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# Review Chinese Exceptionalism by De-Essentializing China: Confucianism & Legalism

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# MAIR Thesis

## Thesis Title: Review Chinese Exceptionalism by De-Essentializing China: Confucianism & Legalism

## Research Question: How Can De-essentialize China Through the Case Studies of Confucianism and Legalism Provide a Critical Review of Chinese Exceptionalism?

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## Abstract

This Master thesis takes a critical stance on Chinese exceptionalism within the International Relations (IR) discipline, offering a comprehensive and rigorous review of existing literature. The discussion of Chinese exceptionalism is surging as the rise of China. Contemporary Chinese exceptionalism is primarily based on ancient Chinese history and Confucian philosophy. Superficially, China is touted as having an impressively peaceful past as a benign hegemon in East Asia. However, this narrative's legitimacy stems from the manipulation and selective interpretation of history, which some scholars have pointed out. This thesis argues that the myth of Chinese exceptionalism still has two critical remaining gaps that must be considered. One is the superficial understanding of Confucianism, and the other is the nearly complete discard of Legalism. It contends that Chinese exceptionalism is not as exceptional as the PRC promotes, and China is not radically different from Western countries. This thesis aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Chinese exceptionalism, challenging the prevailing narratives and filling in the gaps in the existing literature.


## I. Introduction

In IR, great powers often employ exceptionalism to differentiate themselves from others. Exceptionalism is a complex concept, intertwined with a state's or civilization's history, culture, religion, philosophy, ethics, and more. Nymalm and Plagemann (2019) effectively conceptualize exceptionalism. They define it (pp. 14-15) as a paradox between the universal and the specific. It involves claiming a unique and exclusive understanding of the universal good and the inclination to implement it beyond its historical context, articulated and enacted through foreign policy. The connection between a nation's foreign policies and its perception of itself as a singular society or civilization, often tied to a superior revelation or spiritual essence, underscores the idea of exceptionalism. This connection creates the exceptionalism paradox. On the one hand, it reflects exceptionalism's universality by claiming moral superiority over nearly all other societies, motivating the exceptionalist nation to pursue what it asserts is a universal common good in its foreign policy. On the other hand, it mirrors exceptionalism's particularity by suggesting that other societies are incapable of replicating the

exceptional state's unique attributes. Nymalm and Plagemann (2019, pp. 18-19) categorize four types of exceptionalism in foreign policy: imperialist, civilizational, internationalist, and globalist exceptionalism. Notably, civilizational exceptionalism stands out as the predominant discourse, especially with the rise of the civilizational state as articulated by China, Turkey, India, Russia, and, of course, the U.S. (Acharya, 2020, p. 139). Civilizational exceptionalism is noted for its model approach to foreign policy and its tendency to seek exceptions in international political matters. Exceptionalism is not necessarily a phenomenon limited to great or superpowers, though the level of power largely dictates how much attention a discourse on exceptionalism can receive (Nymalm & Plagemann, 2019, pp. 19-20).

This thesis delves into the intricate discourse of Chinese exceptionalism within IR. Without a doubt, China has emerged as a major global power whose actions significantly influence IR and global power dynamics, as exemplified by the ongoing Sino-U.S. competition. Understanding Chinese exceptionalism helps explain how China perceives its role and strategies on the world stage. Insight into Chinese exceptionalism aids policymakers worldwide in formulating informed and effective foreign policies and diplomatic strategies in response to China's actions and policies. This thesis disentangles Chinese exceptionalism by highlighting the misinterpretation of Confucianism and the omission of Legalism in mainstream discourse. By addressing these gaps, future discussions can start from a new dimension academically, and policymakers can gain a more holistic view of Chinese foreign policy behind the curtain of Chinese exceptionalism.

This thesis first presents a literature review of various perspectives on Chinese exceptionalism. The literature review covers the historical roots and contemporary versions of Chinese exceptionalism. This historical perspective provides a backdrop for understanding the current manifestations of Chinese exceptionalism in IR. The literature review also discusses dissenting voices and critics of Chinese exceptionalism. Moreover, it identifies the remaining gaps this thesis aims to fill. The second part of this thesis explains the research methodology, which utilizes qualitative case studies. The third part is the central section that de-essentializes China through two case studies: Confucianism and Legalism. Although the discussion is primarily

theoretical, it briefly compares Chinese exceptionalism with Chinese foreign policy before the conclusion.

## II. Literature Review

The discourse of Chinese exceptionalism is rising, given China's status as the most prominent rising power and Beijing's efforts to address its soft power deficit (Zhang, 2011; Callahan, 2012; Wang, 2014). The current Chinese president, Xi Jinping, likely subscribes to Chinese exceptionalism, given his inclination towards Chinese nationalism. He often appeals to China's illustrious culture and history to shape China's domestic and foreign policies. In a 2014 speech, Xi stated, "The Chinese nation has always been peace-loving. Our love for peace is also deeply rooted in Confucianism. Since ancient times, Chinese people have esteemed ideas preaching peace: 'Coordinate and seek harmony with all nations,' 'Within the four seas, all men are brothers,' 'A far-off relative is not as helpful as a near neighbor,' 'Neighbors wish each other well, just as loved ones do to each other,' 'A warlike state, no matter how big, will inevitably die.' The love for peace has been firmly embedded in the spiritual world of the Chinese nation and remains China's basic stance in handling international relations." Similar sentiments are echoed in his other speeches and official Chinese documents, aligning with the Chinese characteristics consistently emphasized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Xi, 2021; The State Council, 2011; The State Council, 2005).

In general, there are three waves of Chinese exceptionalism: imperial China (221 BC-AD 1911), the revolutionary People's Republic of China (PRC) (1949-1976), and post-1976 contemporary Chinese exceptionalism (Zhang, 2013, p. 308). It is impossible to comprehend contemporary Chinese exceptionalism without understanding its historical manifestations. Indeed, post-1911 Chinese exceptionalism draws heavily from the imperial legacy. The development of Chinese exceptionalism has primarily been based on China's continuous civilization, spanning thousands of years.

Zhang overlooks the Chinese exceptionalism during the republican era (1911-1949). Although China was materially backward at that time, nationalist leader Sun Yat-sen emphasized the distinctiveness and moral superiority of Chinese civilization in comparison to Western

civilization (Acharya, 2020, p. 144; Sun, 1941). Given China's semi-colonial status during this period, that strand of Chinese exceptionalism received almost no attention then or afterward. This strand of Chinese exceptionalism reflects the Pan-Asianism discourse of the late 19th century and early 20th century. However, this connection is no longer appreciated due to the fact that Japan employed Pan-Asianism to disguise its imperialist ambitions (Duara, 2001).

This literature review focuses on imperial Chinese exceptionalism and post-1978 Chinese exceptionalism. The latter is crucial for understanding China's foreign policy and soft power, and the former is the most significant source for developing the latter. Mao's version of Chinese exceptionalism is unique compared to the other two strands. It blended traditional *tian xia* (All Under Heaven, 天下; this term is defined in the following paragraphs) aspirations with the modern ideology of communism, positioning China as the center of the worldwide communist revolution (Chen, 2001; Xu, 2010). In fact, Mao Zedong denigrated Confucianism, believing that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" (Mao, 1974, p. 61). This distinctly revolutionary and offensive element suggests that it is unlikely to revive, meriting only a brief mention here.

