

ESSAY

Holistic Pragmatism: the Chinese Approach on International Relations

Yuanping Yu

SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Warsaw, Poland

Abstract

Different geographical environments produce different histories, cultures, civilizations, philosophies, and mentalities, all of which have an enormous impact on their decision-making and foreign policy-making. Thousands of years of social norms and tradition have shaped Chinese people's holistic and pragmatic thinking and approach, determining China's policymakers' objective and overall approach to state governance and international relations. Above all, China, as a civilizational state that has been unified for thousands of years, distinguishes itself from the Western nation-states formed in modern times through continuous wars and peace treaties. Consequently, China has formed different perceptions and interpretations of national and international affairs, and distinct approaches and decision-making processes in terms of inter-state and international interactions and conflict management. By studying various dimensions of Chinese history, culture and philosophy, as well as analyzing its foreign policy-making and active participation in global affairs, this study argues that holistic pragmatism has pervaded China's domestic and foreign policy-making, influencing Chinese policymakers' decision-making and people's thinking habits. This highlights the necessity to broaden the academic scope of international relations to encompass diverse geographical, cultural and historical perspectives, thereby providing a more comprehensive and profound understanding of international relations in our interconnected world.

Keywords

International Relations, Foreign Policy, Chinese Approach, Holistic Pragmatism

Corresponding author: Yuanping Yu (louisyu2018@gmail.com)

Author roles: Yu Y: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

Copyright: © 2024 Yu Y. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

How to cite this article:

For printed version: Yu Yuanping. "Holistic Pragmatism: the Chinese Approach on International Relations". *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 60, (2024): 144–162. Printed 2024. <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17810.1>.

For online version: Yu Y. **Holistic Pragmatism: the Chinese Approach on International Relations**. *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 2024, 4:9 <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17810.1>

Introduction

With China's rapid economic growth, military modernization, and active participation in regional and international affairs, few countries have garnered that much attention and debate among international scholars as China. As Joseph S. Nye¹ points out, China's rise challenges the current global order and has sparked debate about the impact of power shifts on world stability, which has significant implications not only for regional security, but also for the broader structure of international relations. Scholars such as John J. Mearsheimer² also argue that the power shift triggered by China's rise could lead to increased competition and even potential conflict between great powers. As a rising global superpower, China's foreign policy choices and their impact on the international stage have become the subject of intense scrutiny and analysis among international relations scholars who have, however, struggled to understand China's foreign policy through established theoretical frameworks.

The vast majority of approaches to China's foreign policies are analyzed from the Western perspective based on the mainstream theories developed by Western scholars and theorists. Theories of realism,³ liberalism,⁴ and constructivism⁵ have been repeatedly applied to China's policy-making, trying to understand and uncover China's foreign policy underneath the diplomatic rhetoric. Some scholars examine China's foreign policy from realistic or liberal perspectives, while others pay attention to particular historical traditions and cultural differences. Nonetheless, developing a comprehensive international relations theory capable of elucidating both the intricacies of Chinese foreign policy-making and its underlying decision-making logic poses a formidable challenge for scholars in the field.

Some Chinese academics base on pre-Qin (Paleolithic Period - 221 BC) classics to frame ancient Chinese thinkers as realists or liberals, exemplified by Yan Xutong's perception of Xunzi (313–238 BC) as realists.⁶ A few Chinese scholars draw on the history of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770–221 BC) to relate with the Western theory of balance of power, whilst others focus on the

¹ J.S. Nye, *Do Morals Matter?: Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

² J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014).

³ H.J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948); K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

⁴ R.O. Keohane and J.S. Nye, "Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition," *Political Science Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (1978): 132, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2149069>.

⁵ E. Adler, "Constructivism in International Relations: Sources, Contributions, and Debates," *Handbook of International Relations* (2013): 112–144; A. Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425.

⁶ X. Yan, "Xun Zi's Thoughts on International Politics and Their Implications," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2 (2008): 135–165.

hierarchical tributary structure or asymmetric inter-state relations. Traditional Chinese values and principles have been widely incorporated into the construction of theory by Chinese scholars. For instance, Qin Yaqing's⁷ 'relational theory,' Yan Xuetong's⁸ 'moral realism', and Zhao Tingyang's⁹ '*tianxia*' concept are the most prominent representations of newly developed theories in the Chinese academia of international relations.

Qin Yaqing¹⁰ introduced the concept of 'relationality' from Chinese culture vis-a-vis 'rationality' from Western culture as part of the development of constructivist theory. Qin considers the yin-yang relationship to be the most fundamental of all relationships, including international relations in which states function as 'actors-in-relations'. He argues that China has established 'governance of relationality' from '*zhong yong*'¹¹ (the Golden Mean), whereas the West emphasizes 'governance of rule', which provides new insights into the interpretation of China's diplomatic policy and behavior. Qin's theoretical framework enriches the perspectives on international relations by examining world affairs in a broader and relational context.

Zhao Tingyang¹² proposes the '*tianxia*' (all under heaven) concept, which originated from the practice of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC). His approach to the '*tianxia*' system was founded on two paradoxes: Kant's perpetual peace and Huntington¹³ clash of civilizations. He believes that Kantian peace only applies to countries that are culturally and politically alike, and Huntington's clash of civilizations is a practical manifestation of the ineffectiveness of Kant's perpetual peace. The philosophy of the '*tianxia*' system is to view the world as a political subject, which is the methodology proposed by Lao Tzu, that is 'to view the world from a world viewpoint'. To comprehend the universe from the system of '*tianxia*' is to view the entire world as a political unit to evaluate global issues from a broader and holistic perspective, thus transcending modern nation-state thinking.

