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Su-Yan Pan & Joe Tin-Yau Lo
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Re-conceptualizing China’s rise as a global power: a neo-tributary perspective

Su-Yan Pan and Joe Tin-Yau Lo

Abstract Two analytical perspectives — conventional wisdom derived from warlordism and European colonialism, and soft-power concepts drawn from post-Cold-War American international relations — are prevalent lenses for analysing China’s global rise. However, neither considers the role of the past in shaping China’s contemporary diplomacy. This paper fills the gap of this under-researched area by providing an alternative perspective featuring analytic categories rooted in China’s tributary tradition. It proposes a neo-tributary framework for systematically interpreting historical Chinese mentalities and strategies embedded in China’s contemporary power strategy.

Keywords: International relations; global power; rising power; tributary system; neo-tributary; China.

Introduction

The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) rise to global economic power has driven much debate about its impact on international power relations.
(Goldstein 2005). A persistent, significant topic of policy debates and theoretical discourses is the nature of China’s power strategy (Breslin 2010). Two analytical perspectives dominate this field — conventional wisdom derived from warlordism and European colonialism, and soft-power concepts drawn from American post-Cold War international relations (IRs). These approaches help analyse great powers’ resources and strategies, but not the mentality and strategies determined by China’s ancient traditions and contemporary conditions. Some scholars (e.g. Breslin 2011; Evans 2010) identified the need for a systemic conceptual framework that explains China’s power strategies throughout its history and reflects its contemporary social conditions; still, the field remains under-researched.

This paper proposes a ‘neo-tributary’ analytical framework that systematically interprets the aims and means underlying China’s claim to rising global power status. It identifies four analytic categories for conceptualizing China’s power strategy: Chinese exceptionalism; trade and diplomacy linkages; cultural assimilation; and image building. It argues that the mentality and strategies associated with imperial China’s tributary system are still manifested in China’s contemporary diplomacy.

The major methodology employed herein is analogical reasoning, which compares two systems of objects to highlight perceived similarities, identify accepted similarities, and support the conclusion that further similarities exist (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2013). Analogical arguments do not prove; they function as heuristic devices for discovering new observations or hypotheses (Fischer 1970: 259). Khong (2013) demonstrated the strength of analogical reasoning in studying IR in cross-cultural contexts, by comparing American IR to imperial China’s tributary system. In historical studies, analogical reasoning helps researchers draw analogies between past and present, extract a concept’s meaning from its original context, and introduce it into another (Zhang 2009).

This paper first discusses and critiques the theoretical interpretations most often used when studying China’s rise as a global power. It then disaggregates the ideas, institutional structures and rules constituting the imperial tributary system into the four analytical categories comprising the neo-tributary framework. Next, it elaborates on how these categories are drawn by analogy from the imperial tributary system, and how the analogy between past and present is re-contextualized in conditions surrounding China’s claim to global power status. It concludes with a discussion of the neo-tributary relationship between China and other polities, before presenting theoretical implications for the study of contemporary international power relations.

Conceptual framework for understanding China as a rising power

This section examines major conceptual frameworks commonly used in IR studies to understand China’s rise and the response of other states, including conventional realist wisdom, soft power, and constructivism discourse.
Conventional realism

While realism ‘is a spectrum of ideas’ (Goodin 2010: 132), its variants generally hold that rising nations threaten existing power relations, either by forcibly changing the status quo and reversing the world order, or by forcing the current hegemon into a preventive/defensive war to preserve its position and the balance of power (Bull 1977; Gilpin 1983; Schweller 1994; Waltz 1979). Classical realism sees the world as divided by different individuals’ and groups’ interests, and the international system as what Thomas Hobbes called ‘a war of all against all’ (Kavka 1983), due to the basic human lust for power (Carr 1954; Morgenthau 1985). Structural realism perceives great power emergence as a structurally-driven phenomenon, resulting from nation states’ differential economic, military and technological growth, and holds that, in an anarchic, self-help international system, states ensure their security and counter real or apparent threats (Waltz 1989). In offensive realism, a great power with a marked power advantage is likely to behave more aggressively, because it has the capability and incentive to do so (Mearsheimer 2001).

Power transition theory holds that any increase in one country’s power challenges the status quo, threatens international security and is a potential cause for war. As Kennedy (1987: xxii) has explained, ‘economic shifts heralded the rise of new Great Powers which one day would have a decisive impact on the military/territorial order’. Modern examples include the rise, respectively, of Europe, Japan and the United States through colonial expansion and/or world wars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Jacques 2012; Keohane 1984); all used force to project power globally and transplant themselves onto the world stage.

Drawing upon historical power shifts, realism argues that ‘whenever there’s a rising power, there’s bound to be anxiety in other countries’ (Nye et al. 2006: 41). China’s modern rise is therefore alarming, as China ‘borders other major powers and is implicated in a host of security issues’ (Kirshner 2010: 59); it forces the West to acknowledge that ‘China desires the same thing, competes for influence in the same international political arena, and [could] beat ‘us’ in the same game’ (Barr 2011: 134).