### (1) Imperial Chinese Exceptionalism

The concept of exceptionalism in Imperial China was manifested through the claims of its rulers and elite class regarding China's central and superior position in the world, alongside assertions of a peace-loving Confucian foreign policy. Historically, Chinese exceptionalism emerged due to two significant factors: the early development of Chinese civilization and the absence of rival civilizations in its vicinity (Zhang, 2013, p. 308). John Fairbank (1968, pp.1-2) writes, "Age, size, and wealth all made China the natural center of this East Asian world. Geography kept the whole region separate from West and South Asia and made it the most distinctive of all the great cultural areas." China's name, *Zhongguo* (中国), meaning "Middle Kingdom," *prima facie* indicates Imperial China's view of its centrality in the world (Zhang, 2013, p. 308).

The academic discussion of Imperial China's exceptionalism frequently references two intertwined concepts: the tributary system and *tianxia* (天下, All Under Heaven). The seminal literature from Fairbank (1942, 1953, 1968) provides valuable insights into the Imperial Chinese tributary system. To put it simply, the tributary system posited China as deserving of tribute from foreign leaders, who were, in turn, obligated to fulfill roles as subordinate or tributary states. According to David Kang (2010), the tributary system represented the international order in East Asia, with China at its center. It was a hierarchical and stable system, especially from 1368 to 1841, as the idea of *Pax Sinica* suggests. *Tianxia* reflects China's assertion of Confucian moral authority over the known world, with Chinese emperors considering themselves as the "Son of Heaven" at the apex of the hierarchy (Zhang, 2013, p. 308). Thus, the tributary system was a materialization of China's tianxiaism. Zhang (2013, p. 308) views Sinocentrism as the "most noteworthy, consistent, and important dimension of the imperial discourse." It provides a rich reservoir for modern China to develop its exceptionalism.

### (2) Contemporary Chinese Exceptionalism

Contemporary Chinese exceptionalism largely stems from Beijing's ambition to provide a strategic narrative and ideological rationale that fosters a stable external environment for China's resurgence and its participation as a great power in today's global landscape. Zhang (2013, p. 310) argues that contemporary Chinese exceptionalism comprises three interconnected features derived from Imperial Chinese exceptionalism: great power reformism, benevolent pacifism, and harmonious inclusionism.

Indeed, both Chinese people and political elites harbor a great power dream derived from Imperial China's concept of the "heavenly dynasty" (天朝, *tianchao*) (Ren, 2009, p. 135). In an article by prominent Chinese IR scholar Yan Xuetong (2001, p. 33), he states, "The history of superpower status makes the Chinese people very proud of their country on the one hand, and on the other hand, very sad about China's current international status. They believe China's decline is a historical mistake they should correct." However, as a great power, China aims not to follow the historical trajectory of Western and Japanese powers, which conquered and colonized many other nations. Instead, a rising China strives to build a peaceful and

harmonious world by sharing the benefits of its development with the world (Zhang, 2007; Zhang, 2013, p. 311). The best example is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), comparable to Japanese official development assistance (ODA) through which many Eastern and Southeastern Asian countries improved their infrastructure (Söderberg, 2010, p. 37).

The concept of benevolent pacifism overlaps greatly with great power reformism. This argument is based on Imperial China's peacefulness and defensiveness in its foreign policy. Chinese culture is the primary factor in Imperial China's foreign policy style. Therefore, the PRC will rise peacefully because peace is the "DNA" of Chinese culture (Zhang, 2013, pp. 311-312).

Harmonious inclusionism comprises a series of interconnected ideas that challenge the notion of a single nation, ideology, or methodology dominating global politics. Instead, it advocates for a receptive, open-minded approach to worldwide diverse political and cultural traditions. China seeks to enhance its engagement with the global community through this concept. Beyond merely recognizing the importance of integrating various political and cultural traditions into international governance, "harmonious inclusionism" champions the involvement of all nations in pursuing collective security, growth, and well-being through open, reciprocal multilateralism and cooperation. This aims to achieve shared and universal prosperity for all countries, not just a few major powers. China proposes extending the benefits of its growth to other nations, respecting political and cultural differences rather than imposing its political system on others, and working towards establishing a "harmonious world." This approach embodies the Confucian idea of "harmony in diversity" (和而不同, *he er bu tong*).

In Confucian philosophy, "*he*" represents harmony (acknowledging differences while blending interactions), and "*tong*" signifies uniformity. Hence, the phrase suggests that the ideal person seeks harmony with others without necessarily adopting their views. Chinese intellectuals often argue that China's integrated approach to reasoning downplays individualism while fostering the peaceful coexistence of diverse elements, thereby showing tolerance towards other cultures and welcoming the integration of various traditions into a cohesive process of reconciling differences (Zhang, 2013, pp. 311-312). In today's world, China's "harmonious inclusionism"

is challenging Western universalism by proposing alternative approaches. William Callahan (2004) contends that "harmony in diversity" embodies an inherent logic and flexible approach, using diversity and uncertainty as means to achieve the ideal state of "great harmony." This concept implies that nations should engage in peaceful interactions while maintaining their unique perspectives in international relations. This ensures that differences in opinion do not hinder amicable relations, positive engagements, or cooperative efforts beneficial to all involved (Ding, 2005, p. 29). However, Callahan (2016) holds reservations about the inclusiveness of Chinese foreign policy in practice, citing the deliberate exclusion of the US and Japan from the "inclusive" Belt and Road Initiative.

### (2a) Civilizational State/Sino-Speak

Alongside the rise of Chinese exceptionalism is the emergence of the Chinese civilizational state discourse, or "Sino-speak," as termed by Callahan (2012, p. 33). This discourse justifies Chinese exceptionalism by portraying China as a civilization completely different from, and perhaps superior to, the West.

Callahan (2012, p. 34) identifies Martin Jacques as a prime example of "Sino-speak" through his seminal work, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*. However, he overlooks another critical contemporary Chinese scholar, Zhang Weiwei, the director of the China Institute at Fudan University, who authored the well-known book *The China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State*.[1] Indeed, other scholars might also be classified under "Sino-speak." For example, Lucian Pye (1992, p. 1162) views China as "a civilization pretending to be a nation-state." In contrast to Zhang and Jacques, Pye's analysis is more introspective, focusing on how China's historical and cultural legacies influence the behavior and attitudes of its leaders and citizens rather than starkly differentiating China from

[1] Callahan mentions Zhang in his book "China Dreams: 20 versions of the future" but it seems Zhang in missing in Callahan's discussion of "Sino-speak".

the West (Pye, 1990). However, given the ongoing active involvement of Zhang and Jacques in academia and media, this thesis concentrates exclusively on their perspectives.

Martin Jacques introduces the concept of China as a "civilizational state," a term that sets China's socio-political identity apart from the typical nation-state model prevalent in the West. Jacques contends that the civilizational state perceives itself as a unique civilization with a cultural mission underpinned by its extensive history, continuous civilization, vast territory, and Confucian philosophy. This contrasts the Western notion of a nation-state, characterized by a relatively modern historical narrative, defined borders, and a homogenous national culture. Thus, the expectation for China to "Westernize" is deemed unrealistic. Jacques argues that, operating as a "civilizational state," China's politics, governance, and foreign relations fundamentally diverge from Western practices. He notes that the Chinese state's more paternalistic and meritocratic approach, rooted in Confucian ideals, informs its governance model focused on stability, order, and the collective good rather than individual freedoms. Jacques posits that China seeks not to export its model or ideology but to earn respect and influence through its distinctive status and historical legacy in international relations. He speculates that as China gains global prominence, its approach as a civilizational state may challenge the Westphalian international system, potentially reviving the tributary system (Jacques, 2009).