Yan Xuetong,¹⁴ incorporates the '*tianxia*' concept into the strategic setting by proposing moral and just leadership for the common good of all nations. Yan

⁷ Y. Qin, "A Relational Theory of World Politics," *International Studies Review* 18 (2016): 33–47.

⁸ X. Yan, *Ancient Chinese thought, modern Chinese power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7skkq>.

⁹ T. Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi: Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun (Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of World Institutions)* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Education Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Qin, "A Relational Theory of World Politics."

¹¹ The Golden Mean is one of the Four Books of the Confucian classics, originally the thirty-first Book of Rites. The text was written between the end of the Warring States Period and the Western Han Dynasty.

¹² Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi: Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun*.

¹³ S.P. Huntington, "The clash of civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–50.

¹⁴ Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*.

Xuetong mainly explores the traditional Chinese thoughts, particularly those of Xunzi who advocates ‘benevolence, righteousness, etiquette’,¹⁵ forming the moral realism theory. His theory focuses on political leadership as the most significant independent variable, stressing the importance of both power and political leaders. Power dictates a country’s fundamental interests, and leaders decide how to attain those interests.

Apart from the Chinese scholars, some Western scholars also started approaching China and China’s perception of world politics from Asian perspectives in order to adequately comprehend China’s inconsistent foreign policies. For example, Chris Connolly and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald¹⁶ associate China’s modern history with foreign policy-making, claiming that nearly two centuries of humiliation and colonization have driven contemporary China to strive to invigorate the Chinese nation and reclaim its status as a world power. Lajciak Milan¹⁷ takes a relatively broader view of China’s policy through the lenses of Chinese history and Confucian philosophy that have been deeply embedded within Chinese thinking. Milan claims that Chinese history and philosophy have shaped China’s way of thinking, state governance, and behaviors towards other states.

These emerging Chinese theories provide a more nuanced and contextually relevant understanding of China’s international role. While these theories and approaches have undoubtedly shed light on various aspects of China’s behavior, they fall short in comprehensively capturing the nuances and intricacies of China’s foreign policy. To address the limitations of existing theoretical frameworks, this study aims to incorporate the approaches and theories of Chinese and Western scholars to construct Chinese theory of international relations, to provide alternatives for a better understanding of China and its policies, as well as bridging the gap between Western understanding of China and China’s perception of the world.

In the following sections of this study, I will first delve into the various aspects of how China’s geographical context, historical trajectory, and cultural setting have profoundly shaped the holistic and pragmatic thinking of Chinese people. Section 2 will next investigate the impact of holism in Chinese culture on the development of China’s foreign policy strategies and objectives. Through an examination of the pragmatic mindset entrenched in Chinese philosophy and historical precedents, I will illustrate how this philosophy drives China’s diplomatic maneuvers and adept

¹⁵ “仁、义、礼” (rén, yì, lǐ). Xunzi states benevolence, righteousness, and etiquette are as important to people as property and food are to families.

¹⁶ C. Connolly and J.C. Gottwald, “The Long Quest for an International Order with Chinese Characteristics: A Cultural Perspective on Modern China’s Foreign Policies,” *Pacific Focus* 28, no. 2 (2013): 269–293.

¹⁷ M. Lajciak, “China’s cultural fundamentals behind current foreign policy views: Heritage of old thinking habits in Chinese modern thoughts,” *Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017): 9–27.

navigation of ever-changing global dynamics. Finally, Section 3 will present the conclusions drawn from these discussions and outline potential avenues for future research.

1: The significance of geography, history, and culture in shaping China's approach

1.1. Geographical determinism

Geographically, China faces the sea to the east, the desert to the northwest, and the world's highest Qinghai-Tibet plateau to the southwest. Thanks to the natural blockade of numerous mountains, such as the Pamirs, Tianshan Mountains, Kunlun Mountains, and the Altai Mountains, the Persian Empire (550–330 B.C.) and the Arab Empire (622–750 A.D.), which had been established in Central Asia and West Asia, were unable to cross the Pamirs and reach China's frontier. Instead, they marched westwards to the Black Sea, the Caucasus Mountains, and the Caspian Sea. For this reason, this geographic advantage has limited foreign intrusions to sporadic invasions by northern nomadic tribes. This relatively stable environment has also fostered cultural integration, contributing to a conducive atmosphere for unification and facilitating the development of a centralized political system with minimal external influence.

China's unique geography and geopolitical complexity have long dictated the nation's strategic imperatives and security considerations.¹⁸ With a border stretching from the Himalayan mountain ranges in the southwest to the deserts of Xinjiang in the northwest, China's territorial expanse encompasses diverse regions and typologies, each carrying distinct implications for its foreign policy. This positioning also places China within a distinctive geopolitical context, surrounded by 14 neighboring countries characterized by varying political systems, economic capacities, and religious compositions. This intricate network of neighbors further complicates China's foreign policy landscape, as it must navigate the complex geopolitical environment with diverse geopolitical actors while safeguarding its own interests and security.

Robert D. Kaplan¹⁹ also emphasizes the role of geography in shaping international relations and highlights the importance of understanding geographical and historical factors that shape the world's political and economic dynamics, emphasizing the significance of Eurasia as a key region for future geopolitical competition. Geography has traditionally determined the fate of nations and empires, and this principle is vividly illustrated in China's case. The fate of ancient Chinese dynasties was heavily influenced by their geographical setting, which played a significant

¹⁸ R.D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (Random House Publishing Group, 2012).

