

IDEATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY FROM THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL APPROACH¹

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In the context of China's rising, the questions of how Chinese power is constructed and projected, and its implications on international relations (IR) have increasingly been received attention from both policy makers and academia. This paper would explore the concept of 'ideational leadership in foreign policy' hereinafter referred as 'ILFP, grounded on the combined theoretical and historical analytical framework in addressing the puzzle of why China's self-proclaimed 'peaceful rise' and 'harmonious world' concepts as well as China's Charm Offensive have not been materialized right in Asia, arguably China's main strategic region. The paper argues that the recently revisited Confucian ideas matter in China's relations with the rest of the world under the current Chinese leadership not less importantly as they did throughout more than 3,000 years of history, and that ILFP must not be dismissed as rhetorical wordplay because it symbolizes strategic preferences, capabilities and limits with regards to policy outcomes. However, Hu Jintao in his second term and Xi Jinping in his early years in office might decide, out of their misperceptions and miscalculations, to take a risky and quite early departure from Deng Xiaoping's 'tao guang yang hui' (biding time strategy) which currently fit with Beijing's and regional contextual setting. In an attempt to grasp an insightful account of Chinese foreign policy and its future directions in the early twenty-first century, the paper first approaches theoretical frameworks and methodologies, which shed lights on how ideational leadership emerges and in what way it help shape the minds of Chinese leaders with regards to external relations beyond Chinese borders. Second, the paper provides a detailed historical account of Chinese ideational leadership in Chinese diplomacy dated back from the Imperial dynasties to the current communist party (CCP) leadership generations, characterising foreign policy in its interplay with the ancient tradition. Next, the paper examines China's policy toward Asia as the first experiment of Chinese ancient culture-inspired ideational leadership since the post-Cold War, analysing both its values and limits in guiding Beijing's relations with its neighbours. Lastly, the paper

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concludes by highlighting the significance of a well-tailored ILFP compatible with a rising and fast-changing China under Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Keywords: Ideational leadership, Chinese foreign policy, Chinese diplomacy, China's Asia policy

Ideational Leadership in Chinese Foreign Policy: Conceptualization and Theoretical Framework

Conceptualization

Ideational leadership is constructed ideationally from national leaders' perceptions/views of contextual settings based on their traditional background. The combination of the two separate concepts (ideational and leadership) has been meticulously analysed and concisely described in the latest findings that 'ideational leadership' revolves around 'leadership achieved with the help of ideas', and 'ideational leadership' is exercised by key policy-makers (or those individuals who are most likely to exhibit leadership) who use strategies that are idea-based ('ideational'), and purposively aim for the achievement of (policy) change, ('leadership') ([Stiller 2010: 33](#)). Ideational leadership used in this paper context refers to the ancient thought-inspired statesmanship demonstrated by individual, or collective leader(s) in management of all resources within one institutional or geographical space for multi-purposes in external relations. Whereas standard leadership is assumed as being essentially material power-related or material power-centred, ideational leadership departs from traditional thinking with the distinctive role attached to ideas. The idea-based ideational leadership focuses on 'innovation-mindedness, persuasion, and the breaking-down of vested resistance to change without relying merely on one's position of authority' ([Stiller 2010: 43](#)). In other words, ideational leadership may be seen as a comprehensive concept compassing 'intellectual leadership (ability to articulate the ideas), entrepreneur leadership (ability to sell the ideas) and implementation leadership (ability to translate the ideas into reality)' ([Geldenhuis 2008](#)).

Given the time-honoured tradition of the ancient thoughts, different countries will have their own version of ideational leadership according to their cultural legacies. It is worth of note that among big powers on earth, China is a very unique case of unbroken history of a great civilization and a great power throughout history. Chinese ancient thoughts of domestic and international politics were adopted, far beyond China's boundaries, in other countries, and helped catalyse the latter's ascendancy to powerful status in the past. Though some may

argue that Chinese culture was not different from other powers, and China strategic behaviour were similar to those by other major stakeholders ([Gilboy and Heginbotham 2012](#)), there was no vivid and strong reflection of ancient culture and philosophy in every aspect of politics and society for centuries other than within Chinese society. In this connection, the term of Chinese strategic culture has been extensively discussed, but was not unanimously defined in research within and outside China ([Feng 2007](#); [Johnston 1995](#); [Scobell 2003](#); [Y. Wang 2011](#)) Regardless of what types of strategic culture being conceptualized by scholars, the fact that Chinese well-grounded pride and awareness of the glorious past, and their well-justified determinations to re-achieve the predominance in the world politics always serves as strong driving force of Chinese policy domestically and in its relations with the rest of the world.

With regard to foreign policy, ideational leadership is the key to one's success in managing tangible and non-tangible resources with the strong emphasis laid on the role of ideas, turning those resources into various types of power through mind-shaping process and utilizing them for either strategic or specific goals and objectives. In this sense, ideational leadership may be crystalized and identified as the philosophy-inspired statesmanship guiding one country's diplomacy, but not necessarily identical as policy or strategy. In other words, ideational leadership in foreign policy (abbreviated as ILFP) has primarily been characterized by the relative continuity of the traditional themes of thoughts stemming from the ancient culture, and the subsequent flexibility in responding to changes in contemporary time. It is important for all nations to develop their own ideational leadership to maximize their power and interests, and nation-states are entitled to varying choices regarding the most suitable version of ideational leadership, based on their own historical and contextual settings. The significance of analysing international relations in the light of ILFP has further been highlighted in the visionary argument by one of American's most talented political scientist 'The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural... The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics.'[\(Huntington 1993\)](#) For big powers, how to develop an ideational leadership compatible to their conditions is a must for their country leaders. Even among big countries being endowed with abundant material resources and potential capabilities to become great powers, there have existed striking differences with regard to ideational leadership between those countries, which opt for neutrality in their diplomacy and those countries, which consistently project themselves as big powers in term of mentality, traditional norms and values, philosophy and policy, etc. A sketchy look at the three Asian powers namely China, India, and Japan can provide us

interesting comparative case studies of divergent ideational leadership. In Huntington's most controversial thesis, the Confucian, Hindu, and Japanese civilizations respectively representing the three mentioned states were categorized as ones of the most influential civilizations in the world ([Huntington 1993](#)). The impact of religion-bound culture can be explained for India's relatively passive ideational leadership, while the proactive ideational leadership of China and Japan, the other two Asian big powers in their power projections in the region, might be driven by their secular strategic culture during the imperial dynasties. It is essential to note that only Japan, the only 'superficial' civilization given its substantial learning and creative adoption of Chinese endogenous civilization, might develop the adaptability to launch radical reforms to transform its nation and society, and successfully escaped the humiliating fate of being a colony during the conquest of West power in the mid-19th century, and even rose to the status of the only non-Western power at the turn of the 20th century. In the aftermath of Western colonization and independence restoration in the mid-20th century, it is equally essential to note that only India adopted self-claimed neutrality line in its foreign policy, while China and Japan, out of their broader strategic ambitions, both pursued their alliance with the two superpowers in the Yalta bipolar system. In other words, ideational leadership may bring about the remarkable differences to the strategic preferences and decisions taken by various stakeholders in the international arena, which may be ranked as standing on the same par in term of material resources and capabilities. In this sense, Chinese leaders must demonstrate a high level of ILFP in bring Chinese combined power of material and conceptual factors to full play should their dreams of restoring their long-lost Great Power status be materialized some day. To that aim, China should attach proper importance to exerting influence on others in a moral and effective manner, setting new rules for other states to follow, and eventually establishing a new world order that is acceptable to the world community. ILFP is of significance to China had they replaced the US as the non-Western superpower both in term of material superiority and ideational attraction. As Xunzi, a great Confucian master in the Warring States period (481-221 BCE) asserted that "political power matters most", arguing that the changes in international politics have largely been attributed to political ideas of leaders. It is noteworthy that 'ideational leadership' has much in common with Xunzi's concept of 'political power' or recent concept of 'ideational power' by Lampton ([2008](#)). However, while the interpretation and translation of the concept of power in the Chinese context remain controversial among academics, ideational leadership will be the most favourable term throughout this paper.