Structural realism predicts that (1) China’s rise is bound to have an impact on the western-oriented world order; (2) the international system is increasingly multipolar; and (3) America’s ‘sole great power [status] depends largely on whether new great powers [arise]’ (Layne 1993: 8). Mearsheimer (2001: 401–2) urged the USA to ‘slow the rise of China’, lest it ‘dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the western hemisphere’. To proponents of this ‘China threat’ perspective (e.g. Bhattacheraya 2010; Fravel 2008), usually associated with offensive realism and power transition theory, China’s officially stated intentions notwithstanding, its rise is not benign; its increasing military expenditures and capabilities and willingness to use force in territorial disputes betray its hegemonic
aspirations, and challenge the USA’s regional credibility. This could con-
ceivably lead to war between China (the rising power), the USA (the cur-
rent hegemon) and/or Japan (another regional power), and create an
alternative to the western-dominated, Westphalian system of IRs (Gertz
2000; Tammen and Kugler 2006).

Conventional realism explains why China’s rise has generated anxiety,
particularly in the West, about its resources, capabilities, preferences and
global influence (Kynge 2006). However, neither China’s ‘peaceful rise/
development’ policy (Zheng 2005) nor its ‘Beijing consensus’ development
model (Ramo 2004) reflects the historical patterns of revisionist powers. In
particular, offensive realism cannot explain why China engages in ‘military
diplomacy’ (e.g. joint military exercises) to alleviate western anxiety,
rather than simply competing with other nations in an arms race (Wang
China as a force for stability in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, real-
ist perspectives focus on China’s hard power – i.e. its ability and willing-
ness to use economic and/or military force to get its way – but
underestimates its soft-power aspirations (Ding 2010; Kurlantzick 2007).

**Soft power**

Recently, it has become fashionable to view China as developing signifi-
cant soft-power capabilities. Originally, ‘soft power’ referred to one’s abil-
ity to affect other countries’ behaviours by persuading them to adopt one’s
goals or perspectives; it is thus inherently consensual. Hard power, in con-
trast, is exercised mainly through actual or threatened military force, or
through institutional pressure, payments or bribes, and is fundamentally
coercive (Nye 1990). From a liberal IR perspective, not all games are zero-
sum, and nations might employ both hard and soft resources to achieve
their goals. ‘[Culture], political values [and] foreign policies’ are a country’s
primary soft-power resources (Nye 2008: 96), and their attractiveness ena-les actors to realise favourable outcomes ‘because others want what
[those actors] want’ (Keohane and Nye 1998: 86). The term excludes finan-
cial incentives, diplomatic pressure and other hard forms of influence in
favour of ‘non-commercial, non-financial (and of course non-military) ele-
ments that might make one population sympathetic to another’ (Hunter
2009: 396).

China conceptualises soft power more broadly, to include ‘not only pop-
ular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic and
diplomatic levers like aid and investment and participation in the multilat-
eral organizations’ (Kurlantzick 2007: 6). The term is used in multiple ways
and has multiple interpretations. At the policy level, ‘soft power’ refers to
actively-promoted national building projects. In 2007, then-President Hu
Jintao asserted that China must use both hard and soft power to demon-
strate its increased international status and influence, and that improving
China’s soft power through cultural development was a major practical issue facing China. Since then, there have been widely varying assessments of China’s soft-power capabilities, and of how they can and should be expanded. Chinese scholars and society both acknowledge the uncertainty of many sources of Chinese soft power, pending the ultimate transformation of China’s state, society, culture, economy and politics; and to improve China’s global position, economic support should be the ‘hard’ basis on which ‘soft’ power is built (Cho and Jeong 2008; Li 2008).

In academic discussions, ‘soft power’ is used broadly to interpret Chinese IR thoughts and domestic issues. Some studies (e.g. Ding 2010; Li and Worm 2011) have argued that ‘soft power’ fits well with China’s ancient military philosophy of ‘winning victories without striking a blow’ and its contemporary idea of ‘peaceful rise’; therefore, it may be logical to expect that China will use peaceful means (e.g. culture, education, media) to project itself onto the world stage. Others asserted that soft power, as represented by the export of Chinese culture, is a kind of ‘soft weapon’ used by current Chinese leaders to mask China’s political and military expansion (Nye et al. 2006). Yan (2006) suggested that moving towards greater domestic social justice and democratization would create a kind of ‘internal soft power’ that would improve international perceptions of China’s domestic policy.

Analysing China’s rise from a soft-power standpoint may be conceptually misleading, as China’s concept of soft power includes both coercive and consensual elements and tends to be a cultural, economic or national image-building project, rather than being simply attractive. Moreover, China’s tendency to see economic incentive as soft power is problematic, as economic power is often considered coercive, regardless of how benign the underlying intent; providing financial aid, donations and services to developing countries can create dependencies that allow for gross manipulation, albeit monetary rather than military (Hunter 2009), and funding conditions or limitations can turn ‘carrots’ (attractive power) into ‘sticks’ (coercive power). Such tensions and paradoxes can be observed in China’s soft-power projection, which ‘relies more on (non-military) coercion and inducement than on attraction’; and ‘tends to use utilitarian soft-power resources in a coercive and rigid way’ (Lo and Pan 2014: 2, 15). We agree with Breslin (2011: 4, 9) that ‘[t]he whole point about identifying soft power in the first place was to make distinctions; to identify different potential sources of power other than force, influence and persuasion. But simply combining numerous non-military elements together under a single ‘soft’ definition does not allow for nuanced understandings of different typologies and sources of power’.