¹⁹ R.D. Kaplan, *The Return of Marco Polo's World: War, Strategy, and American Interests in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Random House, 2018).

part in shaping their rise and fall. The major performance was that the geographical environment could contribute to the empire's prosperity through natural advantages while also restraining its development through geographical challenges, leading to its decline.

The geographical vastness of China necessitates a strategic perspective that encompasses both continental and maritime domains. The deserts of Xinjiang in the northwest have their own geopolitical significance, a vital corridor connecting Asia and Europe. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to enhance connectivity across Eurasia as a key region for future geopolitical competition, involves bridging the gaps in these arid landscapes. Thus, Xinjiang's geography influences China's domestic development and its foreign policy objectives, particularly in the context of the BRI.²⁰

Moreover, the geostrategic significance of the China-Pakistan relations, particularly in the context of South Asia and the broader region, enables China to gain access to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, bypassing potential maritime bottlenecks. The various economic and infrastructure projects undertaken by China in Pakistan, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), can fundamentally transform the economic landscape of the region. The towering Himalayan ranges form a natural barrier between China and India. Yet, this geographic divide not only affects China's border security but also has the potential to foster tensions between the two Asian giants.²¹

Geography shapes China's maritime ambitions and its approach to territorial disputes in the South China Sea, particularly in relation to its efforts to secure its vast land borders and maritime peripheries.²² The South China Sea, another critical geographical feature, holds vast reserves of natural resources and is strategically important for maritime trade routes. China's assertive territorial claims in this region have led to diplomatic conflicts with neighboring nations and have attracted international scrutiny. China's objectives include gaining control over disputed territories, asserting sovereignty, and protecting China's maritime interests in the region have shaped China's actions and policies in the South China Sea. Notably, geographical determinism is a key component of China's foreign policy, and its decisions are inextricably related to its geographical characteristics, reflecting the need to protect its borders, secure critical resources, and ensure the stability of strategic trade routes.

²⁰ A. Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); M. Tukmadiyeva, "Xinjiang in China's Foreign Policy toward Central Asia," *Connections* 12, no. 3 (2013): 87–108.

²¹ M.T. Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949*, in eds. G.J. Ikenberry, M. Trachtenberg and W.C. Wohlforth (Princeton University Press, 2019).

²² P. Dutton, "THREE DISPUTES AND THREE OBJECTIVES: China and the South China Sea," *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 4 (2011): 42–67.

1.2. Historical trajectories

China's long and storied history, marked by dynastic shifts, conflicts, and unification, has left indelible imprints on its contemporary approach to international relations. The influence of history on China's foreign policy is a well-documented and extensively studied aspect of its diplomatic strategies. In ancient China, during the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States Period, the vassal wars indeed inflicted disaster and suffering on people. The outcome of the wars, however, intensified the unification process, facilitated national integration, and also accelerated institutional reform. As the new landlord class grew in power, reforms were carried out in various vassal states, and the new feudal system was finally established. Among the vassal states, the state of Qin (221–207 BC), which undertook the most comprehensive reform, annexed the other six states and pacified Baiyue (the ancient coastal areas of southern China where the ancient Yue people were distributed), thereby completing China's great cause of unification.²³

The Qin Dynasty broke the conventional aristocratic system of enfeoffment and became the first unified and centralized feudal nation in Chinese history 1,800 years before the Treaty of Westphalia. The Qin Dynasty established a system of absolute monarchy and centralized power, as well as unified writing, currency, and measurement, which strengthened unity and promoted economic and cultural exchanges between regions and ethnic groups, with a far-reaching impact on China's culture and history. Under the bureaucratic centralization structure, China has maintained almost the same territory and unchanging culture for thousands of years. Despite the adoption and incorporation of different foreign cultures, there has never been a fault line in the cultural transition during Chinese dynasty changes. Peaceful settlements with neighboring states have far outnumbered conflict resolution with forces following the unification of China.

The unification and fragmentation of China over the centuries have shaped the nation's approach to international relations. The establishment of the Qin Dynasty and the unification of China under Emperor Qin Shi Huang significantly impacted the nation's territorial integrity and laid the groundwork for China's centralized state governance. This historical experience has a lasting impact on China's emphasis on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and an assertive stance in contemporary international relations. John Keay²⁴ provides insights into the historical context of unification and the role of governance in shaping China's statecraft. Keay emphasizes the remarkable historical continuity of Chinese civilization, tracing its origins from ancient times to the present and highlights the significance of these cycles in understanding China's political and social evolution.

²³ C.J. Peers, *Ancient Chinese Armies 1500–200 BC* (London: Osprey Publishing Ltd, 1990).

²⁴ J. Keay, *China: A History* (Basic Books, 2011).

Leading scholars have delved into the historical trajectories that continue to shape China's interactions with the international community. One of the most prominent themes in China's historical experience is the cycle of dynastic shifts, characterized by the rise and fall of different ruling dynasties. Jonathan D. Spence²⁵ traces the historical trajectory of China's unification and fragmentation, revealing how dynastic changes and foreign incursions have profoundly influenced the nation's outlook on national sovereignty and territorial integrity. This cyclical pattern has profoundly impacted China's approach to international relations. Graham Allison²⁶ also highlights the recurring theme of dynastic cycles in Chinese history and the imperative of maintaining internal unity to address external challenges. This perspective is essential for understanding China's contemporary commitment to preserving its sovereignty and territorial integrity, which are rooted in its historical lessons.