Theoretical Framework

There exist research gaps that need to be filled in understanding Chinese foreign policy as China's rise in term of material capabilities has catalysed the need of new analytical frameworks for Asia in general and China in particular ([Callahan and Barabantseva 2011](#); [Kang 2007](#)). While Western scholars, mainly influenced by materialist stances, approach China as a big nation-state in the international order characterized with power balancing, the polarity, and unequal exploitation by big powers, the Chinese scholars complains that Western IRs paradigms fail to provide accurate account of Chinese cases, referring to the so-called 'Chinese exceptionalism' ([Zhang 2011](#)). Over the past few years, it is worth of note that pioneering experts in Chinese studies, including Chinese scholars who receive Western education have spared no efforts to bridging the gap by acknowledging both the Western IR contributions and limits, and selectively inheriting Chinese thousand-year-long culture. These projects approach the causal logics between Chinese foreign policy and the ancient culture from divergent theoretical perspectives using different analytical tools for framing analyses and for measuring and assessing claims.

First, in the context of changing structural systems, idea-related factors (inherent mindset, inborn/innate custom or behaviour, etc.) will be conditional on China's interactions with other intervening variables and vary accordingly to different interpretations including the Chinese people, that help shaped, hindered, and facilitated China's response to external challenges ([Blanchard and Lin 2013](#); [Kang 2013](#)). In other word, ancient thought cannot be seen as constant variable all the time in the mainstream of narratives, for instant the concept of strategic culture would neither be pacifism ([Feng 2007](#)) nor parbellum ([Johnston 1995](#)), neither unchangeable nor changeable, neither structuralist, liberalist nor constructivist etc. Instead of an arguably consistent type of 'Chinese exceptionalism', it is essential of note that imperial, Maoist, and today's China each display its own type of 'exceptionalism', related in certain principles but distinctive in form ([Zhang 2011: 18](#)). The ancient thoughts vary over time, and take different forms dependent on the political leaders who exploit the ancient tradition to mould their policy preferences and make necessary modification to achieve specific goals or purposes at certain time period. As an update to his own controversial points that Chinese strategic culture is no different from the Western realpolitik/realism, and a rise in China's relative power would lead to an increasingly aggressive, belligerent, and

expansionist policy.³ Johnston's so-called 'constructive learning process' means that China may and may not learn from its realpolitik strategic culture to become either a belligerent or a peaceful power in the world politics ([Johnston 2003](#)). In other words, 'this realpolitik is learned through a process of socialization, and can therefore be unlearned should decision makers be exposed to a non-realpolitik discourse' ([Y. Wang 2011](#)). In this sense, revised version of Cultural Realism can be seen as constructivist approach to reconstruct concepts and theories of China's interstate experience in the past to explain and predict China's international behaviour ([Zheng 2010](#)). In other words, ILFP can be seen as the uninterrupted process of learning 'to-be' or 'not-to-be', and Chinese leaders themselves are in the driving seat throughout the entire process. The mixture of combined application of realism and constructivism, and/or theoretical and methodological 'inconsistency' can be seen in another productive and practical project where an inspiring political vision for China with Chinese traditional values coexist with the author's claims using a positivist scientific method to explore the puzzle of Chinese ancient thoughts and modern power ([Yan 2011](#)). Yan points to the fact that China needs more types of power and must resort to multiple use of power, not material power alone during its 'peaceful rise' without any precedent or previous experiences. Yan argues that military capability build-up is crucial to China's rise, because 'it is unthinkable that a state could attain humane authority under heaven relying purely on morality and hard power at the lowest class (level)' ([Yan 2011](#)). Yet, it is the political power (or ideational leadership) that can determine the quality, and the success or the failure of one state's rising trajectory.⁴ The ideational background of Chinese ancient culture and philosophy inspired by the ancient thinkers would generate the power with Chinese characteristic for China's peaceful ascendancy to the world powerful position ([Yan 2011](#)). Yan contends that Chinese ancient culture is timely suitable for China's current conditions, and readily available at the Chinese leaders' disposal to create advantageous leverage for China in its rise to the world leading powerful status. 'Political leadership is the key to national power and that morality is an essential part of political leadership' ([Yan 2011: 2](#)).

³ Drawing on realpolitik-conforming elements from the military classics (*The Seven Military Classics*), Johnston categorizes China's strategic culture into symbolic (peaceful) and operational (expansionist) mode, and that expansionist mode is China's prevailing strategic culture. Cultural Realism contends that parbellum strategic culture dictates the Imperial Chinese security policy and the use of force is Chinese proactive and offensive inclination, and dismisses the symbolic Confucian antimilitarism. See Alastair I. Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁴ The Japanese miracle since the Meiji Reform in the mid-nineteenth century testifies to the fact that ideational leadership can make differences even though Japan was not ranked on the same par with other big powers in term of material and natural resources.

Second, the contribution of Chinese ancient thoughts both theoretically and practically will be seen in the supplementary relations, not contradictory ones, between the Westphalia system and Chinese traditional tribute hierarchy. The Chinese pattern of tributary hierarchy thriving on its ancient thoughts appears to become, in a number of ways, another appealing alternative to the Westphalia system ([Kang 2013](#)). The endless debate of which in the two paradigms can be rated as good or bad, similar or different, universal or exceptional ([Feng 2007](#); [Johnston 1995](#); [Scobell 2003](#); [G. Wang 2006](#); [Y. Wang 2011](#)) should be replaced by a more effective and constructive discussion of how to narrow down the gap of misunderstanding and misperceptions of the two schools of thoughts, and how to identify and utilize the values and limits of Chinese ancient thoughts in the policy making process. The study of pre-Qin ancient thoughts helps reveal the lack of a distinction between state power and (legitimate) authority' in contemporary Western-dominated IR theories. As Bell notes, 'Yan makes use of the analytical tools of modern IR theory to sharpen understanding of the international politic philosophy or pre-Qin thinkers, ... and aims to enrich IR theory with the discourse of ancient Chinese thought' ([Yan 2011: 8](#)). According to Yan, 'the issue of authority was under-researched. The former is the strength of enforcement and is mainly built on force, whereas the latter is the strength of legitimacy and is mainly built on trust' ([Yan 2011: 64](#)). Western-dominated theories would become more realistic and have greater policy relevance and predictive power should they take more seriously the role of concepts and morality in shaping international affairs, and not constrained to narrow meaning of projection and distribution of material force and influence ([Yan 2011](#)). In this sense, an evolutionary transformation has been witnessed in the international politics from 'hard realpolitik' to the so-called 'soft idealpolitik'. Yan differentiates between power (权力 — quanli) and capability (实力 — shili) in Chinese language, as well as the type of power deriving from the Chinese ancient thoughts. Yan groups military might, economic wealth and cultural capability in a category as natural capabilities (力 — li), which have much in common with Professor Lampton's analysis of the three faces of Chinese power ([Lampton 2008](#)), while political capability characterized as man-made capability (权 — quan). Power in the Western concept will be fully displayed in Chinese concept as a formula in which combined natural 'li' multiple with political 'quan' to make power (权力 — quanli). According to Yan, (M (military/might) + E (economic/money) + C (culture/ideas)) x P (political power) = Comprehensive Nation Power (CNP). The so-called CNP empowers China with capabilities and influences to determine and to correct others' behaviour in China's external relations.