Most explanatory frameworks for China’s power status rely mainly on realist and liberal IR perspectives — both of which are inductively derived from western experiences, and neither of which considers the role of history in shaping China’s contemporary power strategy. China’s and
Europe’s histories differ, and attempting to explain China’s international behaviour from a Westphalian IR perspective shows ‘historical ignorance’ (Jacques, 2012: 11); scholars must acknowledge the disparity between western expectations and Asian realities, and develop appropriate alternative theoretical approaches. One such approach may be to examine the impact of culture and history on diplomacy and IR, as social progress is the ‘organic expression of a society fulfilling its vision and culture in the flow of history’ (Kissinger 2012, para 1). In this aspect, discussions of ideational power and constructivism light the way.

**Constructivism discourse**

Constructivism mandates explaining China’s rise through non-western theories and approaches, using methods that better reflect Chinese history; given that power emergence is context-specific, and no one kind of ‘trans-historical, trans-cultural regularities... sustain[s] law-like generalisations about international relations’ (Reus-Smit 2008: 398). To constructivists, power (sovereignty) is the product of historical forces and human interactions that generate new distinctions about where political authority resides (Adler 2003). The forces of power go beyond the material; they also can be ideational (Barnett and Duvall 2005), and normative resources can be constitutive factors influencing how actors interpret power and their roles in international life (Wendet 1999).

Constructivism helps to explain the impact of international norms on China’s changes to its security policies over the last two decades (Johnston 2008), and whether China’s rapid economic development may generate ideational power that expands its global influence. Ramo (2004) and Restall (2007) stated that China’s ‘Beijing consensus’ development model offers an alternative path to modernization, and makes China increasingly important and attractive internationally, particularly for developing states. Nye et al (2006: 8) argued that the Beijing consensus (‘authoritarian rapid growth’) is attractive in developing African or Central Asian countries, but less so in Europe and North America. Other researchers have noted that China’s cultural outreach and image building projects offer few ideational resources (Wang 2008; Paradise 2009).

While much research has addressed China’s rising power and the global implications thereof, there is no analytical framework for illustrating and interpreting the four coexisting phenomena that characterize China’s global power strategy: China’s self-identification as a great power; the conscious linking of trade and diplomacy; intertwined economic openness, higher education and cultural assimilation; and China’s sensitivity to international criticism. This paper proposes a ‘neo-tributary’ analytical framework to address this under-researched area, one which offers a systematic understanding of the mentality and strategies spawned by China’s tributary tradition and embedded in its contemporary power strategy. First,
however, it reviews the imperial Chinese tributary system and its relevance to China’s contemporary IR.

The imperial ‘tributary system’ and its contemporary relevance

The tributary system, most often associated with imperial China’s foreign relations, began during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and remained China’s primary foreign relations institution until the mid-nineteenth century (Yu 1967). Its mechanisms, institutions and ways of governance evolved over time. It recognized and reinforced China’s East Asian hegemony by conceptualizing China as the ‘Middle Kingdom’; lesser (tributary) states were required and expected to acknowledge China’s superiority by paying tribute to its emperor and adopting Chinese diplomatic etiquette and practices, in exchange for permission to trade in designated markets for specific periods. Trade followed diplomacy and, to Chinese thinking, subdued foreigners and ‘barbarians’ through cultural assimilation (Fairbank 1983; Hsu 1970).

As a conceptual framework, the tributary system is used to interpret China’s perception of world order (Fairbank 1942; Fitzgerald 1964); examine China’s bureaucratic management of foreign relations (Li 2004); and analyse East Asia’s historical order (Zhang 2001). The system’s salience and applicability to the study of China’s diplomatic relations in different historical periods depends on many variables, six of which manifest consistently and are considered key components of the analytic framework: Sino-centrism (the presupposition of China’s regional centrality and superiority); acceptance of China’s East Asian hegemony, due to its wealth, military, geography, population and resources; institutionalized rituals and norms regulating China’s hierarchical relations; China-centric circles of tribute and trade relations; cultural assimilation into Confucianism; and China’s projected benevolent, non-coercive image (Evans 2010; Fairbank 1968; Kang 2010).

Some scholars have stressed the need to assess the tributary system’s analytical utility for organizing thinking about China’s contemporary IR. Zhang (2009) suggested that the tributary model could be broadened to handle China’s pragmatic security- and power-based concerns. Recent works on Asian security and power relations (Cheow 2011; Forsby 2011; Kang 2010; Malik 2012) suggested that tributary mentality seems to have influenced recent Chinese geo-political trends, including China’s vision of ‘peaceful rise/development’, strategic Asian regionalism and community-building, and its formidable diplomatic efforts at building a system of regional allies and friends. Shambaugh (2013) also noted the need to understand the tributary tradition’s impact on China’s ‘go-global’ strategy.

The idea of a ‘neo-tributary’ system emerges from these discussions. Jacques (2009: 508–9) asserted that ‘the tributary state system will not only
shape China’s outlook but, in the context of its global hegemony, is also likely to influence the international system more widely’, and that China’s international relationships should be viewed in ‘neo-tributary’ terms. Thus far, the term, ‘neo-tributary’, has mainly been used as an analogy to further discussions on past and present Chinese foreign policy, and to hypothesize the tributary mentality’s contributions to China’s contemporary diplomacy. However, its potential utility as an analytical framework is under-researched; the following section addresses this research gap.

