyed any formal power status, but have instead had to rely on the arbitrary delegation of power or in some cases the ability to ignore the biddings from central quarters (Pye, 1992: 22-23). On the other hand, the striving towards political unity implies that the state has actively – and often brutally – sought to prevent other societal actors like religious denominations, scientific associations, feudal landowners, merchants and workers from organizing their members independently. By denying these societal actors any formal, recognised and autonomous platform of power, from which to advance political demands or take part in governance, the state and its ruling elite has been able to become nearly coterminous with society. In other words, the complete absence of any societal checks and balances on the government has sown the seeds of a totalitarian mode of politics (Jacques, 2009: 207-08).

The same kind of elitist, hierarchical logic also shaped the way the Chinese managed their foreign relations during the dynastic era. The sheer political and cultural gravity of the Middle Kingdom enabled it to organise its neighbouring kingdoms and tribal peoples into what has been labelled a tributary imperialist system. The key aspect of this system was the formal recognition of the Chinese emperor’s supremacy by the suzerain, tributary kingdoms and peoples, which moreover were obliged to pay largely symbolic tribute at predetermined, rather infrequent intervals. While the relational logic of this imperial tribute system was hierarchical in line with the Chinese polity itself, it did not, however, display the unifying (totalitarian) drive of domestic Chinese politics. The Chinese thus rarely attempted to interfere directly in the affairs of tributary states or peoples like Korea, Japan, Annam (Vietnam) or the central Asian nomadic

tribes. The main reason for this seems to have been a lack of power rather than will, because whenever the Middle Kingdom did succeed in conquering new territory, it was soon subjected to central, administrative control.

Dynastic China never experienced an enlightenment period similar to that of Europe, which could have paved the way for a gradual erosion of centralised authority (Hutton, 2007: 50-51). As the winds of ideological change finally swept the Chinese polity in the 20th century, dynastic rule was replaced first by nationalist despotism and then by communist dictatorship, the latter evincing an ideologically driven totalitarianism far more exhausting than at any period during dynastic China (Pye, 1992). To be sure, the recent ideological relaxation of the communist doctrines has been accompanied by some curtailments of the communist regime's monopoly on power. Nevertheless, the bottom line is that there is still a conspicuous lack of formal, codified constraints on the exercise of power by the Communist party, the state and its bureaucracy enabling the regime to tighten its grip whenever oppositional voices need to be quelled. After all, the communist party is in firm control of all the central institutions of society like the army, the judiciary, the parliament, the ministries, the media, and the ubiquitous state-owned enterprises (Hutton, 2007: 130-35).

The identity marker of dynastic authoritarianism still permeates Chinese political self-understanding, even if it no longer holds an absolute, totalitarian sway over the Chinese polity. With the world's longest and possibly strongest tradition of centralised, bureaucratized state authorities China's relatively late attainment of independent statehood following "the century of humiliation" has only contributed to bolstering the main organizing principles of Chinese politics, that is, its hierarchizing and unifying tendency.

Han-ethnocentrism: Providing the Chinese people with a particularistic mindset

'The idea of overwhelming racial homogeneity, in the context of a huge population, makes the Chinese in global terms, unique' (Jacques, 2009: 266). Compared to other populous great powers like the United States and India, China seemingly stands out as a "racially" homogenous whole. More than 90 % of China's inhabitants are not only officially labelled, but also define themselves as Han-Chinese, and they constitute a vast majority in every province of China except for Tibet and Xinjiang, where they are (apparently) still outnumbered by Tibetans and Uighurs respectively. Moreover, the bulk of the 55 ethnic minority groups, which are officially recognised as such, are either almost indiscernible from the Han-Chinese or live in one of the five semi-autonomous regions in the north-western and southern parts of China. Whether to describe this relative homogeneity in terms of ethnicity, race or nationality has been an ongoing

ing issue of contention among the Chinese themselves (Jacques, 2009: 250-52), but the important thing to emphasise in this context is the racial/biological connotations that are usually associated with using the Han-Chinese category. Accordingly, to invoke the referent object of Han-Chinese is to frame the Chinese people in terms of an exclusive community.