Third, if a materially powerful China can export its own-brand ideas as the West does, then the inquiry of the values and limits of Chinese ancient thoughts in framing the scholarly debate and setting the global agenda should be critically examined. The claims of Tianxia as the global governance model for the world ([Zhao 2005](#)), or the Chinese IR school ([Qin 2012](#)), or the Chinese ancient thoughts for modern power ([Yan 2011](#)) etc are largely been seen in a framework borrowed from the Western IR, e.g. nation-state, nationalism etc. Still, such Chinese-rooted controversial concepts of legitimate war, the boundary of the Tianxia, stability within hierarchy, wangdao and badao, Chinese worldview (天下 — tianxia) and world (世界 — shijie), so on and so forth are yet to be defined. It is noteworthy that the theoretical framework in this paper has been basically grounded on Yan's excellent inquiry into the pre-Qin period ancient thoughts that shed lights on the modern IR in the twenty-first century. The proposition of 'ancient Chinese thoughts, modern Chinese power' mentioned in Yan ([2011](#)) marks a breakthrough in the investigation of the ancient thought-inspired ideational leadership in Chinese foreign policy making in the early 21st century. Yan argues that if China wants to facilitate its rise and compete with the US for a world leadership role, China's leaders should change its imported ideational worldview and adopt its very own ideationally appealing 'humane authority' (王道 — wangdao) versus the US's hegemony (霸道 — badao) to win more followers. Yan defines humane authority (王道 — wangdao) is an ultimate goal throughout an evolutionary process involving military use and alliance in which the ruler (sage) uphold morality, virtues and norms, while capable of imposing deterrence and punishment to correct the so-called others' 'immoral' behaviour. Yan's arguments posit a relationship between the level of morality of the hegemon, and the degree of stability of the international system and the length of time of its endurance ([Yan 2011: 10](#)). Yan appreciates Xunzi's important point regarding international system, i.e. hierarchy really matter stability, while equality only leads to chaos and instability. Humane authority is more likely than hegemonic power to succeed in influencing the norms of the international system ([Yan 2011: 12](#)). China does have an ideal and ideology: it professes to become an unique kind of great power by acting peacefully and harmoniously... it is a creation of the complex interplay between contemporary political needs, international structural constraints, and the exploitability of China's vast historical and cultural resources ([Zhang 2011: 18-19](#)). Still, the claims of Chinese ancient thoughts being considered international norms or code of conducts (Tianxianism), or the contentions that US 'badao' is characterized as the enforcement and immorality and that China 'wangdao' is symbolized with legitimacy, morality and trust, etc.

have not been supported with appropriate warrants. Furthermore, while it is true that the analysis and explanation of IR phenomena and events cannot be limited to any single paradigm, the 'blending of 'Confucian moralism' and realist understanding of power might produce either surprising theoretical potentials, or the risk of 'moral realism' being misused and abused' ([Zhang 2012: 96-7](#)). While Yan criticizes constructivist approach for heavily relying on subjectivism without acknowledging and addressing problems of objective reality, he seems to disregard the fact that even others want to develop new and positive perspective of China (subjectivism), they will be exposed to the bare facts of military build-up, misled-education, etc. in China instead of self-restraint and confidence building for the sake of reconciliation and stability in the region. Yan argues that regional countries' concerns of China's rise stem from their lack of confidence and misperceptions, therefore it is their problem, not China's. Yan asserts that China's uprising is the irresistible trend, and that China wastes no time to grasp the opportunity to become global power. No matter what terms or phrases are used, china's rise is the fact, and other countries must acknowledge that fact and pay due respect to China ([Wen 2011](#)). The paper argues that the foreign policy will be working for the sake of China and its people's interests unless Chinese ILFP itself is the reflection of the harmonious interplay between material and ideational factors, between outside and inside forces, etc. For instance, harmonious world and peaceful rise will definitely have no good for China when Hu Jintao and other Chinese leaders want to politicize those ancient thoughts, without fully considering China's capabilities and contextual settings, as political rhetoric and wordplay only.

Hypotheses

Hypotheses will be utilized as the methods to test the variances of variables in the theoretical framework. In the stimulation model within parameters/ limits of foreign policy in the early twenty-first century, Chinese leaders are the subject of study, or study variable (SV); ancient thought factor is specified as independent variable (IV); power deriving from ILFP is identified as intervening variable (Int. V) that can influence the outcome of the study; the main treatment of the study or dependent variable (DV) in this study is the 'peaceful and harmonious' policy (abbreviated as outcome P); material factors (economic and military resources abbreviated as factor E and factor M) and conceptual factors (traditional culture and history, norms, values, ideologies, perceptions, etc. as factor C) are assigned as conditional variables (CV). The paper argues that ancient thoughts matter only when such imaginative ideas match with the political wills of the leadership and become integrated as

source of power (ideational/normative power) in foreign policy through the ILFP in the modified formula of $(M \text{ and } E) + C) \times \text{ILFP} = P$. Based on China's current international and external environment, their self-serving interests, background and education, as well as the rule of consensus building in the policy-making process, Chinese leaders would work out the final strategic choices and decisions with regards to policy formulation and policy execution in varying situations and at specific timespans.

Hypothesis one (H1): Ancient thought factor (IV) is assumed as 'kingly authority' or 'wangdao' (王道) in line with the Confucianism Pacifism ([Chu and Jin 2008](#); [Zheng 2010](#)).

a) In case of cooperative and conducive conditions (positive CV both in term of factor E and factor M) at home and abroad, Chinese leaders have more rooms for manoeuvre with regard to external relations. Beijing's appeals for virtues and morality, and against any form of hegemonism (imperialism/revisionist imperialism) and no use of force in international relations earn high credits as an idealist alternative to American hegemony and the West realpolitik. In highlighting the Confucian pacifism, China help assures other big powers and the rest of the world of China's peaceful power transition and assiduous efforts to regain its long-lost power status and influence. Given the prevailing ancient thoughts of China as a great nation and civilization, the kingly authority or 'wangdao' (IV) as a necessary condition for the outcome of Chinese 'peaceful and harmonious' policy (DV) will be strong, and the explanatory or predictive power of the ILFP (Int. V) will be high.

b) In case of competitive rivalry over conflicting interests (negative economic and military indicators of CV) at home and abroad, even the ancient thought emphasize 'wangdao', Chinese leaders make use of 'peaceful and harmonious' policy (DV) as a bidding time strategy to ease the concerns over China's rise to the world power status. In this sense, there would exist big gaps between ideational leadership and policy outcome, between words and deeds (political rhetoric versus policy execution) etc., and Chinese leaders would eventually be under pressures to drop "peaceful and harmonious' policy over confusion. In that light, the ancient thought (IV) as an important input for the foreign policy (DV) will be weak, and the explanatory or predictive power of the ILFP (Int. V) will be low.