A neo-tributary framework

The term, neo-tributary, here identifies and interprets the legacy of the tributary mentality and strategies, as manifested in China’s contemporary international engagements. Four analytic categories comprise the neo-tributary framework: Chinese exceptionalism (as motive); trade and diplomacy (as economic means); cultural assimilation (as political strategy); and image building (as legitimacy defence). The following sections explain how these categories are drawn by analogy from the imperial tributary system, and how the analogy between past and present is re-contextualized in conditions surrounding China’s nascent global power status.

The legacy of Sino-centrism and the mentality of Chinese exceptionalism

Sino-centrism underpinned the tributary system, and led China to demand foreign acknowledgment of its inherent superiority and to pursue prestige and legitimation, which informed its non-coercive diplomatic approach (Fairbank 1968; Fitzgerald 1964). Although Sino-centrism no longer informs China’s sense of superiority, an underlying belief in Chinese exceptionalism continues to shape its thoughts, as manifested in China’s self-identification as a ‘great power’ (da guo). In November, 2006, China’s state broadcaster, CCTV, ran a 12-part documentary, The Rise of the Great Powers, which examined how nine nations (Portugal, Spain, Holland, Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Russia and the USA) became great powers. The series aired domestically and internationally, and expressed China’s determination to study ‘the experiences of nations and empires it once condemned as aggressors bent on exploitation’, and its ambition to be again recognized as a great power (Kahn 2006, para 13).

The idea of China as a multifaceted great power was stressed in the Hu government’s (2003–2013) pursuit of ‘scientific development’ and ‘harmonious society’ (Hu 2007), and was affected by two key factors. First, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and its vassal states, the PRC has sought to escape their fate and to reposition China internationally as a
great power. Jiang Zemin (2002), for example, outlined the need to enhance China’s comprehensive national power (zonghe guoli, China’s combined economic, diplomatic, military, cultural, natural and human capital might) to survive international competition. Second, the timely introduction of Nye’s soft-power concept led Chinese scholars to expand the conceptual framework as it is applied to formulating domestic and foreign policies for repositioning China internationally. Chinese scholars (e.g. Shen 1999) captured the attention of the Hu administration by suggesting that the Soviet Union, once as powerful as the USA, collapsed due to flaws in its soft power; and that China’s putative great-power status depended on its ability to build both hard power (to secure national interests) and soft power (to refute ‘China-threat’ theorists and secure a peaceful international environment) (Glaser and Murphy 2009). The rise and fall of great powers in general, and of the USA and USSR in particular, urged China to reflect on its own position, internationally. Current President Xi Jinping’s ‘China Dream’ concept also calls for China’s civilizational renaissance as a great power (Party Documents Research Office of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee 2013). At the 2014 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders’ summit, Xi advanced his vision of a Chinese-driven ‘Asia-Pacific Dream’, stating that China has ‘the responsibility to create and realise an Asia-Pacific dream for the people of the region’ (South China Morning Post 2014a: para 1).

Wang (2008: 261–70), reviewing China’s public diplomacy, stated that ‘[u]nder the ancient imperial tributary system, emperors and their courts sought to maintain the prestige of the Chinese nation. Today reputation is neglected’ but ‘Chinese [still] assume that China should be respected by the world for its long history and splendid civilization’; therefore, China ‘needs to improve its skills to make full use of the modern media and means to carry out its public diplomacy… to promote national image… [and] recover prestige under the tributary system’. Thus, restoring its international status as the ‘central state’ (Zhongguo) has become China’s ‘political imperative’ (Starr 2009: 65).

**Intertwined trade and diplomacy**

The tributary framework organized imperial China’s foreign relations by highlighting trade and diplomatic linkages. Diplomacy involved tributary states’ sending tribute missions to China and performing diplomatic rituals at court, in exchange for economic access, trade exchanges and other benefits, including military protection and recognition of their own legitimacy (Fairbank 1968; Kang 2010).

China’s contemporary diplomacy is no longer bound to tributary rituals; rather, it increasingly takes advantage of international norms and institutions underlying the current international economic paradigms and
practices (e.g. International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty) in pursuit of historical ‘greatness’ (Lampton 2005). The Chinese Communist Party, in 2002, promoted increased Chinese investment overseas by encouraging national corporations to ‘go global’ (zou chu qu) (Jiang 2002), and significantly impacted China’s global investment profile. Consequently, a new economic configuration is emerging in Asia. China is increasingly a principal buyer of its Asian neighbours’ products, a key export destination, and the region’s major source of foreign capital (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2013). The ASEAN–China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) is the world’s largest free trade area in terms of population, and the third largest in terms of nominal GDP. This geo-economic pattern suggests that a China-led, if not actually Sino-centric, regional order is being formed, one which may further enhance China’s relationship with other Asian countries and somewhat reduce other world powers’ ability to influence East Asia or otherwise limit China’s potential to rise (Bhattacharya 2010).

Since 2013, China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ scheme has sought to establish a new overland Silk Road Economic Belt linking China with Europe through Central and Western Asia, and a Maritime Silk Road connecting China with Southeast Asia, Europe and Africa. To that end, China initiated its Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to finance regional infrastructure and business projects (Xinhua Finance Agency 2015). As of April 15, 2015, 57 countries have joined AIIB, including four G-7 countries (the UK, Germany, France, and Italy). China’s multilateral cooperative initiatives are seen as strategic attempts to win over its neighbours and other regional countries through increased trade, transport connectivity and financial support, and to establish China as Asia’s ‘undisputed geopolitical powerhouse’ (Minnick 2015; The Economist 2015).