Like other large-scale ethnic or racial referent objects the Han-Chinese can be viewed as an artificial construct, an imagined community based on a myth of common ancestral descent, which was envisioned and promulgated by nationalists in the late 19th and early 20th century. In the face of invading forces and an increasingly impotent Manchu-based Qing-dynasty the “invention” of the Han-Chinese category quickly acquired widespread popularity as part of a nationalist reaction against foreign domination. While the Han concept is thus of recent origin as a *racial* category, there is, on the other hand, a certain underlying “material reality” of the Han-Chinese understood as a more loosely defined *ethnic* group formed by millennia of ethnic amalgamation.⁶ Through a combination of migration, conquest, absorption and miscegenation ethnic diversity has to a considerable degree been washed away, creating a Chinese people that have gradually come to be regarded as a relatively homogenous group (Duara, 1993: 21-24). In this sense, even if one may question the validity of referring to a distinct Han-race from a purely genetic perspective, there seems to be a good case for employing the broader term of ethnic group to underline the common descent of the Han-Chinese and to delineate them from some of the non-Han minority groups within China.

Regardless of terminology, the Han-Chinese identity marker involves a thorough particularism, which more specifically encompasses two related constitutional logics. The first one can be described as a strong advocacy for the *homogeneity* of the Han-Chinese that actually predates the nationalists’ late 19th century efforts to invoke the racial category (Gungwu, 1968). Hence, concurrently with the process of cultural and social Sinification, where non-Chinese people became Chinese by adopting the norms and customs of the Sino-civilization and the Confucianist creed, there existed periodically the exact opposite tendency to stress the exclusiveness of the Chinese people in terms of its specific ancestral roots (bloodlines) and to actively promote the homogeneity of the Chinese. During these periods the ongoing ethnic amalgamation was weakened by countermeasures of segregation, expulsion and sometimes outright annihilation of minority groups (Duara, 1993: 4-6). More recently, this preoccupation with ethnic/racial homogeneity is demonstrated, among other things, in the way that many overseas Chinese stick to themselves and form distinct Diaspora communities within their settling countries and in the

⁶ Following Anthony Smith (cf. 1991: 20), an ethnic group is here defined as a collectivity that emphasises common descent in addition to common cultural traits such as language, religion and customs. By “material reality” I mean the physical characteristics of (perceived) common Han-Chinese descent and the physical manifestations of Han-Chinese culture.

way the Communist regime has used migration of Han-Chinese as an instrument to change the population composition in Tibet and Xinjiang (Pye, 1992: 56-57).

Secondly, the particularism of the Han-Chinese identity marker entails a firm belief in the *primacy* of the Han-Chinese, a belief that manifests itself via discrimination against ethnically/racially different groups. In fact, although it is a controversial and therefore not well-documented phenomenon, there are several studies suggesting that ethnocentrism/racism is both deeply ingrained and widespread within Chinese self-understanding (Gungwu, 1991; Dikötter, 1992; Jacques 2009: 245-50; Callahan 2010: 127-59). Traditionally, the Chinese referred to other “races” as barbarians or foreign devils as a way of expressing the Chinese’ feeling of superiority and of justifying indifference, contempt or even hostilities towards foreigners. Nowadays, the Chinese seem to be informed by racial stereotypes based on racial hierarchies with yellow and white people on the top, followed by people with darker skin and with black people of African descent at the absolute bottom. In some respects, with fashion being the most conspicuous example, white skin and features are even more coveted by many Chinese women than yellow skin and Asian features. More disturbingly, African students in China have been subjected to racially motivated discrimination or even mass protests several times in the last couple of decades (Jacques, 2009: 125-28, 258-61).

During the ideologically fervent Mao-period of Communist China the Han-Chinese identity marker was deemed utterly incompatible with the universalistic aspirations of communism and therefore relegated to political obscurity. However, with the ideological loosening of Sino-communism, accelerated by the end of the Cold War, China has witnessed somewhat of a revival of the ethnic/racial agenda. This time, the Han-Chinese particularism has mostly been incorporated into more general nationalist attitudes fuelled by feelings of civilizational greatness or humiliation/injustice caused by foreign great powers (Gries, 2005: 116-135; Callahan 2010: 154-55). Still, some of the most prominent nationalist outbursts in China in recent years – following the local anti-Han riots in Tibet and Xinjiang in 2008 and 2009 respectively – were actually first and foremost driven by the twin identity constitutional tendencies of Han-ethnocentrism: The advocacy for ethnic homogeneity and the belief in the primacy of the Han-Chinese. The decisiveness of ethnicity and race in Chinese self-understanding has been stated bluntly by Lucian Pye: ‘(Their) sense of identity is thus derived less from the content of culture, which is always somewhat vague and ambiguous, and more from the fact of race, which is biologically unambiguous’ (Pye, 1992: 56).