Zhang Weiwei characterizes China as "the rise of a civilizational state which has amalgamated the world's largest continuous civilization with a huge modern state" (Zhang, 2012, p. 47). He defines a civilizational state as a product of "hundreds of states amalgamated into one" throughout China's extensive and continuous history (Zhang, 2012, p. 53). His perspective shares some similarities with Martin Jacques, particularly in the belief that due to its unique history, China will not and should not align with Western norms in domestic politics and foreign policy. However, Zhang disagrees with Jacques on whether China will revive some form of the ancient tributary system. He contends that Jacques still sees an inherent tension between nation-state and civilization-state models. Furthermore, while Zhang does not concur with Jacques on the notion of racial superiority, his discussion of the Chinese "civilizational state" nonetheless implies the superiority of Chinese civilization (Zhang, 2012).

## (2b) Chinese IR Theory

Since the 1990s, the scholarship of Chinese International Relations Theory (IRT) has emerged, led by three prominent scholars: Yan Xuetong, Zhao Tingyang, and Qin Yaqing. According to Do (2015, p. 24), the creation of the "Chinese School of IR" signifies a "generational change in Chinese social sciences, particularly the professionalization of its IR community and their aspiration to 'catch up' with the global intellectual community." These scholars criticize Western IR theories as "Eurocentric" in their interpretation of non-Western countries' foreign policies (Woon, 2018).

As the leading figure of the "Tsinghua School," Yan (2013) introduces moral realism in his book *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, following a detailed examination of Pre-Qin (approximately 770 BC-221 BC) philosophy. 'Moral realism,' as articulated by Yan Xuetong, signifies a departure from traditional realist perspectives that predominantly emphasize power politics and strategic considerations, neglecting moral or ethical dimensions. He differentiates between hegemony or '*ba*' (霸) and humane authority or '*wang*' (王). The former relies on material power, exemplified by U.S. hegemony, while the latter depends on moral leadership. Yan argues that moral leadership is more significant than economic and military power. It derives from the personal authority of a state's leader, the ministers he appoints, and the policies they pursue. Virtuous leadership from a leading power in international relations is likely to win global hearts and minds, contributing to a stable interstate system.

Zhao Tingyang (2006) is known for his tianxia theory in Chinese IR theories, which he elaborates on in *Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-Under-Heaven' (Tian-xia, 天下)*. All-under-heaven means an institutional world that is fundamentally different from conventional military empires such as the Roman Empire and imperial empires such as the British Empire (p. 30). Zhao (p. 36) defines the utopia of All-Under-Heaven as "an extendedly-defined world society with harmony, communication, and cooperation of all nations, guaranteed by a commonly-agreed institution." Zhao (pp. 30-31) thinks Chinese political methodology is essentially different from the Western one. Chinese theory is framed in terms

of world/society, whereas the Western one is framed in terms of nation/state. Zhao (p. 36) also compares the All-Under-Heaven pattern with the United Nations pattern and argues that the former is more successful, as demonstrated by the long periods of peace and stability in Chinese history. Zhao (p. 37) believes that the different philosophies of the two patterns explain the consequential differences: All-Under-Heaven understands the oneness of the world as "harmony with differences," whereas the United Nations understands the oneness of the world as a mission of Western modernity. Therefore, the All-Under-Heaven theory is holistic and inclusive. Zhao suggests that it should be the best philosophy for world governance. Zhao (2021) further articulates his tianxia theory in his newest book, *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*. He (pp. 3-4) continues emphasizing *tianxia* theory's inclusiveness and harmoniousness by comparing it with Western binary philosophy, e.g., Christianity/paganism and Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations.

Qin Yaqing (2016), a foundational scholar of the Chinese School of IR, developed relational theory. Qin sets Chinese relationality against Western rationality, basing his theory on Chinese dialectics. He (p. 34) argues that individual rationality is "a defining element of the background knowledge of Western culture." Unlike the Hegelian 'thesis-antithesis' approach, which often involves conflict and synthesis in an "either-or" logic, Qin references Chinese *Zhongyong* (中庸) dialectics, symbolized by *yin* (阴) and *yang* (阳), to emphasize a non-conflictual, coevolutionary process ('co-theses'), which is "both-and" logic. Zhongyong dialectics leads to harmony by seeking a balanced middle ground for common interests. Yin and yang constitute an organic whole from which any other relationship can be seen as being derived (Qin, pp. 39-40). Qin (p. 42) proposes that relational governance can be "an alternative and a complementary governing model to rule-based governance." Rule-based governance is designed to exploit the rationality of the individual actor, whereas relational governance is "a process of negotiating sociopolitical arrangements that manage complex relationships in a community to produce order so that members behave in a reciprocal and cooperative manner with mutual trust evolved over a shared understanding of social norms and human morality"

(p. 43). In terms of IR, the mainstream IRT perceives an atomistic international system. By comparison, the relational approach understands it as a system of complex relations (p. 44).

However, Chinese IRT proponents do not necessarily endorse Chinese exceptionalism. They aim for their theories to be universal rather than national. Though theorizing on indigenous foundations, Chinese IRT does not self-exclude from Western IRTs (Li, 2021, p. 1399). For example, although Yan is often labeled a Chinese IRT scholar, his project aims to create a universal theory rooted in China's historical experience, culture, and philosophy (Kim, 2016, p. 73). It must be noted that Chinese IRT largely develops based on Confucianism or the pacific part of Confucianism. Zhao's *tianxia* theory and Qin's relational theory do implicitly suggest that their theories are perhaps better than Western ones that tend to produce disorder.

### (3) Dissenting Chinese Non-Exceptionalism

Nonetheless, the lure of Chinese exceptionalism is not appealing to every scholar in China and abroad.

#### (3a) Liu Mingfu

In China, Liu Mingfu, the author of *The China Dream: The Great Power Thinking and Strategic Positioning of China in the Post-American Age* and a retired Chinese PLA officer known for his hawkish views, believes that to safeguard its economic interests, China must enhance its military capabilities to counter American power (Liu, 2015). Otherwise, he argues, China would become a "plump lamb" vulnerable to other military powers (Liu, 2015, p. 255). For him, a nation cannot truly be a great power without the military strength to support its status.

Interestingly, despite his emphasis on military over civilian virtues, he does not see a Sino-U.S. military conflict as inevitable, arguing that China's military strengthening is aimed at deterring a U.S. attack. Moreover, his book reflects some Confucian influence, advocating that China, as a great power, should pursue the "kingly way" (王道, *wangdao*) rather than the "way of the hegemon" (霸道, *badao*) (Liu, 2015), a view also supported by Yan Xuetong (2013). This nuanced stance might explain why Callahan (2012, p. 34) still categorizes Liu as part of "Sino-

speak" because he highlights the Chinese version of modernization as opposed to Western modernization.