Hypothesis two (H2): the Chinese ancient thought-inspired (IV) is assumed as a sort of realpolitik thinking stemming from the Spring-Autumn and Warring States historical statecraft, which is very realpolitik in nature ([Pillsbury 2000](#)).

a) In case of cooperative and conducive conditions (positive material indicators of CV) at home and abroad, China will be most likely to renew its assertiveness of China's Great Power status following China's rise in material power. Chinese thinkers, be realists or liberals or constructivists, contend that the Great China's rise is the legitimate rights of Chinese people, and demand the respect from the rest of the world and a rightful position for a big power and a great civilization in its century-long Imperial past. In other word, the choices of 'peaceful rise' (heping jueqi: 和平崛起) or 'peaceful development' (heping fazhan: 和平发展), or 'harmonious world' (hexie shijia: 和谐世界) policy are defined as the rights and jobs of China and the Chinese people, demonstrating China's maximum degree of self-determination against Western inference ([Wen 2011](#)). The flexible ideational leadership will allow China to adopt opportunistically 'double-standard' policies, being either harmonious or non-harmonious at varying levels with different countries in different periods of time. In this connection, the ancient thought (IV) as a necessary condition for the outcome of a 'peaceful and harmonious' policy (DV) will vary from one case to another, and the explanatory or predictive power of the ILFP (Int. V) will not be the same in different cases.

b) In case of competitive rivalry over conflicting interests (negative factor E and factor M of CV) at home and abroad, a dissatisfied China may adopt an aggressive hegemonic pattern in pursuing ambitious objectives overseas, serving as disruptive factor to the existing balance of power with an aim to setting up a new international order. China will become a rising opposition forces through 'hegemonic authority' or 'badao' (霸道) which work against the status-quo. China would actively search for behind-the-scene bargaining outcomes among major stakeholders to set up a new balance of power or a new sphere of influence in the region, or to unilaterally impose big power approaches to existing and emerging security problems, in favour of China's interests. Interest-driven ideational leadership and power-oriented miscalculations will definitely result in the worst scenario of big power strategic rivalry and confrontation. In that case, the ancient thought (IV) as a necessary condition for a contrasting version of a 'peaceful and harmonious' policy will be strong, the explanatory or predictive power of the ILFP (Int. V) will be high.

In the next section, an analytical survey of ILFP throughout history will sketch out an overview of the relationship between Chinese ancient thoughts and foreign policy, while highlight the importance of a well-suited ideational leadership to the directions of Chinese policy and China's destiny in the future.

Ideational Leadership in Chinese Diplomacy: A Historical Overview

Sino-centric Worldview Ideational Leadership in Imperial Dynasties

Throughout centuries, Chinese culture has accumulated ideational contributions to the governance and leadership of the society and state. There are three major characteristics of Chinese traditional culture that consistently help shape Chinese leaders' strategic preferences, namely (i) Pax Sinica (Chinese peace or China-defined stability), (ii) Chinese cultural superiority, and (iii) rule by virtues ([Blanchard and Lin 2013](#); [Callahan 2008](#); [Chu and Jin 2008](#); [Zhang 2011](#)). The three main themes in ideational leadership have largely been taken into consideration of the so-called 'exceptionalism' in Chinese foreign policy in discursive context.

First, the history of turbulence has taught the Chinese rulers to attach importance to Pax Sinica or China-defined stability, referring to the harmony and peace in East Asia maintained by Chinese hegemony (or the China-dominated tribute system). During imperial dynasties, ideational leadership in Chinese diplomacy was featured with a remarkably flexible inclination to the use of force (Chinese ancient realism or real politics) and consistent propaganda about its moral principles (Chinese ancient idealism). The historical records show numerous evidences of China's interference in other nations to maintain China-defined stability and harmony. This strategy was successful in the sense that Chinese hegemony was largely accepted in the tribute system, and China's vassal states accepted, somewhat reluctantly, the gap between the words (Confucian pacifism) and the deeds (China's legitimized uses of force). This approach has further been elaborated in the research of Confucianism and Chinese power politics by Wang Yuan-kang ([Y. Wang 2011](#)). From the perspective of structural realism, Wang provides a thoughtful appraisal of several Confucian misperceptions in the Chinese existing literature, and an insightful analysis of the so-called 'benevolent tribute system.' Wang examines Chinese military policy during the Song and Ming Dynasties and argues that relative power concerns were at the heart of Chinese strategic choices ([Y. Wang 2011: xiii](#)). Having acknowledged that Confucian pacifism is a widely held opinion in existing scholarship on Chinese strategic behavior, Imperial China's security policy was largely driven by power-based realist logics rather than the ideal Confucian culture of peace and harmony, and Confucian pacifism only had a limited role in preventing China going to war ([Y. Wang 2011](#)). Wang argues that Confucianism arguments appeared only after realpolitik-driven strategies failed to resolve the security issue, and that China has been a practitioner of realpolitik for centuries.

Second, stability was guaranteed by good governance and the respect for Chinese Emperors' mandate to rule (天下 — All Under Heaven) by destiny. Chinese Emperors (天子 — Son of Heaven) who were believed to be chosen thanks to their moral superiority and political legitimacy. In this sense, China's diplomacy was colored by the sense of superiority of Chinese civilization and discrimination against surrounding states ([Chu and Jin 2008: 7](#)). The belief system, that was greatly reinforced by the hierarchical and universalistic political-ethical values of Confucianism, asserted that peace and stability within societies and among states resulted from the maintenance of a set of superior-inferior relationship in which each individual of political entity clearly understood and performed its proper role relative to others ([Swaine and Tellis 2000: 13-4](#)). Connolly and Gottwald ('The Long Quest for an International Order with Chinese Characteristics') argue that China seeks to transform the international system because one of the key defining image of Chinese elites over time has been, and continues to be, China as a leading civilization setting global norms and standards ([Blanchard and Lin 2013: 164](#)).

Third, the traditional line in Chinese diplomacy of 'Pax Sinica' and 'sense of cultural superiority' was closely associated to a self-proclaimed 'rule by virtues'. Originated from a domestic politics terminology, 'rule by virtues' highlights the outstanding qualities and virtues as the key to Chinese Emperors' overwhelming power. In the Confucian belief system, the Emperors were also seen as the virtuous leaders who commanded respect and authority through his moral, upright behaviour in upholding correct, hierarchical, patterns of human relationship ([Swaine and Tellis 2000: 14](#)). In the hierarchical order, Chinese imperial leaders were traditionally empowered the unlimited and unchecked capacities which allowed them to determine policy formulation and execution at their discretion. As a result, Chinese political system was marked by a highly personalistic and centralized authoritarian pattern of rule, not the democratic and institutionalized system influenced by the West civilizations ([Swaine and Tellis 2000: 6; 11](#)). Beyond its territories, Chinese Emperors expected the similar submissions from other countries in its tribute system as the hierarchical system within China. It is worth of note that China-dominated regional order of 'rule by virtues' in Asia was arguably considered more humane, in many ways, than the Western-style colonization and conquest.

In a nutshell, the three major ancient culture-related themes have largely shaped the ideational leadership in Chinese diplomacy in the imperial past, which help shape our thinking about the continuities and discontinuities between the imperial past and the

following periods. During imperial dynasties, the Sino-centric worldview ideational leadership in Chinese diplomacy was featured with a remarkably flexible inclination to the use of force in practice vis-à-vis the emphasis on morality and stability in discourse ([Johnston 1995](#); [Y. Wang 2011](#)). This successful strategy brought about Chinese unparalleled power and unchallenged domination in the tribute system for centuries, and China's vassal states accepted, somewhat reluctantly, the gap between the words (Confucian pacifism) and the deeds (China's legitimized uses of force).