Figure 1		The four basic identity markers of Chinese self-understanding			
Name of identity marker	Sino-civilization	Confucian philosophy	Dynastic authoritarianism	Han-ethnocentrism	
Referent Object	Cultural community => civilization	Moral community => family/ society	Political community => state	Ethnic community => race	
Identity constitutional tendency [of referent object]	Promote greatness & distinctness	Create order & harmony	Ensure unity & hierarchy	Seek primacy & homogeneity	
External differential logic [of referent object]	Historical exceptionalism	Collectivistic universalism	Tributary imperialism	Hereditary particularism	
Terms of exclusiveness/ inclusiveness [vis-à-vis the other ⁷]	Sinification of or isolation from the <i>other</i>	Societal assimilation of the <i>other</i>	Indirect subordination of the <i>other</i>	Segregation or expulsion of the <i>other</i>	

Figure 1 provides a conceptual overview of the argument in the preceding sections. For the sake of clarity the four identity markers have been depicted as *disparate* points of reference for Chinese self-understanding – related to cultural history, moral philosophy, mode of politics and ethnic composition – even though in practice their discursive borders are fuzzy and somewhat overlapping. Finally, while some observers have noted the growing heterogeneity of Chinese society (see e.g. Jakobson & Knox, 2010; Shambaugh, 2011), this paper conversely seeks to identify the deeply embedded, *generic* points of reference for the Chinese population.

⁷ The term *other* is used here in a simple manner to denote the primary group(s) – historically not necessarily states – of foreigners/outside with whom the Chinese interact. No assumption of enmity is implied.

A Chinese identity shift in the making?

‘Six decades of Communist rule has not changed the Chinese soul, which was developed over thousand of years’ (Mahbubani, 2008: 149). As communism is gradually stripped of its ideological clout within China the Sino-centric notion of China as ‘the Middle Kingdom’ is once again gaining currency. This paper argues that we are gradually witnessing an identity shift granting the four identity markers introduced above a stronger position within Chinese self-understanding. In this sense Sino-centrism signals an identity shift towards an increasingly self-centred China more attuned to its distinct civilizational history (see Mingjiang, 2008: 292, Xue-tong, 2011). The paper will not present any direct evidence that an identity shift is indeed taking place. Official Chinese government parlance is still primarily characterised by a peculiar combination of “red slogans” and the “peaceful rise/harmonious world” narrative that is often associated with the so-called Globalism school of thought (see Shambaugh, 2011: 20-21). One may discern some indications of a narrative shift in, for instance, the editorial line of an influential CCP-newspaper like Global Times, but this paper will not state the case of an identity shift via a discursive analysis. Instead the present section advances a more indirect three-pronged argument of an emerging identity shift, while the last section discusses some of the likely implications for international order.

Actually, China has for a long time shied away from invoking its own civilizational past as a discursive asset. Sun Yat-sen, China’s great reformer of the 20th century pushed it to extremes, when he said that, ‘we, the modern people of China, are all useless, but if in the future we use Western civilization as a model, we can easily turn weakness into strength, and the old into the new’ (cited in Mahbubani, 2008: 128). During the Mao-era “the century of humiliation” was seen as a corollary of adhering too strictly to ancient Chinese norms and traditions giving the communists an excuse for eradicating rivalling value-systems. Since the opening up of China in 1978 the communist ideology has gradually been toned down paving the way for two contrasting identity constitutional dynamics. On the one hand there has been a Sino-centric tendency to direct attention inwardly towards the distinctness of Chinese identity most conspicuously demonstrated by the rise of nationalist rhetoric from the 1990s and onwards. On the other hand this development has so far been checked by the official coinage of “peaceful rise/harmonious world” and related Globalism-concepts signalling China’s intent to appear as a benign and responsible great power. However, I will argue that the former tendency will prove the stronger one eventually changing the official parlance and even foreign policies of the Chinese regime.