The historical legacy of conflicts and invasions has left a deep-seated sense of humiliation and vulnerability in Chinese national memory, in particular, the historical impact of foreign invasions and imperialist endeavors on China. This historical perspective underlines China's resolve to protect its core interests, safeguard its sovereignty, and maintain its status as a major global power in contemporary international relations. The Opium Wars in the mid-19th century, which led to the forced opening of China to foreign powers, serves as a prime example that still has its effect today. China's historical experiences during this period left an indelible mark on its approach to international relations, fostering a determination to never again allow external forces to dictate its fate. This historical perspective also informs China's approach to territorial disputes, as illustrated by its stance on issues like Taiwan and the South China Sea. These historical lessons underscore the paramount importance of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and assertive foreign policy. These examples clearly show China's historical trajectories, marked by dynastic shifts, conflicts, and unification, which has left long-lasting impacts on its current approach to international relations.

1.3. Cultural foundations

Ancient philosophical ideas are deeply ingrained in the minds of Chinese people under the influence of the thoughts of pre-Qin philosophers, particularly Confucianism represented by Confucius (551–479 BC) and Mencius (372–289 BC). They serve as the fundamental spirit and essential features of Chinese traditional culture both in theory and practice. Chinese emperors incorporated certain principles and doctrines of Daoism and Confucianism into state governance and inter-state relations.²⁷

²⁵ J.D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).

²⁶ G. Allison, "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 18, no. 2 (2017): 282–285.

²⁷ M. Lajciak, "China's cultural fundamentals behind current foreign policy views: Heritage of old thinking habits in Chinese modern thoughts," *Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017): 9–27.

Xue²⁸ and Feng²⁹ emphasize the significance of cultural foundations in shaping decision-making processes. Mitchell³⁰ highlights how China's foreign policy aligns with Taoist principles by emphasizing the interconnectedness of all things and acknowledging constant change in the world.

Confucian philosophy emphasizes benevolence, righteousness, and etiquette, shaping China's foreign policy choices and decision-making.³¹ Values such as harmony, tradition, and balance are central to China's foreign strategies, guiding its interactions with other nations towards stability and cooperation. China's cultural foundations prioritize moral principles in international relations, evident in its pursuit of moral integrity and responsible global engagement. This commitment to global governance and sustainability reflects China's cultural roots and shapes its interactions with neighboring countries and regional organizations. Understanding these cultural values illuminates China's dedication to peaceful relations, mutual understanding, and a harmonious global order.

Chinese philosophy views the universe as a dynamic system of interconnected relationships, shaping both the environment and human interactions. This dynamic relationship between man and nature and other objects constitutes a 'process', which constructs the environment. Charles Sanders Peirce introduced the concept of semiosis, which highlights the cooperation between signs, objects, and their interpretations.³² This model emphasizes dynamic processes over material, essence, or substances,³³ emphasizing the importance of practical interactions in constructing identity and shaping national interests. These processes foster social norms, collective emotions, and collective identity, illustrating the symbiotic relationship between individuals and their environment. China has embraced economic rationalism since its reform and opening up, yet relational thinking remains prevalent in daily life, evident in practices like 'mianzi'³⁴ (face) and 'guanxi'³⁵ (relationships). Sociologist Fei Xiaotong³⁶ highlights the fundamental contrast between

²⁸ Y. Xue, "A Cultural Theory of Chinese Foreign Policy," *Journal of Contemporary China* (2022): 1–16.

²⁹ H. Feng, *Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Confucianism, Leadership and War* (New York: Routledge & CRC Press, 2007).

³⁰ S. Mitchell, *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1991).

³¹ M. Schuman, *Confucius: And the World He Created*, 1st ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

³² T.L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³³ J. Queiroz and F. Merrell, "Semiosis and pragmatism: Toward a dynamic concept of meaning," *Sign Systems Studies* 34, no. 1 (2006): 38–60.

³⁴ "面子" (miànzi) is an important concept in Chinese culture, which usually refers to the reputation, dignity and honor of an individual or a group in society.

³⁵ "关系" (guānxì) embodies trust and responsibility in Chinese culture, deeply rooted in the concept of "天时、地利、人和" (Heaven, Earth, and Human Harmony), emphasizing interpersonal connections.

³⁶ X. Fei, *Rural China* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2007).

China and the West, likening Western society to a field where individuals are like rice straw, bound by social contracts, and Chinese society to ripples on a river's surface, representing dynamic and interconnected social ties.

Dyer³⁷ has performed extensive studies on relationship governance, with particular attention paid to the study and economic actions of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean companies. Research has shown that contract-based governance is not perfect, and that relationship governance can play an important role. Rules and relations are equally important, and they are complementary rather than mutually exclusive or arbitrarily substituted.³⁸ The conflict, through which the driving force of evolution is generated, is one of the most fundamental assumptions of this dialect. Chinese dialects emphasize complementarity rather than conflict. Chinese believe that harmony is the state of nature and the essence of all things in the world. In traditional Chinese philosophy, nothing in nature is contradictory. This does not mean that there are no conflicts, contradictions, or clashes, but they can be reconciled and dealt with through dialogues. China's successful contemporary foreign policy has been characterized by its non-violence, and diplomatic mediation, and peaceful negotiation to settle various disputes.