Multiple factors impel China’s foreign investments, including market expansion, technology acquisition, political aims, and an improved risk/opportunity profile. Commercial and technological considerations mainly motivate China’s private companies, which provide the majority of Chinese overseas direct investment (Value Partners Management Consulting 2010). To China, trade is part and parcel of diplomacy. The PRC state has skilfully linked its overseas investment to high-level official visits. Inter-twining trade with diplomacy has similarities to China’s tributary tradition, as some occasions show. First, at the 2009 London G-20 summit, Hu and US President Obama announced the USA–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), an annual meeting mechanism enabling high-level representatives from both countries to discuss bilateral, regional and global issues (political, strategic, security-related and economic) of mutual concern (White House Press Office 2009); since then, China’s FDI in the USA has reached record levels, driven by large-scale food, energy and real estate acquisitions (Hanemann and Gao 2014). Second, during his 2014 visit to the UK, Premier Li Keqiang signed a roughly US$20 billion, 20-year
China—UK trade deal, marking a new high in Sino—British trade economic relations (CCTV.com 2014). Third, during his 2013 visit to Kazakhstan and Indonesia, President Xi Jinping announced the ‘One Belt, One Road’ scheme (Xinhua Finance Agency 2015). In March, 2015, the 12th National People’s Congress confirmed that China’s IR priorities for 2015 and onward are more significant openness to the world and expanded economic diplomacy (Li 2015).

In return for its ‘dollar diplomacy’, China seeks, and is increasingly receiving, recognition as one of the world’s great powers: analysts and media pundits alike see the S&ED as creating a Beijing-Washington G-2 relationship that affords China global status comparable to that of the USA (The Los Angeles Times 2009); and the 2014 China—UK trade deal enabled Li to request and receive an official audience with Queen Elizabeth II (Xinhua News Agency 2014), a politically-significant gesture showing ‘how aware China has become of its world status and prestige, so that it can demand the protocol treatment it desires’ (South China Morning Post 2014b, para 5).

**Rituals, rules, and cultural assimilation**

A distinctive characteristic of the Chinese tributary system was that foreign states seeking relations with China were expected to pay tribute of various kinds to the Chinese emperor, according to an elaborate system of prescribed Confucian rituals (Kang 2010), the deep-seated value of which facilitated the tributary’s cultural assimilation. Performing the rituals was a symbolic expression of the tributary’s respect for and adoption of Confucian culture and morality, which emphasizes the hierarchical structure of familial, interpersonal and inter-state relations, and the peace and harmony resulting therefrom (Li 2004). Tributary states close to China (e.g. Vietnam and Korea) used Classical Chinese as their official literary language and adopted most aspects of Chinese culture (e.g. China’s administrative system, architecture, philosophy, religion, literature, etc.) (Han 1992; Woodside 1988); this affirmed China’s centrality, established its hierarchical superiority, and ensured the co-optation of the tributary states (Kang 2010). Assimilation into Chinese culture was ‘the price of gaining and maintaining commercial links’ (Smith 2012: 171). The court rituals, Chinese language and associated cultural assimilation were the means through which imperial China exercised its power and influence.

The modern-day analogies of those rituals are exemplified by PRC-prescribed requirements for foreigners accessing China’s market, higher education and political network, particularly Chinese language proficiency. China’s increased global economic engagement has spurred international demand for Chinese language learning. The country is increasingly a destination of choice for international students, most of whom (62.5%) study
Chinese language and Sinology (Ministry of Education (MoE) 2011). China’s rules have increased the Chinese language’s importance in global economic and higher education markets. In 1990, it established the Chinese Proficiency Test (CPT) for non-native speakers, used by Chinese colleges and universities for admissions purposes, and by international organizations to identify potential personnel (China National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language 2007). In 2009, the MoE announced that government-sponsored foreign students reading degree programmes at Chinese universities must attend a one-year preparatory programme to improve their Chinese language proficiency (China Scholarship Council 2011). These rules effectively make Chinese language proficiency a *sine qua non* for non-native Chinese speakers seeking higher education or employment in China, much as it was for tributary nations seeking relations with the imperial court.

Since 2004, China has further promoted Chinese language and culture by establishing Confucius Institutes (CIs) overseas. While CIs are jointly operated by Chinese universities and foreign partner universities/organizations, the PRC State Council has ultimate authority over them worldwide. In addition to teaching Chinese language on a global scale, CIs promote China’s cultural traditions, way of life and foreign policies (Chinese Language Council International (CLCI) 2011). Unlike other cultural diplomacy institutions (e.g. the British Council, Goethe-Institut, Alliance Française and Cervantes Institute), which are often independent entities in a host country (Institute of Cultural Diplomacy 2011), CIs are ‘network weavers’ that create global connections through which China may expand its cultural influence, economic collaborations, and diplomatic relations (Zaharna et al. 2014).