### (3b) John Mearsheimer & John Ikenberry

In the West, leading neo-realist scholar John Mearsheimer (2014; 2021) is markedly more pessimistic than Liu and consistently challenges the notion of China's "peaceful rise." He posits that the international system is anarchic, lacking overarching authority to regulate state actions. Within this framework, great powers inherently distrust each other and prepare for the worst-case scenario. Mearsheimer contends that as China's power grows, it will naturally aim to dominate Asia, much like the United States has sought dominance over the Western Hemisphere. This ambition for regional supremacy is likely to provoke tensions and potentially conflict with the U.S. Mearsheimer applies the security dilemma concept, where one state's defensive measures are perceived as threats by others, leading to an arms race and increased hostility. He argues that China's military strengthening, intended to secure its interests, will be viewed as aggressive by its neighbors and the U.S., escalating reciprocal suspicion and military buildup, thus rendering a peaceful rise highly improbable (Mearsheimer, 2014; 2021). Consequently, he gives minimal consideration to China's history and culture, viewing China as an unexceptional actor in the anarchic international system. Mearsheimer's argument appears plausible as the Sino-U.S. relationship has deteriorated significantly since 2016, with tensions high in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.

In contrast, the liberalist John Ikenberry (2008) held the belief that Sino-U.S. power transition would unfold peacefully. He argued that the rise of China was not comparable to other precedents of great power rising because China was rising within the framework of a well-established liberal international system. China was already integrated into this system and benefiting from it. While the rise of China was unstoppable, Ikenberry believed that the U.S. could fully integrate China into the liberal international order, and China would exercise its power within the framework of the international system. Thus, China would replace U.S. hegemony but not the liberal order established by Washington. However, Ikenberry was too optimistic about the durability of the liberal order and underestimated Chinese leadership's ambitions. Donald Trump's election cast significant doubt on the rules-based liberal order.

China does not need to overturn the current international order but can substitute parts of it, such as with the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). His later work also reflects the growing realization of the challenges in fully integrating China into the rules-based liberal order (Ikenberry, 2017; Lim & Ikenberry, 2023).

### (4) Critics of Chinese Exceptionalism

Undoubtedly, the discourse of Chinese exceptionalism has faced criticism from several scholars.

Callahan (2012, pp. 51-52) posits that "Sino-speak" is evolving into the predominant language to describe the convergence of a new form of Orientalism and the idea of Chinese exceptionalism. This Orientalism with Chinese characteristic promotes Chinese values as the ethical antidote to what is depicted as a morally declining and chaotic world, primarily influenced by U.S. geopolitical interests (Zhang, 2013). By presenting ancient China as a benign regional hegemon and contemporary China as a continuation of Chinese civilization, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is portrayed as naturally assuming the role of a responsible power. Woon (2018, p. 77) reflects on how Chinese exceptionalism grants discursive legitimacy to the notion of Sino-centric dominance in the 21st century, limiting the range of alternative visions for China's future. Ho (2014, p. 165) contends that both Chinese exceptionalism and non-exceptionalism, as viewed by John Mearsheimer, tend to essentialize China into an absolute identity, leaving no room for nuance. This binary perspective is counterproductive for comprehending China's aspirations for power within the international system.

More crucially, both contemporary and imperial forms of Chinese exceptionalism are often constructed through tactics such as selective interpretation of history and romanticizing Chinese heritage. Callahan (2012, p. 37) criticizes Martin Jacques because he "cherry-picks amenable facts from secondary sources for a simplistic and partisan reading of China's past and future." Chinese history is far less peaceful than Chinese exceptionalism rhetoric suggests. The expansions of Chinese territories were not solely the result of cultural assimilation.

Chinese territories significantly expanded during the Yuan and Qing dynasties, both referred to as alien/non-Han "conquest dynasties." However, other Chinese dynasties, especially the Han and Tang, also tried to expand their territories (Zhang, 2015a, pp. 200-201). Even the Song Dynasty, often perceived as the weakest Chinese dynasty, did not refrain from expansion (Wang, 2011). These expansions were not merely defensive. For example, many early Ming campaigns in Mongolia/Yuan Dynasty were more offensive than defensive (Zhang, 2015b). Victoria Hui (2008, p. 58) said: "War, not Confucian ideals, explains how China expanded from the Yellow River valley in the Warring States era to the continental empire in the Qing dynasty." Hans van de Ven (1996, p. 737) wrote: "Chinese history has been at least as violent as Europe's."

Hui (2023) argues that many scholars view Imperial Chinese history from a Sino-centric perspective, and it can have a quite different narrative when looking at how neighboring Confucianized states viewed Imperial China. Callahan (2012, p. 47) notes that Imperial Chinese sources often portray China as a benevolent empire. Kang (2010, p. 2) claims that China had no desire to expand because countries such as Vietnam and Korea voluntarily submitted to the China-centered tribute system and felt proud to be part of Confucian civilization. John K. Fairbank (1942) introduced the tribute system by heavily relying on Chinese official sources. However, it is vital to consider the voices of those who faced Imperial Chinese hegemony (Hui, 2023; Suzuki, 2009). Indeed, there is much evidence suggesting neighboring countries had contradictory reactions. Zhang (2015b, p. 8) believes the tribute system was "constantly revised, challenged, or avoided by different actors." Korea is commonly perceived as one of the Chinese tributary system's most "loyal" members. However, after researching Korean state letters, court documents, and personal essays, Lee (2017, p. 172) concluded that Korea's Ming policy "vacillated markedly from compliance (in 1370) to a failed challenge (in 1388), back to compliance (in 1392), and then to another attempt at challenge (in 1398)." In the early days of the Ming Dynasty, there were several diplomatic twists between Ming China and Choson Korea. Chosen Korea officially adopted the "*sadae*" (serving the great, 事大) policy after hearing of the Yongle emperor's "punitive expedition" against Vietnam to avoid a similar invasion (Zhang, 2015b, p. 76; Lee, 2017). Historically, Imperial China tried to

invade Korea during the Han Dynasty, Sui Dynasty, Tang Dynasty, and Mongolian Yuan Dynasty. Vietnam is another "loyal" member of the Chinese tributary system. Imperial China ruled Vietnam for nearly one thousand years. Vietnam declared independence after the fall of the Tang Dynasty. Imperial China tried to reclaim Vietnam several times in the following centuries (Hui, 2023, pp. 487-488). The final peace between Imperial China, Vietnam, and Korea is more like the outcome of realist calculations in that China had no capacity to conquer and administer Korea and Vietnam, and Korea and Vietnam had to submit to China symbolically in return for peace. In fact, Vietnamese monarchs branded themselves "king" when communicating with China but "emperor" when in private or sending messages to their Southeast Asian "vassals" (Kang, 2010, p. 103).

### (5) Remaining Gaps

Though many scholars have identified the contradictions between Chinese exceptionalism and actual history, their critiques are superficial to a certain extent. They point out the violent aspects of Imperial Chinese history; however, they have not sufficiently explained the rationale behind this contradiction. Hui (2023) de-essentializes China by examining other countries, but China itself needs to be de-essentialized first.

The rise of Chinese exceptionalism is also China's response to Western centralism, but Beijing's counterattack has gone too far. Chinese culture has been essentialized in black-and-white terms. Many arguments from "Sino-speak" scholars are derived from this essentialized view of Chinese culture. Even prominent scholars like Henry Kissinger (2011, p. 5) believe in "the singularity of China." However, it makes no sense to claim that the culture of such an ancient and diverse civilization is internally coherent and externally bounded. Christian Reus-Smit (2018, p. 12) states, "the cultural terrain in which politics plays out is polyvalent, multilayered, riven with fissures, often contradictory, and far from coherently integrated or bounded." Peter Katzenstein (2009, p. 11) also warns against "coherent cultural complexes with dispositional essences." Similar critiques regarding the essentialism trap can also be observed from George Lawson (2012, p. 205) and Margaret Somers (1994, p. 605). Indeed, Chinese culture must be de-essentialized to debunk Chinese exceptionalism from its roots. In

other words, the so-called pacifist Confucianism must be re-examined, and Chinese culture should not be simplified as merely Confucianism.