When it comes to religion or belief, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism could coexist peacefully in China and Asia, serving different purposes in people's lives thanks to their complementary and inclusive nature. Their teachings guide people in dealing with relationships between people, nature, and the mind. Taoism teaches people how to achieve harmony between nature and man; Buddhism guides people on how to balance the relationship between man and mind; Confucianism advises people on how to deal with the relationship between people. Ancient China embraced all religions from other cultures, but mainly for pragmatic and practical reasons, the majority of religions were progressively sinicized and incorporated into Chinese culture. In addition, separation of religions and politics, as well as Confucian teachings, enable Chinese rulers and the current Chinese government to consolidate power and conduct independent national and foreign policy without any religious or external interference. As demonstrated, China's cultural foundations, notably influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and moral principles, significantly shape its foreign policy mindset. These cultural elements serve as guiding principles for China's approach to international relations, informing its diplomatic strategies and interactions with the global community.

2. Holistic and pragmatic approaches on international relations

The cultural and philosophical distinctions among nations globally arise from their diverse geographies, characterized by varying climates and landforms. These

³⁷ J. Dyer, "Does Governance Matter: Keiretsu Alliances and Asset Specificity as Sources of Japanese Comparative Advantages," *Organization Science* 7, no. 6 (1996): 649–666.

³⁸ J. Dyer and H. Singh, "The Relational View: Cooperative Strategy and Source of Interorganizational Comparative Advantage," *Academy of Management Review* 23, no. 4 (1998): 660–679.

geographical differences not only influence their political and philosophical trajectories but also shape their decision-making and foreign policy processes. Traditional moral codes, behavioral standards, religious convictions, and ideologies that a country has precipitated in the long-term process of historical and cultural development have subconsciously affected the way of thinking, mentality, and values of decision-makers. Thousands of years of social norms and tradition have shaped the Chinese people's holistic thinking and pragmatic approach toward China's diplomatic strategy and policy practice, which has manifested itself, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in the process of formulating foreign policy and dealing with international relations.

The differences between Chinese and Western scholars in their research and theorizing of international relations can be observed from the research perspectives and methodologies adopted by them. The different methodology they adopted also reveals not only the differences in thinking and reasoning between Chinese and Westerners but also the strong complementarity between them. These prominent international relations theories attempt to evaluate national diplomacy and international relations from realistic, cooperative, or cultural perspectives. However, the ever-changing and complex world politics cannot be articulated by one or two theories alone but should be comprehended and explained by a combination of various theories depending on the overall environment. Extensive research on China's foreign policies throughout history reveals that while many Western theories can be identified, China consistently adheres to its own logic in dealing with both its internal and international affairs.

2.1 Holism and pragmatism in chinese culture

Different geographical environments, cultures, and histories highlight the underlying differences in mentality, decision-making, policy-making, and state governance. Admittedly, numerous factors can influence a country's policy-making, but the environment, culture, history, and philosophy are also essential components that constitute a nation and shape people's thinking habits. In return, the state as a collective body formulates state policy, reflecting the interests and aspirations of the people.³⁹ China's culture and history are shaped by its distinct geographical environment, which allows Chinese people to observe the world differently and to employ divergent ways of thinking and undertaking in national governance and foreign policy-making.

Holism views the universe as a dynamic whole, a concept not only shared by ancient Greek, Roman, and Chinese philosophers and medical practitioners, but also by modern scientists to study the latest scientific research and understand the

³⁹ A. Moravcsik, *Liberalism and International Relations* (Harvard University and University of Chicago, 1992).

unknown. The Confucian culture of ‘harmony of man, nature, and the world as one’⁴⁰ enables us to think holistically. Buddhism assumes that, without cause and condition, nothing in the universe can arise and function independently. Taoism defines that the constant interplay amongst the five moving, unstable and changeable elements, like the dancing of yin and yang, characterizes everything on earth and in heaven.⁴¹ Chinese medical system views people in a dynamic and constant interaction with the environment.⁴² Chinese medicine’s profound holistic and comprehensive healing art closely merges the individual body and society politics.⁴³ This holistic concept of traditional Chinese culture forms the origin of the overall concept of Chinese medicine. As Caruana⁴⁴ argues even realism becomes a metaphysical viewpoint when approached from a holistic perspective, engaging with the whole network of interdependent theories and concepts that constitute scientific practices. To illustrate, physical chemist and Nobel laureate Nicolis and Prigogine⁴⁵ pointed out that Chinese culture has the characteristics of ‘holistic harmony’ caused by the balance of various confrontational processes. Physicist Hermann Haken also highly values the significance of ancient Chinese culture in his study of synergetics.

Pragmatism serves as a means of assessing theories or assumptions in terms of their performance in practical applications, with the aim of logically and practically addressing problems. From ancient times to the present, sages have always stressed the importance of learning and practicing teachings, reflecting the pragmatism of the Chinese people. From Confucius and Mencius through Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and Wang Yangming (1472–1529), self-cultivation and integration of knowledge and action were prevalent from the emperors to commoners. “*The Master said: ‘If a man can recite three hundred of the Odes and yet when given a government post cannot fulfill it, what good it is to him?’*”⁴⁶ which stresses the important notion of ‘practical application’ between learning and thinking.⁴⁷ “*Only when there is enough*

⁴⁰ “天人合一” (tiān rén hé yī) is a key concept in Chinese philosophy, embraced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. It denotes the harmony between human existence and the cosmic order.