The Confucian identity invoked in the imperial tributary system created a shared identity among states, rather than a one-way acculturation (Kelly 2012). Likewise, CIs are expected to foster shared identification with China, as confirmed by PRC state councillor and CLCI chairperson Liu Yandong (2010: 3), who pointed to efforts to ‘strengthen people-to-people communication’, ‘enhance [CIs’] influence in local communities’ and ‘increase the general public’s interest in China and understanding of what China is today’. However, foreign institutions’ participation in the CI project is more related to the economic and educational benefits thereof — CIs generate money (Hartig 2012) and equip local students with the language skills and knowledge of culture norms needed to do business successfully with China (Shepherd 2007). While it is unclear whether CIs have encouraged actual cultural assimilation, they have enhanced China’s linguistic and cultural influence through dynamic network building, centralized administration, and resource-intensive approaches (Zaharna et al. 2014).

The increasing global significance of the Chinese language and market has informed a rapid increase in the number of international students studying in China. In her speech to the MoE’s 20th plenary meeting, in
August, 2010, Liu Yandong (2010) stressed that local and international universities and students are key players in cultural exchanges, as academic exchanges generate cross-cultural understanding; therefore, the state should increase its subsidies and supports for foreign students studying at Chinese universities, in hopes they will improve understanding between China and the world. In the same year, the MoE (2010) provided massive foreign student subsidies — RMB800 million (US$121.7 million), and planned to sponsor 100,000 ASEAN exchange students to study in China by 2020, and vice versa. The scholarship scheme has, thus far, enhanced China’s political relationships with other ASEAN countries (Pan 2013). Thus, the rules surrounding foreigners’ participation in the CPT, its scholarship scheme, and the CI project are politico-cultural strategies to regulate China’s IR and further its potential for cultural assimilation. These contemporary practices reflect the imperial tributary system era, when ‘Chinese influence abroad was based on commerce and culture rather than on military power’ (Fairbank 1983: 65).

Benevolent governance, legitimacy, and national image shaping

A key objective of the imperial Chinese tributary system was to portray China as a model of benevolent governance reflecting core Confucian values — specifically, the preservation of social and political harmony (Shambaugh 2005). Chinese emperors claimed to be Sons of Heaven, and thus rightful governors of not only China, but of ‘All under Heaven’ (Tianxia). To the Chinese people, Heaven was the foundation of moral order and human conscience; to have Heaven’s mandate was to possess sufficient rectitude and moral authority to govern, provide moral guidance, and wield ‘natural’ power over smaller neighbouring territories (Kornberg and Faust 2005).

Being perceived as ‘benevolent’ — domestically and internationally — legitimized Chinese rulers’ authority, and forestalled potentially destabilizing rebellion or warfare (Smith 2012). Thus, cultivating a benevolent image was a political imperative that addressed Chinese rulers’ fundamental need to secure the basis of their power; foreigners’ apparent acceptance of Chinese cultural superiority, prestige and moral recognition was crucial to the state’s legitimacy (Fletcher 1968).

The contemporary equivalent to this lies in the PRC’s international policies and behaviours. Officially, policy-makers use such phrases as ‘peaceful rise/development’ and ‘harmonious world’ to reassure the world of China’s benign intentions; good moral order is integral to the Chinese government’s status as a ‘responsible country’ (Zheng 2005). China has sought to be seen a responsible great power through its international behaviours, such as during the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, when it was widely credited with minimizing regional financial turmoil, or its prompt and generous 2004 Asian tsunami relief efforts. It can also be seen in China’s
sensitivity to international criticism, as when it quickly increased aid to the Philippines in the aftermath of 2013’s Typhoon Haiyan, following international condemnation of its original miserliness (McLaughlin 2013). China also joined the international naval task force fighting piracy off Somalia, to show its central role as a global player in an important international operation (BBC News 2010).

Despite this, China’s image and legitimacy still face many challenges, mostly due to its domestic problems and political ideology. Contemporary China has seen the decline of communism as a legitimate, ruling political ideology (Bell 2008), and the central government’s political supremacy has been challenged by scandals involving local authorities and protests against official corruption (Cheng 2012). Chinese political stability has been challenged by rising popular nationalism among lawyers, artists, scholars and citizens, who publicly call for improved political and justice systems, greater human rights protection and enhanced national pride (Gries 2004).

The country’s domestic problems have negatively impacted its international image. China is perceived as an authoritarian country whose ruling elite relies on hard power to exert domestic control, and routinely violates its citizenry’s human rights at home and abroad (Hooghe 2005); ‘China’s greatest strategic threat today is its national image… [and] how China is perceived by other nations… will determine the future of Chinese development and reform’ (Ramo 2007: 12). Unsurprisingly, Chinese government ‘has become quite attentive to China’s national image in recent years’ (Wang 2003: 48).

In response to international criticism, the PRC state declared, in its 2007 White Paper on Chinese Foreign Affairs, that Chinese public diplomacy should ‘express [China] positively to the world’ (Wang 2008: 258). Subsequently, the state aggressively grew its official media network globally, by expanding China Radio International, increasing the number of international television channels offered by CCTV, and opening additional international Xinhua News Agency branch offices, including one in New York’s Times Square. This media onslaught has two fundamental missions: to defend China against misunderstanding and criticism by making Chinese voices more clearly heard overseas (Breslin 2011, 2012); and to present China as a multicultural, inclusive and globally responsible nation by showcasing high-profile international cultural events (e.g. the 2008 Beijing Olympics) that garner favourable global attention.

**Interplay between China and other states in a neo-tributary relationship**

The neo-tributary framework advances understanding of how China engages with other polities to form favourable relationships. The original tributary system captured important interplays between imperial China
and other states; for example, that ‘Chinese rulers constructed hierarchic relations with foreign countries for reasons of prestige and political defence, and foreign rulers paid tribute to China because they desired trade and profit’ (Zhang 2009: 563).