## III. Research Methodology

This study's research design is primarily qualitative. The qualitative research methodology was chosen for its efficacy in delving into complex phenomena within their unique contexts. Malterud (2001, p. 483) defines qualitative research methods as involving "the systematic collection, organization, and interpretation of textual material derived from talk or conversation. It is used to explore the meanings of social phenomena experienced by individuals in their natural context." This approach is apt for studying Chinese exceptionalism, a topic rich with subtlety and complexity, facilitating a thorough comprehension of its principles, narratives, and ramifications.

The thesis utilizes qualitative case studies of Confucianism and Legalism as a framework to de-essentialize Chinese exceptionalism. Confucianism is the first case because it is the most frequently discussed Chinese school of thought and Chinese exceptionalism is largely based on Confucian pacifist culture. The second case is Legalism, another major Chinese school of thought, as important as Confucianism but has received much less attention in the Anglophile world.

Qualitative case studies are designed to explore phenomena within their real-life contexts, incorporating a variety of data sources. This approach ensures that the subject is viewed from multiple perspectives rather than through a singular lens, facilitating a thorough understanding of the phenomenon's different facets (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Yin (2003) suggests that a case study approach is particularly useful in scenarios where: (1) the study seeks to answer “how” and “why” questions; (2) the behavior of participants cannot be manipulated by the researcher; (3) there is a focus on examining contextual factors believed to be relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (4) the boundaries between the phenomenon itself and its context are not clear.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how Confucianism and Legalism can be employed to de-essentialize China. The outcome is not pre-determined. Confucianism and Legalism were

two major schools of thought in ancient China, so they are highly relevant to debunking Chinese exceptionalism. The phenomenon of Chinese exceptionalism is still developing.

These two case studies are characterized as exploratory, as they seek to investigate the phenomena of Chinese exceptionalism, which does not have a predetermined set of outcomes (Yin, 2003), and intrinsic, given their unique relevance to the study of this particular phenomenon (Stake, 1995).

The thesis primarily uses secondary sources for these two case studies, combined with some textual analysis to support the argument. In the first case study, the thesis reviews the mainstream and alternative views on Confucianism through secondary source analysis, supported by some textual analysis from Confucius and Mencius. In the second case study, the thesis reviews relevant secondary sources about Legalism to find out how Legalism is different from but connected to Confucianism. The analysis will also be supported by some textual analysis from prominent Legalists—Hanfeizi and Shang Yang.

## IV. Case I: Confucianism

### (a) The Myth of Confucian Pacifism

It is nearly taken for granted that Confucianism is equivalent to pacifism. The myth of Confucian pacifism is the belief that Confucianism determined Imperial China's defensive foreign policy. The long history of *Pax Sinica* that continued till the second half of the 19th century provides the most powerful justification (Zhang, 2015a, p. 200). Even several leading scholars in the West subscribe to the view that Confucian culture dictates China's peace-loving tradition. Since the Enlightenment, the philosophes touted Chinese civilization as "rational and peaceful" (Waldron, 1997, p. 36). Max Weber (1951, p. 140) wrote, "The Confucianists, who are ultimately pacifist literati oriented to inner political welfare, naturally faced military powers with aversion or lack of understanding." John K. Fairbank (1974, pp. 7-9) contended that Chinese culture's "pacifist bias" renders the use of force a "last resort." Ralph Sawyer (1996, p. 3) argued, "Despite incessant barbarian incursions and major military threats throughout their history…Imperial China was little inclined to pursue military solutions to external

aggression." However, Confucianism is more complex and nuanced than what these scholars believe.

The narrative of Confucian pacifism is essentially a philosophical ideal that can never come into effect in the real world. A perfect pacifist world is only possible in the ideal of *tian xia*, a harmonious but hierarchical political order without state borders, where a sage King at the apex governs by utilizing virtue. In this ideal circumstance, the use of force can find no justification. Confucius and Mencius also acknowledged the difficulty or impossibility of implementing their *tian xia* governed by a sage king through benevolence (Bell, 2008, pp. 227-229). Even Yao and Shun, the icons of sagehood, are not considered qualified sage kings:

> Zigong said: What would you say of a man who showers the people with blessings and who could save the multitude? Could he be called benevolent? The Master said: What has this to do with goodness? He would be a saint! Even Yao and Shun would be deficient in this respect. (Confucius et al., 2014, p. 17).

The closest example to Confucian *tian xia* is the Imperial Chinese tributary system, but the latter resembles the former mainly in theory rather than in practice.

The discussion below is based on classical Confucianism instead of neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism, which was developed in the Song Dynasty (960 AD-1279 AD), became the state ideology during the Ming (1368 AD-1644 AD) and Qing (1644 AD-1911 AD) eras. Ming neo-Confucianism also stresses a hierarchical *tian xia* order, where the Chinese emperor, as the ultimate authority, governs by self-cultivation. In turn, subordinates show their appreciation for the emperor through loyalty and obedience. Punitive expeditions are responses to serious crimes, such as threatening Chinese security or executing Chinese envoys, and serve to express the emperor's awesomeness (Zhang, 2015a, pp. 203-204). The development of neo-Confucianism also mirrors the growth and maturity of the Chinese tributary system. However, it is the classical version that significantly shaped Imperial Confucianism overall (Hui, 2018, p. 156).

### (b) Missionary Confucianism: Just War/Punitive Expedition

Confucianism never rules out the possibility of deploying force, and several scholars have pointed out the Confucian support for violence under plausible circumstances (Bell, 2008;

Twiss & Chan, 2015; Yan, 2013). Confucius and Mencius were not blind to the semi-anarchic Chinese Warring States period in which they lived. Bell (2008, p. 230) thinks that most of the passages in *The Analects of Confucius* and *The Works of Mencius* are written in the context of a non-ideal world of states competing for territorial advantage, and they justify the use of force in a realistic world.

Mencius suggests that small states should reinforce their territories when facing threats from larger states rather than abolishing them: "Dig deeper moats and build higher walls and defend them together with the people" (Mengzi et al., 2009, p. 24). A defensive war is justified if a virtuous ruler must deploy violence with his people's support to protect his territory from being conquered by other states (Bell, 2008, p. 231).

The most critical view from Confucius and Mencius is the idea of just war or punitive expeditions. A war is considered just if it promotes peace and benevolence. To launch a just war, one must meet specific requirements. Bell (2008, pp. 235-237) summarizes four requirements: "First, the 'conquerors' must try to liberate people who are being oppressed by tyrants… Second, the people must demonstrate, in concrete ways, that they welcome their conquerors… Third, punitive expeditions must be launched by rulers who are at least potentially virtuous… Fourth, the leader of justified punitive expeditions must have some moral claim to have the world's support." The Confucian justification of "punitive expeditions" seems to resemble the justification of humanitarian intervention from Michael Walzer (1977, p. 101). Bell (2008, p. 242) even believes Confucians might be more supportive of "punitive expeditions" launched against Iraq and Afghanistan compared to Western liberal defenders of humanitarian intervention. Kim (2010, p. 33; 2017, p. 193) describes a "punitive expedition" as "Confucian moralpolitik" and "an intervention by a humane foreign ruler." Kim (2017, pp. 191-192) stresses that a "punitive expedition" is impossible without a moral hierarchy among the states. He (p. 197) also notes that the primary purpose of the punitive expedition, according to Mencius, is to punish the unvirtuous ruler rather than save the people. However, the people's living conditions indicate whether the ruler is a sage king or a tyrant. This is different from modern humanitarian intervention, which aims "to protect the citizens of the target state from

flagrant violations of their fundamental human rights usually by agents of the state" (Ayoob, 2002, p. 81).

