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A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step: Towards a Confucian geopolitics

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Abstract

This commentary welcomes the opportunity of a dialogue on the development of a Confucian geopolitics that offers an alternative to the prevailing dominant geopolitical theories. Three areas are discussed to further development of such an alternative. The first is the challenges (and not only the opportunities) of recovering Confucian values to inform foreign policy and international relations. The second is the appropriation of Confucian philosophy to legitimize state action, and how this is actually playing out in present-day China. The third is the slippage between narrative and practice – that is, how a narrative of Confucian geopolitics is translated in practice and how practice is or is not reflected in the narrative.

Keywords

alternative geopolitics, appropriation, Confucian geopolitics, legitimization, narrative, practice

An alternative global geopolitics

I title this commentary on Confucian geopolitics with a quote from Laozi, about a significant journey beginning with a single step, coming from Chapter 64 of the *Dao De Jing*, though oftentimes attributed to Confucius. The journey towards alternative global geopolitics is already in play, as China's rise has introduced the neologism of 'the Chinese century', though others have more broadly heralded the 'Asian century'. Regardless, China clearly has a very high signature in an 'Asian century', in the same way that the 20th century was labelled the 'American century' and the 19th century 'Pax Britannica'. But an alternative geopolitical theory is not yet in train, and what we are witnessing in these pages of *Dialogues in Human Geography* is part of the first steps towards that.

Prevalent textbook answers on geopolitics have western-inspired origins, shaped by European and American histories. Think only of the classic work of American naval officer and historian Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), German geographer and ethnographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), and English geographer Halford Mackinder (1861–1947), whose ideas emerged from 18th and 19th century Europe (and indeed, for Mahan, 17th century Europe). What worldviews, historical struggles, geopolitical tensions, and international incursions have been relegated to the background

or even omitted from analyses, thus excluded from the basis of theorizing, and how might they provide interventions into an alternative understanding of world order? An et al. (2021) foreground China and its historical and contemporary geopolitical relations in their contribution to understanding alternative geopolitics, generating this and other commentaries in this volume. Needless to say, other regional stories deserve similar analysis and theorizing, from African to Latin American and others, decentring the largely European and North American dominance in the literature.

An adaptive, hybrid Confucian geopolitics

An et al. suggest that Confucian philosophies are vital to understanding contemporary Chinese geopolitics, shedding light on China's foreign policy. They cite the Belt and Road Initiative as evidence of the salience of Confucian ideas in the Chinese geographical imagination, and in Chinese geopolitical and geo-economic praxis – even if in hybrid, selective terms. The hybridity of their framework acknowledges the continued strength of Confucian influence, but also embraces other geopolitical and geo-economic cultures in order to have explanatory power. They believe these other ideas to be, namely/ mainly, modern nationalist thought (that emphasizes, *inter alia*, national identity and national independence) and neoliberalism (that emphasizes free market capitalism). Confucianism, they believe, is used by the Chinese state in malleable, adaptive, and strategic ways to respond to changing contexts. This is not simply true of the present or recent past, but has deep historical roots, stretching back all the way to the second imperial dynasty (Han Dynasty, 202 BCE–8 BCE), and evidenced through, for example, the Tang, Song, and Ming Dynasties.

‘Hua’ and ‘Yi’

Several deeply valuable insights shine through in the authors' interesting offer of an alternative geopolitics. For one, their characterization of the spatiality of Confucianism, and the contrast to Said's Orientalism, provokes an alternative position that

decentres the west and its accompanying geopolitical imagination. An et al. introduce readers to the concepts of ‘Hua’ and ‘Yi’, the former associated with an agricultural or ‘civilized’ economy, governed centrally, and influenced by Confucian values, and the latter linked to nomadic economies, removed from central government reach, and not just untouched, but pushing back, on Confucian values. The underpinning spatiality is not one of fixity but flow. Where the former qualities are evident, the space is ‘Hua’; where they are not, the space is ‘Yi’, and the division is perhaps characterized by borderlands rather than boundaries, and most importantly, can change over time, unencumbered by ethnicity or race. The Hua-Yi distinction introduces a Sino-inspired geopolitics, in contrast to Said's civilized west (Occident) versus the wild and exotic ‘other’ (the ‘Orient’).

The emerging questions around this spatiality of Confucianism centre on three issues, to my mind. The first relates to the challenges of recovering Confucian values in state discourse, leave alone national compass, post-May Fourth Movement and Cultural Revolution. How has that transition journey been enabled to the extent that political leaders, from Jiang Zemin to Xi Jinping, have come to appropriate Confucian lines of thinking when they were vehemently rejected from the period just prior? What tensions might remain that may inhibit embrace of a Confucian geopolitical worldview, and how might they impact on China's relationships with its neighbours? What has allowed the ‘rehabilitation’ of Confucius, in geopolitical thinking in the context of this discussion, but perhaps more broadly in Chinese culture?