⁴¹ S. Levitt, *Taoist Feng Shui* (Vermont: Destiny Books, 2000).

⁴² V. Di Stefano, *Holism and Complementary Medicine: Origins and Principles* (Crowns Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2006).

⁴³ Huang Di Nei Jing Ling Shu (*The Ancient Classic on Needle Therapy*), trans. P.U. Unschuld (California: University of California Press, 2016).

⁴⁴ L. Caruana, *Understanding of Science: Integrating the analytical, historical and sociological* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁴⁵ G. Nicolis and I. Prigogine, *Exploring Complexity: An Introduction* (New York: W.H. Freeman & Company, 1989).

⁴⁶ “诵《诗》三百，授之以政，不达” (Sòng “shī” sānbǎi, shòu zhī yǐ zhèng, bù dá). Confucius emphasizes the importance of applying what one has learned to guide practice.

⁴⁷ R.T. Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study of Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).

*food and armed forces can the people trust their rulers*⁴⁸ in the Analects of Confucius,⁴⁹ and *‘people know propriety by having enough granaries, and honor by having enough food and clothing’*, stated by Guanzi (475–221 BC), demonstrated Chinese people’s pragmatism.⁵⁰ When it comes to state governance, Mencius (372–289 BC) believes that *‘the people are before the country, and the country is above the ruler’*,⁵¹ which is also shared by Confucius saying, *‘the water that carries the boat is the same water that swallows it up’*.⁵² As can be seen, Chinese philosophers stress the importance of people-centered governance, emphasize practices over contemplation, and teach through examples rather than words to demonstrate the applicability and practicability of their teachings.

The holistic and pragmatic thinking of traditional Chinese culture has not only influenced the development of traditional Chinese medicine and painting, but also the way of thinking in China’s formulation of domestic and foreign policies. Many intervention variables, including the perceptions of decision-makers, the decision-making process, and the implementation process, all of which are shaped by the values and the beliefs of leaders, national strategies, country-societal relationships, and political system characteristics, influence the country’s response to international affairs.⁵³ In the decision-making process, holism has enabled Chinese people to evaluate the overall situation, observe the development pattern and formulate the most appropriate long-term strategy; pragmatism has taught the Chinese that every strategy and plan must be adapted to specific situations and scenarios to achieve the desired results and goals. Understanding this concept is the key to a process-oriented theoretical understanding and interpretation of society and foreign policy in China. That is why scholars could hardly understand China’s changing foreign policy, for circumstances and the environment constantly change.

2.2 Holistic pragmatism in China’s foreign policy

China has undergone enormous transformations over the past four decades, mostly thanks to this pragmatic approach of Chinese leadership. China’s foreign policies

⁴⁸ “足食，足兵，民信之矣” (Zú shí, zú bīng, mín xìnzhī yǐ) from “Analects” Y. Yuan. Confucius underscores economic development and national defense, yet prioritizes earning the people’s trust, even if it means sacrificing the former.

⁴⁹ *The Analects of Confucius*, English trans. F. Pan and S. Wen (Shandong: Qi Lu Press, 1993), 133.

⁵⁰ W.A. Rickett, *Guanzi: Political, Economic and Philosophical Essays from Early China* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁵¹ “民为贵，社稷次之，君为轻” (Mín wéi guì, shèjì cì zhī, jūn wèi qīng). Mencius’ thought of “the people are more valuable than the king” is the thought of taking the people as the foundation.

⁵² “水能载舟，亦能覆舟” (Shuǐ néng zài zhōu, yì néng fù zhōu) from “Xunzi Ai Gong” of the Warring States Period. The ruler is like a ship, the people like water: they can either navigate smoothly or engulf and sink the ship, which means that things are beneficial when used properly, and vice versa; *Xunzi: the Complete Text*, trans. E.L. Hutton (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁵³ R. Paolo, *Neoclassical Realism and the Underdevelopment of China’s Nuclear Doctrine* (Switzerland: Springer, 2018).

have been driven by its fundamental interests such as sovereignty, economic development, and a stable domestic and international environment. China's pragmatic objectives are mainly to sustain an external environment that facilitates its internal economic growth and to strengthen its international standing.⁵⁴ These practical and effective approaches have manifested that both Chinese mentality and state policy-making are largely built upon pragmatic principles, yet closely correlated with Chinese culture and customary practices.

Looking back on contemporary Chinese history, major diplomatic decisions and actions made by the Chinese leadership were pragmatically founded on critical reasoning and comprehensive assessment. During Mao Zedong's period, China chose to ally with the Soviet Union because of China's overall national strength and international political environment, instead of ideological preference and political regime. Faced with Western political isolation and economic blockade from the 1950s to the 1970s, China took fairly pragmatic measures to maintain its independence and state survival, investing heavily in national defense and developing heavy industries and nuclear weapons, albeit at the expense of agricultural development, as evidenced by China's participation in the Korean and Vietnam wars. 'Starting a new stove', 'cleaning up the house before inviting guests', and 'leaning to one side',⁵⁵ became the guiding principles of China's international environment-based foreign strategies, safeguarding China's national interests and security for its first decade. From 1964 to 1971, China's development policy was heavily impacted by its appraisal of the international environment and its assumption of the risk of wars.⁵⁶ To unite with the developing and under-developed countries, in 1974, China took the strengthening of solidarity and cooperation with the Third World as an important part of its foreign policy, which had helped China regain its rightful seat in the United Nations in October 1971 with primary support from the Third World countries. These practical policies were formulated pragmatically by Chinese leaders in light of historical conditions and the overall environment.