These characteristics have modern parallels. The idea of ‘hierarchy’ still resonates in modern-day IR, although international institutions and rules are theoretically based on sovereign equality. For historical reasons, political, economic and social development remains uneven among the nations of the world. Global systemic political and economic imbalances have resulted in a global capitalist economic hierarchy, with more-developed countries at the core and lesser-developed countries at the periphery (Wallerstein 1984).

China has a long history of Third World membership. It lost its economic and political impetus after its defeat in the Opium Wars of the 1800s, and continued to lag behind while first the West, and then Japan, modernized. Building on its awareness of its historical global inequality, China has skillfully used hierarchic relationships to strengthen itself by learning from more-developed countries and building partnerships with less-developed countries (Pan 2013). Scarcely three decades after initiating sweeping economic reforms and opening itself to the West, China’s global status has changed from that of a peripheral country, to that of one approaching the core. The pursuit of its lost prestige has been the driving force behind this aggressive development agenda and the PRC’s behaviour as it rises anew in the international ‘hierarchy’ of nations. China’s claim to a new global status – based on its expanding economic and diplomatic relations with more advanced countries – reflects its priorities and its willingness to align itself with (and belong to) the First World club.

The ‘tribute’ foreign countries pay to modern China is their acknowledgement of China’s rising status in the international community. This includes embracing China as a major developing nation, awarding it with membership in international organizations, offering it a seat at international tables commensurate with its importance, and affirming it the compliance it desires. Theoretically, China’s IRs are no longer regulated by a hierarchical tributary system; practically, Chinese exceptionalism is still evident in international events (Zhang 2013). Foreign states often seem to bend over backwards to avoid ‘angering’ China (Taipei Times Editorial 2009), to bandwagon (Kang 2003), or to engage in ‘low-intensity balancing’ with other states against China’s potential security threat, while maintaining a cooperative working relationship with Beijing (Roy 2005). Chinese exceptionalism may cause suspicion and alarm among other major powers (e.g. the USA and Japan), and cause them to adopt diplomatic and military hedging and (re)-balancing strategies to strengthen their national and regional interests. In 2011, the USA announced a ‘strategic turn’ toward Asia, an effort to deepen US credibility and presence in the Asia-Pacific, and to balance China’s growing regional power (Congressional Research
Thus, Chinese exceptionalism, like its American counterpart, is not achieved without cost.

At the policy level, there is obvious evidence of foreign states’ willingness to accept China as an ‘imagined power’ or ‘power in the making’ (Breslin, 2011; Jacques, 2012). First, the perceived Beijing—Washington G-2 relationship is an acknowledgment of China’s changing status (The Los Angeles Times, 2009). Second, much of Asia (and some non-Asian Pacific Rim countries) is ‘orienting itself around China’ in a complex division of economic labour, forcing every Asia-Pacific economy, including the USA, to ‘find its niche and participate’ (Lampton, 2005: 310).

At the cultural level, China has continued to use cultural assimilation to expand its influence and reinforce its political and economic partnerships with other countries through Confucianism and the Chinese higher education system — hosting international students, sponsoring them to study Chinese language and China-related degree programmes, and operating CIs. This constitutes an important part of China’s diplomatic strategy, and is in line with its larger political and economic agenda. Other countries’ participation in China’s cultural assimilation is probably the by-product of global economic integration and educational exchange, of which China is an important part. China is a party to the WTO’s General Agreement on Trade in Services, which liberalized international trade in services, including higher education. Agreements on bilateral economic and trade cooperation have led to an inflow of international students into China; since the 1990s, increasing number of students have come to China from South Korea, Japan and the USA — all countries with strong economic ties to China (Ministry of Education, 2011).

International students’ decisions to study in Chinese universities reflect their expectation that doing so will afford them a competitive advantage in their home countries (Pan, 2013). Indeed, academic institutions and individual academics can act as unofficial cultural diplomats involved in cultural exchange, even though their motivation might be purely institutional or personal and without political or economic agenda. But for ASEAN students sponsored by the Chinese government, assimilation into China’s official cultural norms and becoming new-generation PRC supporters seems akin to a modern-day tributary mission.

Even though the tributary system vanished before the Qing dynasty fell in 1911, its underlying mentality is still manifested in Chinese diplomacy and the nation’s modern-day pursuit of power. The neo-tributary framework proposed by this paper is not a claim that this system is re-emerging; instead, it reflects the evolution of historical aspects of the system in the contemporary context, and provides an analytical framework for systematically organizing thinking about the aims and means underlying China’s international engagements with and impact on other polities. The analytic categories proposed in the neo-tributary framework enable us to understand the changes and continuities in China’s international behaviours.
Conclusion

This paper’s contributions arise from its theoretical implications. First, it has further developed the ‘neo-tributary’ concept into an interpretative framework for re-conceptualizing China’s global rise, and has provided alternative analytical devices for understanding complex relationships and identifying fundamental relationships between phenomena. It has demonstrated the framework’s utility for analysing the historical mentality and strategies embedded in China’s contemporary power strategy, as manifested through China’s:

(1) claims to be a modern great power, to realise its quest for renewed international prestige;
(2) intertwining of trade and diplomacy, to build global economic interdependence;
(3) use of cultural assimilation, to reinforce China-centric economic and political partnerships;
(4) presentation of an image of benevolent governance, to enhance its international acceptance and domestic legitimacy.