A good case study is Qi's punitive expedition against Yan:

> Now, Yan oppressed its people, and you went and punished its ruler. The people believed you were going to deliver them from out of the flood and fire and, bringing baskets of rice and pitchers of drink, they welcomed your army. Then you slew their fathers and older brothers, bound their sons and younger brothers, destroyed their ancestral temple, and carried off their treasured vessels-how can this be condoned? Certainly the world fears the might of Qi. Now you have doubled your territory but have not practiced humane government; it is this that is setting the troops of the realm in motion. If you will immediately issue orders to return the captives and halt the removal of the treasured vessels, and if you consult with the people of Yan about withdrawing once a ruler has been installed for them, you may still be able to stop an attack. (Mengzi et al., 2009, pp. 23-24).

Qi's punitive expedition meets the first requirement. It also met the second requirement initially but failed shortly after. Qi's tyrannical actions in Yan made Qi's ruler wicked and caused him to lose the world's support. In this case, Mencius saw Yan's illegitimate royal transmission between Zikuai and Zihi as the primary justification for a "punitive expedition" because it was not sanctioned by the Mandate of Heaven, rather than the suffering of the people (Mengzi et al., 2009, pp. 43-44).

Confucianism also has a missionary aspect. A virtuous ruler should spread benevolence beyond his borders, and everyone can be "civilized" in principle (Confucius et al., 2014, pp. 24-25 and 46). Confucius and Mencius allow for legal punishments when other means of promoting benevolence and preventing immoral behavior prove ineffective (Confucius et al., 2014, p. 35; Mengzi et al., 2000, pp. 138-139). In the West, the binary is the "civilized" West vs. the "barbarian" non-West. In China, the binary is the "civilized" Middle Kingdom vs. the "barbarian" nomads. Phillips (2021, pp. 119, 190, and 192) employs the terms "Confucian man's burden," "Confucian 'civilizing mission,'" and "Confucian assimilation" to highlight the hypocrisy. However, the Confucian missionary spirit is not comparable to Western Christianity, as Imperial China did not send missionaries to promote Confucianism, and the Confucian cultural bloc is limited to East Asia and Vietnam. Western civilization spread far beyond Europe.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that war can only be launched to spread peace and benevolence. A war is unjust if it is launched for purposes other than rectifying aggression and tyranny (Bell, 2008; Twiss & Chan, 2015). Therefore, a war launched to enlarge territory and weaken other states is unjust:

> Mencius said, "Those who serve the rule today will say, 'We can enlarge the lord's territory and expand his treasuries and storehourses.' And, in the present age, for this they are called 'good minister,' whereas in antiquity they would have been called 'good ministers,' whereas in antiquity they would have been called 'thieves of the people.' To seek the enrichment of a ruler who neither follows the Way not commits himself to humaneness is to enrich a Jie[2]. Those who say 'We can form alliances with other states so that his military campaigns will be successful' are, in the present age, called 'good ministers.' Whereas in antiquity they would have been called 'thieves of the people.' To bolster the military strength of a ruler who neither follows the Way nor commits himself to humanness is to support a Jie. Even if he were to receive all-under-Heaven as a gift, one who follows the way of the present day without having changed present practices would be unable to dwell in it for the space of a single morning. (Mengzi et al., 2009, p. 140).

Last but not least, Bell's interpretation of Confucian just war requirements is subject to dissent. An independent scholar, Hagen Kurtis (2022), argues that Bell's interpretation is overly lenient. Launching a "punitive expedition" is acting as an agent of Heaven ("a minister appointed by Heaven"), and the requirements of "being potentially virtuous" and "having some moral claims of the world's support" are too weak to be standard (Mengzi et al., 2009, p. 44). Kurtis points out that Confucian requirements for a just war are so strict that they can hardly be met in the real world. That is why Confucianism is almost equivalent to pacifism. Additionally, Sungmoon Kim (2017, pp. 196-197) believes that even large-scale human rights violations and local people's wholehearted support are insufficient for intervention. Nonetheless, it is also odd to argue that Confucius and Mencius were merely thinking in the context of a utopian world without linking to the realist Chinese Warring States era.

[2] Jie refers to 桀, the tyrannical ruler of Xia Dynasty.

However, how to interpret Confucian just war theory is of secondary importance when combining Chinese exceptionalism with IR, as the following discussion shows. This thesis prefers Bell's approach as it resonates more with Confucian just war theory in practice.

### (c) The Risk of Manipulation in IR

It seems that peace is embedded in Confucianism, and the requirements for punitive expeditions can constrain China from launching any expansionist campaigns. However, Confucian requirements for launching a just war are vague and subject to practical manipulation:

> Mencius said, "A hegemon uses force under the pretext of benevolence," "a true king uses virtue and benevolence," "The Spring and Autumn Annals acknowledged no just wars. There are only cases of some wars not being as bad as others. A punitive expedition refers to a higher authority attacking a lower one. Peers should not launch punitive expeditions against one another." It is pronounced. One can say that the First Gulf War is a just war authorized by the United Nations, similar to "a guilty duke corrected [punished] by the Son of Heaven." It is like a conflict with a "higher authority attacking a lower one." In this war [the 2003 invasion of Iraq], the United States says it is using force to exercise benevolence, that it is acting as both a true king and a hegemon. However, the Second Gulf War is not the same, because without the authorization of the United Nations, the United States and the United Kingdom are attacking an enemy state with vastly different [inferior] power and resources. In this war, the United States is using force under the pretext of benevolence, and it is also maintaining its geopolitical, national security, and economic interests in the name of promoting democracy in the Middle East; it is obviously acting as a global hegemon (Gong Gang, 2003, as cited by Bell, 2008, pp. 238-239).

No objective metrics are used to evaluate whether a country obeys the Confucian requirements for launching a "punitive expedition," unlike Western "universal values," which can at least refer to the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Still, this does not always prevent Washington from launching wars in the name of spreading democracy and human rights to legitimize its actions. In the future, Beijing could do the similar in the name of promoting global peace and harmony considering some historical precedents. Imperial China invaded Vietnam in the early fifteenth century in the name of a "punitive expedition." Chinese territory greatly expanded

during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. Hui (2018, p. 156) characterizes Emperor Wu's foreign policy as "militarism with a Confucian façade." Confucianism was elevated as the official ideology during the Han Dynasty; however, since then, "warfare was considered to be a special application of justified punishment of…those who refused to acknowledge the authority of the legitimate emperor" (Yates, 2009, p. 25). The Han Dynasty defined the Xiongnu as the "enemy of virtue and humanity," and it was the duty of the virtuous emperor to "punish" them (Zhu & Wang, 2008, p. 273).