The pragmatic approach has substantially influenced the Chinese people's mentality, China's state governance, and foreign policy-making.⁵⁷ China has insisted on pragmatic firmness and strategic flexibility as fundamental principles for resolving practical issues. China's normalization decision-making process was guided by a

⁵⁴ *Power and responsibility in Chinese foreign policy*, eds. Y. Zhang and G. Austin (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2013).

⁵⁵ “另起炉灶、打扫干净屋子再请客、一边倒” (lìngqǐlúzáo, dǎsǎo gānjìng wūzi zài qǐngkè, yībiāndǎo) are the three foreign policy guidelines of New China proposed by M. Zedong: reject recognition of diplomatic relations established by the Kuomintang government; eradicate remnants of imperialism before considering new diplomatic relations; align with socialism, world peace, and democracy.

⁵⁶ *Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, eds. T.W. Robinson and D. Shambaugh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

⁵⁷ A. Satoshi, “China's Diplomatic Philosophy and View of the International Order in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* (2014): 3–33.

maxi-mini negotiating strategy that prioritized China's national interests while mitigating the economic and security costs of achieving both foreign and domestic ratification.⁵⁸ While making major state policies, Deng Xiaoping persisted in following the principle of 'seeking truth from the fact'⁵⁹ and 'crossing the river by feeling the stones'.⁶⁰ Deng famously said, '*It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, a cat that can catch mice is a good cat*',⁶¹ demonstrating pragmatism and flexibility in choosing between planned and market economies.

Deng asserts that 'the adherence to reform and opening up will shape China's future', which has significantly contributed to the formation of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Reform and opening up must, however, be adjusted to the backgrounds, environments, and localities. The successful experience of other countries can be learned, but not blindly copied. China has therefore been actively learning from other nations, including the Soviet Union's socialist political system and planned economy, the United States' market economy and business management, Japan's and Germany's industrial policies, and Singapore's industrial parks and free trade zones. China examines and implements what, irrespective of ideological, political, or cultural differences, can practically facilitate China's overall development.

China recognizes the principles of realism by considering national interests as China's foreign policy and guidelines of state behaviors.⁶² The Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s exemplifies China's commitment to maintaining territorial integrity and an independent foreign policy that defends the country's fundamental interests. The reform and opening up of 1978 and accession to WTO in 2001 display China's liberal approach to integrating into global trade and achieving economic success. Following its overtake of Japan as the world's second-largest economy in 2010, China put forward the 'Belt and Road Initiative' and the concept of 'community with a shared future for mankind', and joined RCEP in cooperation with ASEAN countries, which exhibited its constructivist characteristics based on shared values and cultures among Asian countries.

⁵⁸ *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978–2000*, ed. D.M. Lampton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁵⁹ “实事求是” (shíshìqiúshì). On December 13, 1978, X. Deng delivered an important speech at the closing meeting of the Central Working Conference: “Emancipate the mind, seek truth from facts, and unite as one to look forward.”

⁶⁰ “摸着石头过河” (mōzhe shítouguò hé) is a metaphor for X. Deng's approach and strategy to China's reform and opening up; Y. Deng, *China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁶¹ “不管黑猫白猫，能捉老鼠的就是好猫” (bùguǎn hēi māo bái māo, néng zhuō lǎoshǔ de jiùshì hǎo māo). Whether the planned economy or the market economy, it is only a means of resource allocation, and has nothing to do with the political system.

⁶² Y. Qin, “Development of International Relations theory in China: progress through debates,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 11 (2011): 231–257.

On the other hand, China believes that long-term peaceful coexistence and interdependence can be achieved through preventive mechanisms and the development of shared values, instead of resorting to military forces to resolve conflicts and settle disputes. Affected by Confucian culture, the sense of community and relationship in East Asian society shows more elements of relational governance. China and its neighboring countries do not face a security dilemma as the West does because of similarities in culture, history, and tradition in Asian countries.⁶³ China's policy on territorial disputes in the South China Sea is to call for the relevant parties to adopt a restrained, calm, and constructive attitude and 'shelving differences and seeking joint development'.⁶⁴ Through peaceful negotiation and economic incentives in asserting its territorial claims, China minimizes the risk of conflict and aligns with China's overarching goal of achieving regional stability and economic growth. Meanwhile, the US has also been attempting to strike a balance between reassuring its Asian allies and adopting pragmatic approaches with Beijing to protect U.S. interests without raising Beijing's major concerns or engaging in conflicts with China (*Ibidem*).

Likewise, concerning the border conflict between China and India on June 15th, 2020, the Chinese government urges the Indian side to conduct a thorough investigation into the incident, severely punish those responsible, strictly control and restrain front-line troops, and immediately stop all possible provocations and violations to strictly avoid the recurrence of the incident.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi also stressed that the Indian side must not underestimate China's determination and will to safeguard territorial sovereignty and should not misjudge the current situation and make mistakes.

When it comes to US-China relations, this widely known 'Thucydides Trap' theory has been often used to describe the future relations between the US and China.⁶⁶ Mearsheimer⁶⁷ states that the US will take any measure to contain and undermine China, which will destabilize the current international establishment dominated by the United States. Yet, it should not be neglected that China's military spending accounts for just 1.6% of its GDP, far less than the United States (3.45%) and Russia

⁶³ D. Chen, "Qiantan Jiangouzhuyi dui Dongya Anquan Qianjing de ZaiRenshi (The future of East Asian security: a constructivist re-interpretation)," *World Outlook* 4 (2002): 30–34.