Second, the neo-tributary framework, as an alternative analytic perspective, transcends western-dominated realist/liberal IR perspectives by considering historical Chinese experience and rethinking its modern relevance. Contrary to conventional realist wisdom, it suggests that China’s rise is not, and is unlikely to become, revisionist in nature. Unlike a revisionist power, which uses hard power to change the status quo and reverse world order (Morgenthau 1985; Schweller 1994), China’s pursuit of global status is mainly driven by a tributary mentality that bases national prestige on international recognition, and the political defence of domestic legitimacy. China has continually used non-coercive trade and culture to achieve harmonious national development and perpetuate the legitimacy of its ruling clique. Homogeneous with the tributary mentality, harmonious foreign relations are expected to enhance the PRC’s national prestige and, in turn, further legitimize the sovereignty of the ruling clique.

Unlike narratives set forth in other soft-power discourses, the soft-power attractiveness rests on China’s culture, values or policies is moot. China’s ‘harmonious society’ is cynically perceived by many as a hegemonic attempt to maintain order by harmonizing differences at home and abroad (Pye 1992). Despite this, China still exerts significant cultural influence through engaging with other states to build relationships, make rules and reinforce shared obligations to its liking. As Breslin (2010: 52) explained, ‘engaging the global economy has been a key source of economic growth (thus helping to maintain regime stability)… establishing China’s credentials as a responsible global actor [and] ensuring continued access to what China needs’.
Tributary tradition suggests China’s international engagement is likely to be based on rules and institutions, economic interdependence and intertwined economic, diplomatic and cultural linkages. China, as a nascent global power, is becoming adept at the international governance game. It has incorporated aspects of western liberal ‘internationalism’ into its foreign policy, particularly cooperative security, multilateral forums and confidence-building measures (Lampton 1997, 2005). China’s case supports Keohane and Nye’s (1998) assertion that rising powers can use institutions to pursue mutual gains and reduce their own malfeasance or the manipulation of other states, because absolute wealth gains outweigh relative power gains.

Third, the neo-tributary approach also suggests the presence of a hierarchy of power – an issue which China has traditionally been very wary of addressing. In fact, under the presidency of Xi Jinping, China has become more comfortable with the idea of great power status, and has also suggested that future relations between China and the USA should be based on a ‘new type of great power relationship’ defined as ‘no conflict or confrontation’, ‘mutual respect’ and ‘mutually beneficial cooperation’, by abandoning the zero-sum game mentality and advancing areas of mutual interest between the two countries (CPCNews.cn 2015). Using the term ‘great power’ to refer primarily to China and the USA, China wants to be viewed as an equal; nevertheless, the ‘new type’ approach suggests that China seeks a less-disruptive rise and a non-confrontational foreign policy (Li and Xu 2014). Indeed, China’s claim to a new global status is mainly based on its expanding economic and diplomatic relations, evidenced by its growing enthusiasm for free trade agreements, both bilateral (often with OECD states) and regional (e.g. ASEAN).

While not overtly challenging western organizations, China’s growing comfort with developing international regimes at least provides alternatives to them. China’s recent initiatives can be seen as a form of constructive international cooperation that yields a net positive benefit. While freer cross-border trade and increased economic inter-dependence may not eliminate the possibility of actual warfare, China’s willingness to construct a peaceful international environment, and to facilitate its long-term interests through economic and cultural exchanges rather than military adventurism, is a positive development that stands in stark contrast to its previous anti-western/hegemony belligerence. It is also noted that China is now increasingly interested in joining the ‘First World Club’ on its own terms, albeit stopping well short of the use of force. In doing so, China has sought to gain ‘discourse power’ (huayu quan) – to have its voice heard by the world – and to once again occupy the position of greatness and centrality it enjoyed in centuries past (BBC News 2015). As Fitzgerald (1964: 71) observed, despite its change from Confucianism to Communism, China’s worldview ‘has not fundamentally changed: it has been adjusted to take
account of the modern world, but only so far as to permit China to occupy, still, the central place in the picture’.

While Johnston (2012) has questioned what (if anything) East Asia contributes to IR theory, it is arguable that historical ideas emerging from Chinese IR provide a complementary approach to understanding international power relations. Confucianism offers a philosophical perspective from which to understand ‘harmonious hierarchy’ power relationships (Smith 2012: 167), and ‘Tianxia’ (All under Heaven) is now part of a new vocabulary used to describe US hegemony (Pax Americana) (Khong 2013). As to how best to explain China’s great power status, this paper sheds light on the rediscovery of Chinese tributary tradition. The tributary approach reconceptualises East Asian relations and redefines a model applicable to non-European hegemonies (Kang 2010), emphasizing ‘hierarchy and inequality in ways that the (European) notion of hegemony seeks to dissipate’ (Khong 2013: 40). China’s traditional tributary relationships were ‘hierarchic and non-egalitarian, like Chinese society itself’ (Fairbank 1968: 10), a mentality still observed in China’s contemporary international behaviour; as Mark Twain supposedly said, ‘history doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme’ (Doyle et al. 2012). Indeed, tradition and modernity, past visions and present needs, all interact and interplay to mould China’s diplomacy in its search for global prominence.

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