The second issue around the spatiality of Confucianism is a curiosity about how China's relationship with its Special Administrative Regions (Hong Kong and Macau) are to be understood using Confucian geopolitics, and in particular, in relation to Hua and Yi. While the authors have drawn attention to the way in which Hua and Yi have expanded from understanding Chinese dynastic relations between centre and tributaries to valuing its explanatory power in the world system, understanding the explanatory power in relation to the relationship with Hong Kong and Macau would bring the gaze

back, and enable a test of the robustness of the proposed Confucian geopolitics. If, for a moment, we consider these Special Administration Regions as ‘Yi’, what are the implications for how China might respond to their circumstances in a Confucian geopolitics?

The third issue for me centres on the slippage between narrative and practice, something that I will return to later, but briefly, the key question is this: how far is the narrative of harmony and benevolence evidenced in practice?

Appropriation and political legitimacy

Turning from Hua and Yi and the spatiality of Confucian geopolitics, a second contribution of this fascinating paper is the reminder and demonstration that power trumps philosophy. The authors demonstrate this by tracing the evolution of Confucianism through the dynastic centuries. Confucianism was adapted to the governance and political needs of each ruling class and offered ‘convenient’ philosophical bases for the ruling mindset of the day, thus providing political legitimacy as appropriate. From humane governance as the dominant trope in the pre-Qin period to monarchical authority in the Han period, the authors demonstrate how Confucianism is not an ‘a priori’ category but a mutable ideology, and a set of principles and values that change with contexts and circumstances, though, admittedly, with a spine that has remained central – moral activism and moral cultivation.

But how this malleability is actually played out in present-day China is less clear to me. The appropriation of Confucian morality and philosophy to legitimize state action slips away from analysis after the early reference to it in the paper and the assessment of dynastic times. The later analysis of BRI begins to sound more like an apologist’s justification of Chinese actions than a critical analysis of appropriation and legitimation. The assertion that the geopolitical discourses of China today, which reveal the ambitions for expanded global engagement, are rooted in the desire for a harmonious and multipolar international community cannot but elicit raised eyebrows. The question that readily comes

to mind is simply this: ‘Really?’ How then are we to understand China’s sweeping claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea in harmonious and multipolar terms? How is the trade war with the U.S. to be interpreted using the lenses of harmony and multipolarity? Indeed, how is the Taiwan issue to be deciphered using a Confucian geopolitics anchored in harmony? To be fair, the authors argue for a hybrid Confucian geopolitics, and the influence of nationalist thought and neoliberalism in these geopolitical tugs-of-war are patently clear to me. What is not clear is how that part of the hybrid equation anchored in Confucian thought explains these international geopolitical relations, and how this Confucian sensibility is refracted through, or sits alongside, modern nationalist assertions and neoliberal capitalist ambitions. The example of the BRI and the brief exegesis around it provide a teaser of the potentiality of Confucian geopolitics, but evidentially, it is not clear how the assertions of benevolence are substantiated. At the same time, in the larger stage of China’s geopolitical relations, the brief BRI example alone does not anchor a robust basis for building a Confucian geopolitics, without commentary on China’s many other geopolitical relationships.

Narrative and practice

A third meritorious position that the authors take is the acknowledgement of potential slippage between narrative and practice. The authors show how the influence of neoliberalism on China’s geopolitics is obvious in practice but suggest that the term ‘neoliberalism’ is ‘taboo’ in official discussion. Conversely, however, it is less clear how the rhetoric of being a global power (or the ambition to be such), driven by morality and a commitment to harmony and a harmonious (world) order, is evidenced in practice. Even though the evidence of divergence or convergence between narrative and practice was unclear, the authors were prepared to make an assertion of convergence. The absence of consistent and insistent evidence-based analysis adds to the sense of authorial justification of Chinese state action without the disciplined intellectual and empirical

work needed to persuade readers of the state's narrative. How then might the reader be convinced?

The first step, but not the last

Despite my wish for evidence-based empirical analyses of the myriad geopolitical tangles and geo-economic projects that China is mired in, from the South China Sea to the Belt and Road Initiative, so as to strengthen and validate the emerging Confucian geopolitical theory that the authors expound and promote, I am fully cognizant that these pages are not (yet) the place for fully developed empirical analyses of each situation. My hope is simply that the robust 'testing' and refinement of the theory finds a place in this and other journals in the months and years ahead, or else the Confucian geopolitics propounded remains theoretically interesting but

may elicit scepticism. The journey of a thousand miles has nevertheless started, with a single step.

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