Given its resources, a hegemon can quickly meet most of the requirements for launching a "punitive expedition" through manipulation. The U.S. has been very successful in portraying itself as the "defender of the free world" or the "Kingly Way" and in demonizing its rivals through misinformation, even fabricating atrocities (Abrams, 2023). Indeed, a hegemon is often the most powerful in both hard and soft power (Nye, 1990). Due to its absolute advantage in military, technology, and economy, challenging the U.S. is not easy, making it entirely possible to gain "world support" to launch a "punitive expedition." It is difficult to predict if people from the "repressive regimes" would welcome the "liberators." However, it does not matter, as a hegemon or a (manipulated) true king would be unlikely to withdraw the troops once the "punitive expedition" commences with (manipulated) moral legitimacy and world support. Several other scholars share this view (Yan & Huang, 2011; Johnston, 2020). Yan and Huang (2013, p. 140) write, "Hegemony can of itself generate legitimacy for the use of military force." Johnston (2020, p. 68) even thinks "moral realpolitik" effectively makes war easier to launch, observing that the rhetoric of just war "shifts the responsibility for warlike behavior onto the enemy."

Moreover, the Mencian-Confucian discourse justifies China and other Confucian countries in launching a "punitive expedition," but other countries may find the Mencian-Confucian discourse incongruent with their values (Kim, 2017, p. 200). Today, Washington accuses Beijing of being a non-democratic regime even though the latter never endorses the Western notion of liberal democracy, which is similar to the missionary aspect of Confucianism.

To conclude the case study of Confucianism, it is clear that while Confucianism has a vital pacifist element, there is no consensus on how to interpret Confucian standards for launching

a punitive expedition or just war. Given its potentially coercive element, it is not feasible to essentialize Confucianism as pacifist. Confucian pacifism, as many scholars understand, exists neither in theory nor practice. Similar to the romanticization of Chinese history, Confucianism is often cherry-picked to suit the PRC's foreign policy strategy for creating a peaceful environment for its rise. This does not mean that the PRC will continue to rise peacefully and be a peace-loving hegemon, as advocated by Chinese exceptionalism. It is not feasible to rule out the possibility that the PRC could be missionary and paternalistic in some ways, given that Beijing is becoming more assertive and aggressive in its foreign policy, e.g., in the South China Sea and Taiwan. It is as absurd to claim that the PRC will be a benevolent hegemon because of some Confucian pacifist elements, as it is to claim that the U.S. is a peace-loving country because of its liberal democratic institutions that constrain recourse to war, as per the democratic peace theory (Rosato, 2003).

## V. Case II: Legalism

If the case study of Confucianism is not strong enough to rebut Chinese exceptionalism due to its contentious punitive expedition/just war concept, Legalism can serve as a more tenable case study.

By comparison, Legalism has received almost no attention in the discussion surrounding Chinese exceptionalism. Among the debates regarding Chinese history, culture, and philosophy, the most frequently mentioned school of thought is Confucianism. Confucianism has always been the one that Beijing references to showcase China's peace-oriented culture. This makes sense, given that Confucianism was elevated to the state ideology by Emperor Wu in the Han Dynasty, and subsequent dynasties upheld Confucianism's orthodox position. This historical incident generated the misperception that China's tradition was predominantly Confucian (Hui, 2008). The perception that Confucianism is the sociocultural doctrine shaping Chinese society is largely accurate at the ontological and epistemological levels. However, it is not necessarily true in the sense of sociopolitical norms (Zha, 2022, p. 335). Apart from Confucianism, there are many other "Hundred Schools of Thought," such as Daoism, which

played an influential role in shaping post-Han China and competed with Confucianism (Zhang, 2015a, p. 199).

This thesis contends that integrating Legalism into the debate is the most potent argument for debunking the myths of Chinese exceptionalism. The influence of Legalism on China is arguably at least as crucial as that of Confucianism. Though Emperor Wu of Han upheld Confucianism as the official ideology, Hsiao Kung-chuan (1976, p. 137) called his policy "Legalism with a Confucian façade." Zhang (2015a, p. 216) writes, "Contemporary Chinese foreign policy may be influenced by various schools of ancient Chinese thought, Confucianism being just one of them. Indeed, if China's historical experience is any guide, a quite possible outcome is that of a blend of Confucianism and Legalism to guide policy, as has repeatedly been the case in the long history of Chinese politics and foreign policy. For some intriguing reasons that historians are still debating, a Confucian-Legalist liaison has proved to be the most consequential—almost a norm—through Chinese history." Zha (2022, p. 335) thinks that, more precisely speaking, the Chinese sociocultural doctrine is characterized as "Confucianism in semblance and Legalism in essence" (*ru biao fa li*, 儒表法里). However, Legalism has not received enough attention in the Chinese exceptionalism debate.

### (a) Realism With Chinese Characteristics

Legalism is one of the pre-Qin "Hundred Schools of Thought," a collection of principles regarding statecraft that offers strategies for how a ruler can efficiently manage and control their government to maximize state wealth and expand territorial boundaries. In contrast with Confucianism, Legalism views human beings as inherently selfish, and education or self-cultivation cannot overcome this. Legalist thinking is premised on how people actually behave rather than on Confucian optimistic beliefs about how people ought to behave. They believe people are inherently self-interested and require external discipline to meet the state's needs. It makes sense that Legalists advocate for a robust and central state that maintains control through rigid enforcement of laws and functions through a merit-based bureaucracy. The Legalist approach is pragmatic and amoral. The primary goal of the state is to enhance its power. Moral justification is utterly unconcerned with the institutions and methods Legalists advocate. This

often justifies harsh penalties and rigid controls over society to secure compliance and deter dissent (Zha, 2022; Pines, 2014; Fraser, 2011). A passage from *The Lord of Shang*, a seminal Legalist book by Shang Yang, well explains this realism with Chinese characteristics:

> Among the people's external tasks, nothing is more difficult than war; hence, he who takes law lightly cannot cause them [to engage in] it. What is called "taking law lightly"? It means that rewards are few, awe is meager, and excessive ways are not blocked. What are called "excessive ways"? It means that the argumentative and clever are esteemed, itinerant servants are employed, men of letters and those who have privately established a name are deemed illustrious. When these three are not blocked, the people do not engage in war, and undertakings end in defeat. Thus, when rewards are few, those who heed [others] do not benefit; when awe is meager, those who violate [orders] are not harmed. Hence, to attract [subjects] by opening excessive ways and to let them wage war while taking law lightly are like making a cat bait for a rat: Is it not too much?
>
> Hence, he who wants to enable his people to wage war must take laws seriously. His rewards must be abundant, [his] awe must be severe; excessive ways must be blocked: the argumentative and clever should not be esteemed, itinerant servants should not be employed, men of letters and those who have privately established a name should not be illustrious. When rewards are abundant and awe is severe, the people see that he who [excels] at war is abundantly rewarded, and they forget about death; they see that those who do not fight are degraded and then regard life with bitterness. When rewards cause them to forget about death, while awe causes them to regard life with bitterness, and, moreover, excessive ways are blocked: to face the enemy in this situation is like shooting at a floating leaf with a hundred-*shi*-capacity crossbow-How can it not be pierced thorough (Shang & Pines, 2017, pp. 228-229)?