First of all, from greater material power flows greater ideational power. Just as American preponderance in the 20th century was a key factor in propagating liberal-democratic values, rising Chinese power will pave the way for Chinese ideas. Indeed, ‘for both reasons of national pride

and security, China wants to project its model abroad' (Ramo, 2004: 28). The often heard Western reservation that China does not possess a persuading soft power appeal is not so much erroneous as it is irrelevant (e.g. Buzan, 2010: 22). As seen above, China's Confucian and dynastic roots provides it with a collectivistic and authoritarian template that may seem attractive to (parts of) the outside world, not least as long as China maintains its current growth pattern (see Ramo, 2004: 26-28). More importantly, however, it does not necessarily require universalistic identity logic to nourish – or for that matter justify – a great power's identity project. All it takes is a profound dissatisfaction with the existing international order. With the "century of humiliation"-discourse still firmly embedded in Chinese thinking an ascending and more self-confident China appears to be fertile ground for anti-Western sentiments and the adoption of a more particularistic Chinese identity project (Callahan, 2010: 193).⁸

Furthermore, there is a global post-Cold War trend towards populist and nationalist politics altering the political landscape of even Western countries as new right-wing parties gain a strong foothold. China is by no means exempt from this trend, albeit its monopolistic mode of politics gives the Chinese regime a measure of control over possible outlets. While Western observers accordingly have used to view Chinese nationalism as a top-down instigated phenomenon, a number of recent studies have documented its bottom-up nature as witnessed by, among other things, the numerous Chinese internet sites of nationalist leanings (Callahan, 2010: 65; Jakobson & Knox, 2010: 45-46; see also Gries, 2004: 19-21, 117-121). With regime legitimacy no longer resting on communist doctrines of elite avant-gardism, the regime must not only fill an ideological void, but also increasingly incorporate popular inputs. Hence, a preoccupation with regime survival may, in fact, prove to be the strongest reason for translating popular nationalism into a more particularistic and self-assertive identity narrative of China.

Finally, several China-observers have recently described how the communist regime seems increasingly challenged by a wide array of semi-autonomous actors (the army, business interests, provinces etc.) as well as a cacophony of voices from the rapidly expanding media channels (Shirk, 2007; Jakobson & Knox, 2010). This development may in itself create strong counteracting incentives to mobilise the Chinese behind a clear identity profile towards the outside world. To be sure, a number of constraining conditions may reduce the likelihood of the proposed identity shift, of which China's dependence on the global economy and its military inferiority vis-à-vis the United States stand out. However, due to the increased significance of China's home market, China's impressive competitive power, its bountiful financial resources, its comprehensive military modernization and its growing ability to asymmetrically offset American power capabilities, one may argue that China is becoming gradually more capable of adopting

⁸ For an opposite (liberal-constructivist) argument that China has deep interests in maintaining a globalist, status quo-orientation see e.g. Johnston (2008), Ikenberry (2011).

an independent foreign policy course (see also Ramo, 2004: 3). This begs the question of what an identity-generated change of foreign policy will look like.

The rise of Sino-centrism in the 21st century

The argument so far can be condensed into the following propositions: State identities shape interests and thus overall foreign policies; four specific identity markers are central to Chinese self-understanding although they have been partially suppressed during the communist era; rising Chinese power is provoking an identity shift towards a more Sino-centric China based on the four identity markers. If this argument is accepted, then one may expect Chinese foreign policy to evince at least five tendencies with respect to international order.

No matter whether a Sino-centric China will seek merely to revise the current international Liberal Order or rather to build a rivalling order its identity-derived “construction manual” will differ greatly from that of the West. Firstly, emphasizing the civilization marker will lead the Chinese to adopt the culturally based exceptionalism characteristic of ‘the Middle Kingdom’-mentality. Only, this kind of exceptionalism will not be balanced by an equally strong liberal-democratic creed as in the case of the United States. In other words one may expect a civilization-oriented China to favour a unilateralist approach to international relations and only resort to multilateralism for instrumental reasons.

Secondly, stressing the Confucian philosophy marker will bring along a collectivistic notion of societal organization that runs counter to the individualistic philosophy of the West. If this version of collectivism, which champions order, harmony and a communitarian approach to interest formation, gains a stronger voice internationally, the human rights regime of the current liberal order is likely to be increasingly neglected by states within China’s orbit. Since collectivistic thinking is also a central feature of communism, it is actually not so much China’s changing identity in this respect as the fact of its rising power that will pose a challenge to the individualistic outlook of the West.