Absence of Ideational Leadership During and After the Western Colonization

China's perception of the world order in the years after the 1900 Boxer Rebellion was no longer based on traditional perception of its own superiority, but on the awareness of danger of to be lagged far behind and being colonized by the West ([Rozman 1981: 250](#)). The sense of Chinese cultural superiority was severely undermined following the West invasion of China during the 'Century of Humiliation' since the outbreak of the First Opium War. Following the Western interferences and invasions, China was faced with the biggest empire survival-threatening challenges ever in the history since Qin Emperor. China was no longer an equal among the great empires, ... a long-unchallenged understanding of China's place in the world had been largely undermined' ([G. Wang 1977: 9](#)). An old China was too shocked to be able to respond to the rising Western powers associated with the Western values that came to colonize China with modern military force and advanced technologies.⁵ Chinese people had to accept the bitter fact of being defeated at the guns of Western countries, and the formerly pro-claimed 'Son of Heaven' now being defeated and considered as inferior state to the so-called 'barbarians'. Following numerous war defeats, the Qing Dynasties signed humiliated peace treaties and accepted many unequal conditions with Western powers, e.g. opening seaports and territories to Western traders, offsetting dividends to the war victors, etc. Traditional vassal states in the imperial tribute system ceased to pay tribute to Chinese imperial rulers, or fell into the West's colonial control right in the face of the self-proclaimed legitimate Tianzi (Son of Heaven). China's case was extremely miserable as Japan, one of the vassal states within China's tribute system in imperial past, after undertaking Meiji Reform in the mid nineteenth century, then became the only Asian power that could stand on the same

⁵ Indeed, China was defeated by the Western powers in the sense that 'internal issues ill-treated by the Qing rulers made Beijing vulnerable to external pressures' because many contend that China is defeated by the Chinese themselves only. For an in-depth discussion, see Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Kun-Chin Lin, 'Contemplating Chinese Foreign Policy: Approaches to the Use of Historical Analysis', *Pacific Focus - Inha Journal of International Studies*, XXVIII/2 (2013), 145-69.

par with Western countries. Japan's rise threatened China's survival as an empire given the former's ambitions to annex China's vassal states e.g. Taiwan, Korea etc. and to put China under its colonial control. This led to the tremendous changes in Chinese thinking and perceptions, as evidenced with the emergence of 'victim mentality' and 'sense of vulnerability'. However, way-out solutions to China's ideational leadership crises were extremely difficult in the context of existing national conditions of both foreign aggression and civil war. Having confronted with the biggest immediate threats ever to its very own survival, China was extremely bewildered and sometimes at loss in thinking and responses during China's transitional period. Regretfully, as Chinese empire was shattered at the turn of the twentieth century, Confucianism as the national doctrine and other traditional values and thoughts were simultaneously taken out as scapegoats for public criticisms and attacks. In his famous 'Three Principles of the People', Dr. Sun Yatsen advocated the rejection of old thinking that obstruct the modernization and development only, and made the breakthrough in integrating new ideas and philosophies from the West into the quintessence of the Chinese culture. Dr. Sun Yatsen's philosophy was first adopted as the political guideline of the first Republic of China, and was then further interpreted by Chiang Kaishek and other Kuomintang leaders as the 'Chinese knowledge as the basis, Western knowledge as the function' (中学为体, 西学为用). Chiang insisted that foreign methods and ideas could never grow and flourish unless they were built on the foundation of Chinese tradition, and even went further in crediting Chinese thinkers with Western ideas ([Tan 1971: 169-71](#)). Chiang-led Kuomintang's vigorous call for the revival of traditional philosophy and virtues mainly reflected Chiang's considerations in addressing severe threats from Communist forces and Japanese invaders, namely 'to oppose the foreign ideology of Communism, traditional philosophy seemed a potent weapon; to oppose the spirit Japanese Bushido, the revival of the Chinese national spirit (through the revival of the confidence in Chinese culture) seemed a logical step' ([Tan 1971: 173](#)).

The contextual changes of the 'Century of Humiliation' did shake the traditional Sino-centric worldview ideational leadership to ground. Imperial ruling dynasties ended in 1911 but the ground was not fertile for a new ILFP in a New China (the Republic of China) given external and internal challenges and crises. By earlier twentieth century, China became a semi-feudal and colonial nation, dubbed as 'the Asian patient' without independence and sovereignty, territorial integrity and diplomatic dignity. As an empire with long history of unchallenged tradition and prestige, it was extremely difficult for Chinese Kuomintang

leaders to transform Chinese society and nation for modernization at the dawn of new century. To some extents, Chinese pride of national attributes and qualities, and the subsequent rejection of foreign ideas and values reduced the possibility of effective borrowing and application in local context ([Rozman 1981](#)). Although ideational leadership was absent in this period, China indeed underwent a serious brainstorming process that served as ground mapping for ideational leadership in the following period.

Changing Ideational Leadership in the Communist China during the Cold War

‘Continued Revolution’ Ideational leadership under Mao (1949-1976)

Being hailed as the helmsman of the nation, Mao Zedong attempted to initiate the unprecedented ideational leadership in Chinese history, combining those of the first Qin Emperor, Tsun Yatsen, and the Maoist version of Marxism, pursuing the ‘continued Revolution’ strategy. Mao sent out the message that ‘the primary sources for change, innovation and development must come from within the society or country (or the leaders) concerned, and the external factors should always be secondary, either in economic development or in the practice of revolution’ ([Yahuda 1978: 283](#)). First, it is noteworthy that Chinese view of the world under Mao was in fact deeply rooted in Chinese history and traditional perception of China’s place in the world order because ‘no one can understand Mao Zedong’s thought without knowing some of the Confucian tradition’ ([Fairbank 1979: 53](#)). While criticizing the Confucianism and Chinese culture, the Chinese communists were (ironically) dependent on that civilization, and self-claimed revolutionary ideals and practices also (beneficially) grounded, in one way or another, in earlier modes of thought and behaviour even they never admitted ([Rozman 1981: 456](#)). Furthermore, the crucial role of ideology under communism lends particular interests to China’s ideological past ([Fairbank 1979: 55](#)). China’s definition of independence namely sovereignty, freedom from interference, and equality in strength with the strongest in the world order are much broader than conventional definitions assumed by normal nation-states ([G. Wang 1977: 2](#)). As Connolly and Gottwald argue that China’s engagement with the international system over the past 100 years show that the desire for prestige and honour within the international system is one key determinant in China’s behaviour, and China’s self-esteem has meant that it has constantly sought, on the basis of its capacities at any point in time, to remake the rules to take account of China’s own self image ([Blanchard and Lin 2013: 164](#)). In other word, the pride of unrivalled long history of Chinese civilization, its demand for a rightful place as one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, its attempts to challenge the legitimacy of

‘unequal treaties’, or its burning desire to become a world-ranking Great Power through efforts to construct an alternative international order all stemmed from the traditional Sino-centric worldview mindset of the Chinese people for centuries. Be weak or strong in term of material capabilities, Mao and other communist leaders always assert China’s prestige as a big power in its relations with the rest of the world as evidenced in the Korean War against the US and its unyielding stance with regard to territorial integrity and the so-called ‘territorial restoration’.⁶

Second, Chinese foreign policy since the founding of Communist China until Mao’s death in 1976 was largely based on revolutionary platform of ‘opposing hegemonism and defending world peace’ than the crucial task of development of China. Chairman Mao’s radical perceptions and assessments of international context and the war brinkmanship mentality that largely shape Chinese ‘continued revolution’ ideational leadership in which China served as the world revolutionary centre that was assigned the mission to export revolution worldwide. As national security and territorial integrity was at risks since the embryonic stage, the dominant themes in Chinese foreign policy were characterized with anti-hegemony and peace orientation. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence proposed by China and India at the 1954 Bandung Conference regarding relations among countries of different socio-political systems well reflected China’s sensitivity and security perceptions of external aggression and interference in domestic affairs, primarily appealing to the respect for China’s existence, equality, mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence with other powers. However, such foreign policy named after peace and coexistence soon proved problematic with the ‘continued revolution’ ideational leadership. On the question of war and peace, Mao stressed that there was no true peace in the world should imperialists not be defeated. Mao Zedong then developed the basic concepts of Marxist-Leninist of dialectic materialism referring to the contradictions between Western imperialism and Chinese communism in Chinese revolution. The Chinese Communists did not believe that the contradictions can be resolved without revolutionary struggle, ... it firmly believed that imperialism is the source of wars in modern time ([Tan 1971: 367](#)). Chinese communists denounced Khrushchev-led Soviet Union’s policy line of détente with the West as the betrayal of Communist world, and