⁶⁴ "搁置争议，共同发展" (gēzhì zhēngyì, gòngtóng fāzhǎn) was X. Deng's policy proposition in the 1970s, aimed at territorial disputes with Japan and later extended to the South China Sea, in order to create conditions for the final settlement of territorial issues; J. Kim, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea: Implications for Security in Asia and Beyond," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (2015): 107–141, viewed January 26, 2024, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26271078.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A672ad57a03c0a0a525634af4de28375e>.

⁶⁵ J. Zhou, "India urged to halt border violation," *China Daily*, June 17, 2020, viewed January 26, 2024, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202006/17/WS5ee9503ca3108348172537c3.html>.

⁶⁶ P. Rudolf, *The Sino-American World Conflict* (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2020).

⁶⁷ J.J. Mearsheimer, "The Rise and Fall of the Liberal, International Order," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 7–9.

(4.06%), according to the statistics compiled by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in 2022.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, to counterbalance the US's power in the Asia-Pacific region, avoid direct conflicts with the US in the South China Sea, and ease disputes with South Asian countries, China proposed the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), which has 150 countries and 30 international organizations signed up until 2023.

Both countries have stated unequivocally that neither side seeks confrontation. The United States and China have learned to carefully manage their relations and strive for peaceful coexistence within a changing world order, demonstrating their prudence and diplomatic acumen in handling affairs and resolving differences to avoid the historical pattern of great power conflicts. If there would be any conflict that would happen between China and the US, it would be most probably associated with Taiwan, which has always been a thorny issue to China for seventy years.⁶⁹ Moreover, China has been extremely adamant in its 'one China' policy concerning the Taiwan issue, underlining China's determination for the reunification of Taiwan, either by peaceful means or by forces. A case in point is the relegation of diplomatic relations between China and Lithuania, as a result of Lithuania allowing Taiwan to open a representative office in Vilnius.

These examples demonstrate China's firm commitment to the peaceful settlement of border disputes with its neighbors and to ensuring national interests, sovereignty, and territorial integrity from a holistic and pragmatic perspective through a wide range of foreign policies, yet without renouncing the use of force. Chinese decision-making groups have invariably devised a variety of comprehensive and pragmatic foreign policies to achieve their strategic goals. Realism strengthens China in maintaining national independence and safeguarding national interests, liberalism facilitates China's integration into the international trade system and rapid economic development, and constructivism enhances China's role as a regional power. This is why, when applying a single Western theory, we fail to understand China's strategic motives and foreign policy, because all of these theories of international relations are being utilized as pragmatic means by the Chinese leadership in response to changes in domestic and international environments to achieve its long-term goals and overall national interests.

Conclusion

To conclude, China's assertive foreign policy and active participation in international organizations, after thirty years of phenomenal economic and social development, has spurred international relations scholars to comprehend its foreign

⁶⁸ "Data for all countries from 1949–2022 as a share of GDP," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), viewed January 27, 2024, 2022, <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sipri.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2FSIPRI-Milex-data-1949-2022.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>.

⁶⁹ S. Chan, *China, the U.S., and the Power-Transition Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

policy-making and perception of international relations. Each international relations theory can partially explain the diplomatic behaviors and strategies, which requires scholars to develop, in particular, a comprehensive approach that incorporates geographical environment, historical and cultural backgrounds. As Kelly E. Robert⁷⁰ asserts, Western international relations theories are eurocentric and cannot be promulgated to other countries with distinct cultural and religious backgrounds. Given China's distinctive history and culture, the mainstream theories and concepts prevailing among international relations studies should not be universally applied. The philosophy and wisdom of other civilizations should be studied and embraced progressively to contribute more to global governance and theory-building in international relations.

The geographical, historical, and cultural differences between China and the West lead to different ways of thinking and approaches to international relations, which also applies to the methodology used by Chinese and Western scholars to construct international relations theories, despite their respective advantages and limitations. Divergent philosophical and historical traditions render China and the West to take different approaches in managing domestic and international affairs.⁷¹ Chinese scholars approach international relations from a holistic and relational perspective, while Western scholars are inclined to dissect, analyze, and develop theories to understand inter-state relations through deductive reasoning. Understanding the diverse perspectives of different cultures on international relations will provide valuable insights for global governance, directing the formation of a more harmonious international community and enriching international relations theory-building.

Lastly, long-term multi-ethnic coexistence and cultural integration with dominant ethnic groups enabled ancient China to become a centralized and civilizational state with cultural openness and inclusiveness, laying the groundwork for the construction of national unity and collectivism. In comparison to the West's analysis-based reductionist approach, Chinese culture's holism and pragmatism have shaped China's domestic and foreign policies, as well as the mentality of the Chinese people. As demonstrated by the foreign policies taken by China, international relations theories are the means and instruments employed adeptly by China's decision-makers to achieve the ultimate goals of safeguarding national sovereignty, economic development, and regional security per the domestic and international environment, with holism and pragmatism serving as guiding principles.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

⁷⁰ R.E. Kelly, "A 'Confucian Long Peace' in pre-Western East Asia?," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 3 (2011): 407–430.

⁷¹ G. Chan, *Chinese Perspectives on International Relations: A Framework for Analysis* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999).

Data availability

This study is a theoretical approach to developing an international relations theory, without substantial data associated with it.