Thirdly, provided the dynastic marker continues to be an integral part of Chinese self-understanding politics within China will take a centralised and hierarchical form that may easily be translated into its foreign affairs as Chinese power grows. Already now, Beijing wields substantial political leverage that may gradually take a semi-imperialist form in the sense of China pressuring dependent countries to accommodate themselves to Chinese interests. Interestingly, such a development would at the same time work against China’s long-time, anti-imperialist adherence to the principle of sovereignty, which was originally a result of military weakness and communist ideology. But as circumstances change China may be increasingly in-

clined to disregard a strict application of sovereignty and intervene more directly into the affairs of dependent states.

Fourthly, on the face of it the Han-ethnocentrism marker may seem an unlikely point of reference for Chinese foreign policies, but to the extent that China does gravitate towards ethnic nationalism its foreign policy would probably display the following proclivities with respect to international order. China would seek to establish closer ties with the numerous overseas Chinese communities especially in South East Asia by using Chinese language media, Confucian Institutes and cultural networks as bridgeheads in order to influence the attitudes and loyalties of the overseas Chinese. Such ethnically informed policies may gradually develop into a more assertive desire to represent and even protect the interests of overseas Chinese in the same way that Beijing – via its “One China Policy” – claims to be the sole legitimate representative of the Chinese population on Taiwan.

Fifthly, and perhaps most disturbingly, the four basic identity markers of Chinese self-understanding almost stand in diametrical opposition to the ones dominating American identity thereby providing their mutual relationship with a potentially conflictual identity-constitutional dynamic. Americans believe strongly in individualism and the Bill of Rights (as opposed to Confucian collectivism), they fiercely uphold republicanism and the checks and balance system (as opposed to dynastic authoritarianism), they advocate multiculturalism and societal pluralism (as opposed to Han-ethnocentrism), and they exhibit their own version of exceptionalism associated with “Manifest Destiny-thinking” (unlike the exceptionalism of Sino-civilization).⁹ Irresponsible politicians on both sides may be tempted to frame these differences of identity; however, since identity narratives are not automatically constructed from available identity markers there is considerable narrative freedom to avoid an oppositional framing of the Sino-American relationship.

Let me finish with some clarifying observations. This paper is not unique in arguing that China is likely to harbour revisionist ambitions in its future foreign policy. In fact, several IR-scholars have argued so from both realist and constructivist standpoints (see e.g. Mearsheimer, 2006; Jacques 2009; Callahan, 2010; Kaplan, 2010). By coining the term ‘the Beijing Consensus’ Joshua Cooper Ramo (2004: 3-4) was among the first to accentuate the potential dividing lines between China and the West with the latter rallying around the so-called Washington Consensus. At the heart of his analysis lay a three-stringed political, economic and social juxtaposition of two very different developmental models leading Ramo to suggest that ‘the Beijing Consensus’ is increasingly viewed as an alternative societal model. Later, China-experts such as Martin

⁹ On the basic identity markers of American identity see, for instance, Gleason (1992); Lipset (1996); Jenkins (2003); Spiro (2008).

Jacques (2009) and William Callahan (2010) have focused on the cultural dimension of the differences between China and the West.

What is new here, however, is an attempt to not only identify and systematise a number of deeply anchored, culturally generated Chinese identity markers, but also to explore their specific ideational character as potential building blocks of a new Sino-centric international order. It is quite interesting to note that Chinese constructivist scholars studying Chinese identity formation almost invariably adopt a rather different view than the one presented here. They tend to assert the inclusive, complementary, yin-yang nature of China's self-understanding echoing official government parlance by insisting that an ascending China will promote a universal and peaceful harmony of differences among states (see Yaqing, 2010: 138-41; Liqun, 2010: 19, 40, 47). While this paper does not share such a view on the nature of Chinese identity constitution, there is, on the other hand, little reason to expect China to divert sharply overnight from its current "peaceful rise/harmonious world"-informed foreign policy course. Many China-experts have rightly observed that Beijing since 2009 has manifested a new attitude towards the outside world (cf. Economy, 2010: 149; Christensen, 2011: 54-55; Shambaugh, 2011: 24). David Shambaugh (ibid.) thus recently referred to China as 'an increasingly realist, narrowly self-interested nation'. Still, a comprehensive identity shift towards a Sino-centric China may take somewhat longer to realise and it is, in any case, not the only possible identity-scenario for a rising China. But if China does indeed turn out to be an utterly non-Western challenger, the United States may want to keep a sharp watch on China's current military modernisation.

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