⁶ This explains the seemingly irrational decisions and aggressively risky policy decisions undertaken by China under Mao in the lens of the Western scholars when Beijing was considered in the weakest and most disadvantageous position in term of material capabilities.

the revisionism against the Marxist-Leninist doctrines.⁷ Beijing declared that ‘China would fight for the maintenance of world peace through the development of socialist forces and the revolution struggles’, arguing that ‘the principle of peaceful co-existence was not applicable to relations between oppressor and oppressed nations’ (Tan 1971: 366-67). Even Mao Zedong’s last ideational legacy in Chinese diplomacy namely the ‘Three Worlds’ concept articulated by Deng Xiaoping at the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 was still grounded on that radical ideational leadership. In ‘Three Worlds’ concept, Mao categorized the two superpowers in the First World, industrialized countries in the Second World, and the rest of developing and least developed countries in the Third World with an aim to leading a world united front against hegemony, especially the Soviet Union. The concept was the chain product in Chairman Mao’s revolutionary foreign policy line charted since 1949, and remained as the conceptual framework for various Chinese leaders to analyse the world situation and formulate China’s foreign policy throughout the 1970s (Cheng 1989: 194).

In short, though Mao’s ‘continued revolution’ ideational leadership appealed to the revolutionary zeal as a momentum for reviving a glorious Great China regardless of the unfavorable internal and external environment, such erroneous ideational leadership became a disastrous failure that brought about China devastating consequences both at home and abroad. Domestically, the denunciation of ancient culture heritage during the ‘Great Cultural Revolution’ was in fact the assaults on those who opposed to Mao Zedong’s ruling power in his campaign to purify the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Externally, China’s diplomatic relations with the rest of the world were adversely affected, especially since outbreak of the ‘Great Cultural Revolution’ in 1966. The hostile relations with the US-led Western camp since the confrontation in the Korean War, and various skirmishes and conflicts with the Soviet Union and other neighbouring countries during the Cold War seriously undermined Beijing’s self-proclaimed peace-loving image and policy. China was plunged into chaos, as the economy was on the brink of collapse, and the socio-political structure was destructively shattered.

‘Tao guang yang hui’ (Biding time) Ideational leadership under Deng (1978-1992)

Learning from Mao’s failure, Deng Xiaoping developed a pragmatically opportunistic ideational leadership, which fitted well with contextual conditions of China, and

⁷ China’s bombard attacks of Quemoy (Jinmen) and Matsu, the two islands in the Taiwan Straits in 1958 was one of Beijing’s planned tests of the China-Soviet Union alliance that Khrushchev and other Soviet Union leaders frustrated Mao with their blunt refusal to be involved in further escalating stand-offs and confrontation with the US in the Asia-Pacific over the sensitive issue of Taiwan.

demonstrated a cautious confidence of visualizing Great China nostalgia. In the prevailing trend of integration and interdependence since the Third Industrial Revolution in the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping and his comrades came to a crucial conclusion that the possibility of world war was not ruled out, however it was no longer the imminent threats to China's security as much as it was before. The guideline of hiding forces and binding time for opportunities (taoguang yanghui: 韬光养晦) reflected the wisdom of Deng-led ideational leadership in grasping tremendous opportunities and addressing big challenges at that critical time. Following the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976, the Four Modernizations were the top priority of the post-Mao leaders to improve the people's livelihood, and the discredited legitimacy of the communist ruling regime following the disastrous Cultural Revolution ([Cheng 1989: 195](#)). The principles and themes guiding the Chinese foreign policy were no longer dictated by the anti-hegemony line, but by the emphasis on modernization instead. To that aim, China's diplomacy mainly focused on ensuring a peaceful environment for national development and reform since the 1978 Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Communist Party Congress. Since the 1982 Twelfth Party Congress, China embarked on the foreign policy of independence, peace and development, asserting fundamental changes i.e. China's position of not aligning to superpowers either in 'leaning to one side' (yi bian dao: 一边倒) or in 'one- united front' (yi tiao xian: 一条线), and China not taking the lead (bu dang tou: 不当头) as the world revolutionary centre against both US imperialism and Soviet revisionism in the past. The theme of peace and development in Chinese foreign policy set forth by Deng Xiaoping was a timely and correct decision for China and the world. Since the early 1980s, the slogan of 'China's development was not isolated from the world's development, and vice versa' marked the breakthrough in Chinese diplomacy, highlighting Deng's pragmatic approach. In this light, China prudently took the first steps to integrate into the international order dominated by those powers that invaded and colonized China in the past 'Humiliation Century'.

The 'tao guang yang hui' ideational leadership have transformed China materially in all veins, turning a wrecked economy to one of the world largest economies, and elevating China to the ranking of the most powerful nation in the Asia-Pacific. From an in-depth perspective, the reform and open-up policy and the Four Modernizations designed by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s were the most successful efforts ever launched by the Chinese Communists to modernize China and to revive China's re-ascendancy as a great power. As one scholar remarked 'one almost universally shared goal in China for the last 150 years or

more is to make China rich and powerful and to regain the nation's former status as a great power that control its own fate' ([Lampton 2008: 25](#)). Still, China had been grappling in the struggle between the 'ancients' and the 'moderns,' in a wide variety of forms, has characterized numerous trials and efforts undertaken by a great civilization to achieve modernization over the two centuries ([Rozman 1981: 510-11](#)). In other word, the ILFP under Deng primarily deals with the material weakness that was inappropriately addressed during the late Qing Dynasty and under Mao Zedong, while leaving the ideational factors, especially the Chinese ancient culture, underestimated and unexplored.

China's Asia Policy: First experiment of New Ideational Leadership since the end of the Cold War

The very first indicators of Chinese new ideational leadership in the post-Cold War period under Jiang Zemin and his successor Hu Jintao have been witnessed in Asia, a region home to China's fourteen neighbouring states, its traditional sphere of influence (China-dominated tribute system) in the Imperial past, and also its main strategic springboard for China's rise in the modern time. It is noteworthy that the Chinese leaders in the third and the fourth generations have initially launched the first stepping stone for the comprehensive rise of China, both in term of material and ideational factors, given the fact that Confucianism ancient thoughts which have been revisited and enshrined in the foreign policies in the post-Cold War period.

Jiang Zemin's version of 'tao guang yang hui' Ideational Leadership (1992-2003)

From the first Opium War to the end of the Cold War (1840-1989), China suffered from the so-called 'victim mentality', and was inclined to adopt pessimistic views of foreign countries and dissatisfaction toward any international order. Yet, since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar world order dominated by the US and Soviet Union, China gradually shifted from the 'outsider' position (1949-1989) to the 'observer' status (1990-1995), and a 'proactive stakeholder' in international affairs in some circumstances. In the late 1990s, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, and the end of the Cold War brought China unprecedented opportunities and challenges. While China could have been relieved as the permanent threats to China's security from the Soviet Union, its giant neighbour in the North for decades, suddenly 'disappeared,' Chinese leaders were immediately aware of the risks itself being targeted by the West as one of the last communist regimes in the world, especially in view of the US-led embargo on China following the Tiananmen crackdown in June 1989, and the NATO

‘mistaken’ bombing’s of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrad in May 1999. Asia was then considered the first experiment for China’s new ideational leadership in the post-Cold War in facing with a totally different world. The ‘New Security Concept’ (xin anquanguan: 新安全观), envisioning the arrival of China as a ‘great responsible power’ (fu zeren de daguo: 负责任的大国) in the new millennium, was Jiang Zemin’s contribution to Chinese ideational leadership in foreign policy during the most challenging period to China since the end of the Cold War. In the continued ‘tao guang yang hui’ ILFP framework set by Deng Xiaoping which emphasizes on development of material capabilities (the Four Modernizations), Jiang Zemin took the first steps toward envisioning a future of China’s leading the world in term of ideational power in the conformity with China’s spectacular rise in material power.

The concept of ‘New Security Concept’ put forth by the former Foreign Minister Qian Qichen at the ASEAN Regional Forum (AFR) in July 1996 aimed at assuring the security and favourable conditions for China’s reform and the Four Modernizations in a complex security environment of the post-Cold War period. The establishment of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) including China and other five former Soviet Union states bordering China in the northwest, China’s positive records of border dispute settlements with most of its neighbouring states (twelve out of fourteen neighbouring states by 2008), and the signing of China-ASEAN strategic partnership, including the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreements (CAFTA) in 2001, and the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and the Declaration of Conduct (DOC) among the claimants in the South China Sea disputes in 2002, were viewed as constructive achievements, to name a few, among a number of demonstrators of the new security concept of building confidence through dialogues and promoting security through cooperation. His ideational legacies for his successor also included ‘peaceful rise’ and ‘harmony’ (datong: 大同) which has been further developed under Hu Jintao’s leadership.

‘Transformative’ Ideational Leadership under Hu Jintao (2003-2012)

China under Hu Jintao enjoyed a more secure and stable conditions than under Jiang, and Hu’s ILFP between the 2002-2007 period was largely the continuity of Jiang’s ILFP material-cum-ideational version, adding Hu’s emphasis on ‘peaceful rise/ development’ and ‘harmonious world’. The term ‘peaceful rise’ was first coined by Zheng Bijian, the Deputy Head of the Central Party School of the Communist Party in his speech at the Bo’ao Asia Forum in 2003 as a counter-argument for the Western-specified ‘China Threat Theory’. The ‘peaceful rise’ term, which was replaced by ‘peaceful development’ in 2004, emphasized

China's commitments of not seeking hegemony, and of a peaceful power transition that pose no threats to international peace and security. At the 60th United Nation Anniversary in 2005, Hu Jintao's 'harmonious world' speech sketches out a future in which the harmonization of differences will be the prevailing trend in the international system, calling for the respect for the right of each country to independently choose its social system and development road, and the support for the efforts of countries to realize rejuvenation and growth according to their own national condition, and the diversification of civilizations in the spirit of equality and openness, (in order to) reinforce dialogue and exchanges among different civilizations and join hands to build a harmonious world where various civilizations coexist. Many scholars shared the view that China's leaders attempt to uphold 'peaceful rise' and 'harmonious world' policy, assuming it as a shield to protect China's interests against Western interference in its domestic affairs, and as an ideological attractiveness of China's rising to the rest of the world ([Callahan and Barabantseva 2011](#)). China's rise may be interpreted as the very first non-Western rising model (a newly-emerging unprecedented 'kingly authority' featured by 'peaceful rise with Chinese characteristics for a harmonious world' versus the US's 'hegemonic authority'. Indeed, 'in the post- 9/11, Beijing wins support at home abroad not by articulating lofty aspirations but rather by identifying itself with the resentment of those who resist an ideologically assertive American' ([Lampton 2008: 142](#)). For instance, the spirit of 'harmony without uniformity' is a timely Chinese ideational counter-response to the US unilateral stance of identifying those who are not with the US are with the terrorists, thus exercising effective pressures on Washington to conduct its international relations with the same respect for diversity that it practices at home ([Lampton 2008: 143](#)). In the context of globalization, Beijing's reappraisal and embrace of traditional culture, national pride and nationalism has been considered the natural responses to adverse impacts from outside on society and state. Chinese ancient thought featuring the most quintessence of Chinese traditional culture and historical statecraft would be the ideational weapon for Beijing to challenge the West's long-time dominance since the nineteenth century.

As the trend of interdependence and cooperation for development prevails under the impacts of globalization, especially since the outbreak of the 2009 world financial crisis, China's role in shaping regional economic-security architecture has been much appreciated. In the aftermath of the 2008-2009 world financial crisis, Chinese leaders have been faced with new challenges and pressures for a high profile internationally and high stakes in the current balance of power. The initial departure from the 'tao guang yang hui' guideline

adopted by China since 1978 and the ‘peaceful and harmonious’ line in external relations during Hu’s early years in office, to a much more assertive profile has been witnessed in China under Hu to grasp China’s self-perceived opportunities and make use of all abilities and resources to materialize its targets (you suo zuo wei: 有所作为) ([Johnston 2013](#); [Swaine and Fravel 2011](#)). The ILFP can explain changes in the way China has been treating its Asian neighbouring countries for the past two decades. It is noteworthy that since the outbreak of diplomatic hassles and incidents in the South China Sea between China and other ASEAN claimants in 2009, China’s harvest of charm offensive in East Asia has been adversely affected. It is known to all that China has spared lots of efforts in counter-balancing the China Threat Theory, especially in the regions adjacent to China’s boundaries. However, the hard-won fruits of China’s charming diplomacy with Southeast Asian countries were soon shattered following China’s assertive moves in the South China Sea disputes and/or the diplomatic hassles as evidenced in the ASEAN Summit held in Cambodia in November 2012. As a result, instead of enjoying its smooth and peaceful ascendancy, China has been confronted with growing concerns, claims, and protests from other regional countries. Undoubtedly, Beijing has been, to some extents, aware of and prepared itself to the adverse consequences following such initial changes in the dubbed ‘peaceful and harmonious’ foreign policy. The political pressures on Hu Jintao and his successors were not severe and urgent enough to push them into the aggressive behaviour,⁸ unless they were experiencing other political ideals to guide their use of power in the new context of China’s rise. In other words, the increasingly activist inclination should be seen as the selective way of ‘measuring the waters by dropping the stone’ that Chinese leaders may resort to achieve the empirical assessments of China’s capabilities in relations with other conditional variable at home and abroad.

To sum up, at the turn of the new millennium, Chinese leader represented by Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao came to learn that the utilization of China’s ancient thoughts for the promotion of comprehensive power and resources would work well for China’s rise in the new regional and international setting. The fact that China’s material (hard) power need more time to catch up with the US current level which definitely change over time will require China to ‘become an increasingly influential nation with substantial ideational power’

⁸ It is often asserted that poor policy coordination and policy implementation (PLA operandi PLA retired and quasi-retired haws), or China’s responses to escalating provocations from other claimants and stakeholders are to be blamed for China’s inconsistency between policy and behavior, but such kind of views are partial compared to the comprehensive analytical framework of ILFP perspective.

([Lampton 2008: 29](#)) to achieve their strategic goals and ambitions. Out of the Chinese ancient wisdom and philosophy that have been explored by Chinese thinkers and leaders for decades, the application of ‘harmony in diversities’ spirit would be of great significance in terms of policy and practice to the formulation of new ideational concepts in China’s international strategies ([Jiang and Xie 2004](#)). ‘Beijing’s active promotion of ‘harmonious world’ suggests that the era of Deng ‘lay low, not take the lead’ strategy is coming to an end; but what comes next is still not clear’ Callahan ([2011: 1](#)). Similarly, the ambivalent concept of ‘harmonious world’ initiated by President Hu Jintao was no longer mentioned since President Xi Jinping came to power. New inputs for Chinese ideational leadership should be critically discussed and better designed for China’s future role as the world leader.

Implications for Chinese Ideational Leadership under Xi Jinping

Jiang and Hu’s ideational leadership experiences in China’s Asia policy are of great significance to President Xi Jinping’s strategy in leading China re-ascendancy to the world-ranking Great Power status. As Xi officially came to power in March 2013, it would be too early to offer a meticulous assessment of Xi’s ideational leadership in foreign policy. However, this section attempts to provide a sketchy overview of Chinese policy directions under Xi during his first years in reign that would be conducive to the shaping of an ideational leadership compatible with a rising China. For many, Xi might aim to revive Chinese power and pride of the glorious past in the modern time through his appeal for ‘China’s Dream’ (zhongguo meng: 中国梦), which was originally mentioned in a book of Colonel Liu Mingfu, a Professor at Beijing’s National Defence University as a zero-sum game in which China would achieve its dream by displacing the US leadership ([Liu 2008](#)). Xi also demonstrated his strong confidence in spelling out China’s top diplomatic priority of building ‘Major Power Relations’ with the West, which was traditionally written in Party Congress documents only. Xi attached top priority to harmonizing differences among China and other powers, with an aim to stabilizing relations with big powers and developing peaceful co-existence, or negotiable agreement on the spheres of influence. It is equally important for China to build stable relationship with big powers, especially the US to ensure China’s smooth ascendancy to powerful position in multipolar world order.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, China’s rise has been one of the most striking characteristic in the global politics, and been taken into consideration by all regional countries over the past decades. Ironically, as China becomes more confident about its rise, Beijing leaders seem to be caught in a dilemma of making this phenomenon be understood

and accepted to the rest of the world, primarily to its Asian neighbours. Amidst rising tensions in the disputed seas pending constructive approaches, China's recent assertive behaviour in the South China Sea and East China Sea has added undesirable fuel to the simmering fire among claimants over the sovereignty and territorial disputes in the region. The China's oil-rig Haiyang Shiyou HYSY- 981 deployment in the contested waters with Vietnam in early May 2015 has aroused world-wide protests against China's violation of international laws, including the United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China's tramp of the international rules and practices draws home the very basic question of what kind of dreams Xi is pursuing, and what sort of means Xi is resorting to achieve their dreams, and whether China's Dream is at the expense of others' etc. Undoubtedly, a miscalculated, misperceived ILFP will cast adverse impacts on China's very own upward trajectory to Great Power status.

Hu's experiences with regards to ILFP have not been properly learnt by Xi who has repeatedly made mistakes in relations with other Asian neighbours, disregarding international community's concerns of security, and dismissing the international laws and code of conduct concerning territorial disputes, environmental protection, etc. that proportionally discredited Beijing's responsible and harmonious image. As mentioned earlier, Asia is the key to China's success in materializing China's Dream. A strong foothold in Asia will always be the main springboard for China to gain the upper hand in strategic competition with other powers in and outside region. While cooperation and interdependence set the tone of big power relations on the surface, the strategic rivalry is ever more intense and fierce in nature, and China badly needs to have stable international surroundings to better address those challenges to its power projection from within and from without China. To be honest, the sheer size of the giant itself plus the ups-and-downs in relations throughout thousand years of history has unavoidably caused the uneasy feelings among some of China's neighbouring countries. It is understandable that Beijing needs more time and patience from other countries is in transformation and learning process. However, China must, in return, treat history of its relations with others in the past with sincere and constructive manner. Ironically, China's refusal to treat history in constructive manner, its assertion of sovereignty in disputed territories, China's over-confidence and unilateral moves without any consultation with regional countries only do harm to the image of China as a big responsible power, and validate regional concerns of a perceived threat from China. In addition, China should develop better records of managing rising problems, not the records of repeating the same

mistakes. China's heightened tensions over Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands with Japan, its sovereignty and territorial disputes with some ASEAN claimants in the South China Sea, and Beijing's ties with some unpopular regimes are revealing the country's 'Achilles heel' during its rise to global prominence. In other word, Beijing must take the main responsibility in providing other countries the correct perceptions, not misperceptions of China, in order to avoid the worst scenario of a united front against a real China Threat in its very own neighbourhood.

In the short run, adventurous decisions and behaviour in the name of 'great nationalism', or as the excuse for 'sovereignty integrity' and 'energy security' may bring Beijing some gains in its material power. Yet, those regretfully mistaken tactics would severely undermine China's grand strategy in the medium and long term. China's assertiveness would ignite a new arms race in the region, and inadvertently justify the US and other powers' involvement in Asian affairs. The US rebalancing to Asia, though being largely nominal, serves to remind China's of future disturbances from the US strengthened alliances and new partnership linkages around China. A polarized regional politics and divided markets would cast a long shadow on China's very own growth and stability. Regional protests against China's adventurous behaviour will undoubtedly help to revive China's Threat Theory, which may result in vicious cycles of tensions and ratchets. Most importantly, the failure to observe international commitments in accordance with international rules and norms would gradually diminish China's credibility as a responsible stakeholder. If China interprets international relations in favour of China's interests only, Beijing will find it in a very difficult situation to get its will and behaviour respected in any future China-led system should it someday be realized.⁹ In other word, a new, well-tailored ILFP must be worked out for a new China in a new context, but it is definitely not the risky and costly ILFP executed by Hu Jintao during his second term and by Xi Jinping in his early years.

In lieu of conclusions

Ideational leadership is the key to one's success of managing tangible and non-tangible resources, turning them into various types of power through mind-shaping process and utilizing them for either strategic or specific goals and objectives. In a broader context, a nation would have greater chance in the world should they successfully develop an ideational

⁹ This arguments make sense for Beijing's claims of 'human authority' an alternative world leadership to the US hegemony, especially when the international law and rules have not been respected by the US and other game-setters themselves worldwide.

leadership in foreign policy. Throughout history, the ever-changing ideational leadership in Chinese diplomacy has been accordingly associated with the hiatus of China's position in world politics. China's ideational leadership in handling relations with its neighbouring Asia, which set ground for ideational leadership in Chinese foreign policy deserve increasing attention in the context of China's re-ascendancy to the powerful status in the international arena. Ideational leadership is of great significance to China's endeavour to become a Great Power. The ideational leadership demonstrates both the quintessence of Chinese ancient culture throughout centuries and individual statesmanship in promoting the role of ideational factors in relations with other material factors in the foreign policy making process, thus effectively facilitating China's power projection in international arena in the contemporary era. The US offered the case for reference: American values of freedom and democracy as well as US-initiated and sponsored institutions were by no means less important than American military and economic strength in setting up a US-led new world order since 1945.

As long as China has constructive attitude to reasonable concerns of the regional countries, then new opportunities will be presented to China in its ascendancy to the leading powerful position in the Asia-Pacific in the new century. In fact, if China can handle well existing problems with its Southeast Asian neighbours, including other security hotspots in the Asia-Pacific, then it will be the showcase for the entire world to be assured of a peaceful rising China as promised by the leaders in Beijing. First, Xi's ideational leadership ought to be revised to fit with contextual setting in Asia and the world at large. Asia is the first and the most important step for China's rise in the US-dominated balance of power. Also, China has high stake in ensuring a stable external environment, especially in Asia for its further development. A short-visioned, and miscalculated ideational leadership in Asia's policy must be fixed without delay. Second, there are lots of invaluable lessons that Xi can learn from his predecessors. For instant, an over-ambitious ideational leadership with revolutionary zeal under Mao would almost ruin his empire. Meanwhile, a long-visioned, well-thought 'tao guang yang hui' ideational leadership with cautious confidence under Deng, Jiang and, to a lesser extent, Hu did work out miracles for Chinese nation and peoples, releasing tremendous changes in China and the world accordingly. Domestically, President Xi Jinping should pay due attention to the need of educating and leading his people back on the right track in its course to become a future Great Power. Internationally, China must not let itself be bogged down in unnecessary troubles, but should posture itself as a Great Power by balancing its own power and ambitions with a far-sighted vision instead. Third, Chinese academic contribution

can be utilized as positive recommendations for Xi's ideational leadership, notably research projects on the role of China's ancient thoughts in formulating a future ideational leadership compatible with China's re-ascendency in the modern time.

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