Regarding foreign policy and interstate relations, Legalists hold beliefs opposite to those of Confucianists. Legalists contend that the state should practice hegemony (*ba* 霸) as opposed to humane authority (*wang* 王). They are material determinists, believing that the cause of interstate war is the selfishness of human nature (Yan, 2013, pp. 28-29, 33). Hanfeizi, a prominent Legalist, attributes the origin of conflict to the failure of material goods to meet demand: "Hence the number of people increases, goods grow scarce, and men have to struggle and slave for a meager living. Therefore, they fall to quarreling, and though rewards are doubled and punishments are piled on, they cannot be prevented from growing disorderly" (Han, 2003, Section 49, *The Five Vermin*). He is very frank about the cruel interstate competition and perceives force as the most effective way to achieve peace: "It is customary

with a ruler that, if his state is small, he will do the bidding of larger states, and if his army is weak, he will stand in fear of stronger armies. When the larger states come with demands, the small state must consent; when strong armies appear, the weak army must submit" (Han, 2003, Section 9, *The Eight Villainies*). He maintains that being a hegemon is the best guarantee of security in the international system (Yan, 2013, p. 47). Hanfeizi does not think there are any substantial differences between hegemony and humane authority because, as he understands it, humane authority also depends on military might and a legal system rather than on morality, given changing times. Hanfeizi does not unconditionally reject the role of morality in foreign policy. Morality can play a role under two conditions: the main threat is from animals and illness, and human beings do not need to worry about basic needs such as clothing and food (Han, 2003, Section 49, *The Five Vermin*).

Legalism is rudimentarily similar to realism but also differs in certain respects. Some compare Legalism with Machiavellian realism. Legalism is more "scientific" in the sense that it focuses more on institutions for controlling officials who administer the state and the populace who are the source of its wealth and military power than on the arts of the individual ruler, which Machiavellian realism emphasizes (Fraser, 2011). It is comparable to Morgenthau's view that politics should be governed by objective laws rooted in human nature and that law is an instrument to exercise power (Morgenthau & Thompson, 1985).

### (b) Confucian Façade and Legalism Core

Historically, Legalism and Confucianism managed to coexist. Qin was the first state to practice Legalism, and it ended up being the victor of the Warring States period by unifying China. However, the Qin Dynasty (221 BC-207 BC) did not last more than two decades, largely due to its harsh Legalist policies. Confucianism gained popularity in the following Han Dynasty, but Legalism did not disappear from history. The two opposing schools of thought formed a *de facto* marriage. The Confucian-Legalist sociopolitical system gradually merged ideological and political factors and endured to serve the Chinese state. Confucianism continues to cultivate people through normative values, while Legalism shapes the state's sociopolitical actions given its pragmatism. Therefore, the monologue of Confucianism as the official ideology, as

highlighted by Imperial China and the PRC, is more rhetorical than real (Zhao, 2015; Yang, 2020; Zha, 2022).

To better explain the dynamics between Confucianism and Legalism, this thesis lists some examples from Imperial China showing how Confucianism supplements structural realism. The Ming Dynasty reached its nadir in the mid-16th century. Structural realists thought that the Ming should accommodate the Mongols by accepting the Mongol request for trade and tribute. However, the Ming quickly reversed the accommodation policy after facing opposition from Confucian officials, as compromising with the enemies, “barbarians” such as the Mongols in particular, would damage China’s prestige. During the Song Dynasty, Song and Xi Xia faced the threat from the Liao Empire. Realistically speaking, Song should have allied with Xi Xia if the balance of power logic were applied. However, an alliance with Xi Xia was virtually impossible because Song treated Xi Xia, a state governed by “barbarians,” as a vassal state. Another example is the tribute system. The Chinese empire did not expand as the Western powers did. Instead, Imperial China’s influence spread through the unique tribute system. The Ming Dynasty chose to establish the tribute system rather than conquering the states that Zheng he’s naval fleets visited (Wang, 2015, pp. 186-187). However, as discussed in the literature review, this tributary system inevitably had a coercive element, as neighbors such as Vietnam and Korea had to join the system to symbolically acknowledge their vassal positions vis-à-vis China. Hence, superficially, the tributary system was Confucian, but its emergence was not completely based on the voluntary consent of its members.

To conclude the case study of Legalism, this section introduces Legalism and its influence in China. Legalism presents a powerful argument against the official narrative of Chinese exceptionalism. From the PRC’s perspective, the essential purpose of constructing the Chinese exceptionalism narrative is to frame Imperial China as a benevolent hegemon; consequently, the PRC will also be a benevolent hegemon because it is the inheritor of a thousands-of-years-old peaceful Chinese civilization. However, the concept of Legalism or the "Confucian façade and Legalism core," with its marked similarity to Western realism, can potentially deliver a death blow to most of the myths hidden under the narrative of Chinese exceptionalism. This also explains why the PRC never promotes Legalism in its soft-power campaign.

## VI. Implications

After evaluating Chinese exceptionalism in theory, this thesis aims to briefly test Chinese exceptionalism in practice by investigating the extent to which Chinese foreign policy reflects its exceptional narrative. Exceptionalism does not dictate policy, but it reflects the political elite's worldview and can influence policy ideas (Zhang, 2013, p. 307).

The official rhetoric of Chinese foreign policy is largely consistent with the pacific part of Confucianism. In the early days of the PRC, Premier Zhou Enlai enunciated the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" in 1954: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (Nathan & Zhang, 2022, p. 59). After the Cold War, President Jiang Zemin articulated the "new security concept," which means "rise above one-sided security and seek common security through mutually beneficial cooperation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2002). Then in the early 2000s, President Hu Jintao introduced "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development" (The State Council, 2005). Current President Xi Jinping has taken a fundamental shift in foreign policy style by adopting a more proactive approach in the international system. Still, he has emphasized China's insistence on peaceful rise by introducing the "Community of Shared Future" (Xi, 2017). This concept essentially suggests that China will share its development with others. However, Xi's version of peaceful rise has some pre-conditions, according to Jian Zhang (2015c). The first is the unprecedented emphasis on the protection of China's national interests, which may prevail over peaceful rise (Zhang, 2015, p. 9). Xi (2013) stressed that "we must adhere to the path of peaceful development, but we must never give up our legitimate rights and interests, and we must never sacrifice our national core interests. No sovereign country should expect us to trade our core interests, and do not expect us to swallow the bitter fruit of undermining our sovereignty, security, and development interests." China's almost unconditional stance on "core interests" explains why China has been assertive on issues in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Taiwan. Another important precondition of Xi's version of peaceful rise is reciprocity (Zhangc, 2015,

p. 10). Xi (2013) stated that "China is on the path of peaceful development, and other countries must also follow the path of peaceful development. Only when all countries follow the path of peaceful development can they develop together and live in peace with each other." This means China reserves the right to react or defend itself if any countries try to contain China or even wage war against it. It appears that non-Confucian part of Chinese foreign policy is becoming evident since the Xi administration.

In practice, Chinese foreign policy is more complicated. China has a particular focus on its neighbors and deploys "peripheral diplomacy" regarding them. "Peaceful Rise" and the "Community of Shared Future" or "Community of Common Destiny" (人类命运共同体 *ren lei ming yun gong tong ti*) mainly target China's neighbors, as China's rise can only take place in a stable environment (Zhang, 2015c, p. 11). However, as the term "peripheral diplomacy" indicates, China has a top-down paternalistic attitude toward its neighbors. From the 1950s to post-2009 Chinese foreign policy, Beijing has been consistent with its Legalist "carrots and sticks" style foreign policy towards its neighbors. China rewards them when they are cooperative in preventing a rival great power (the U.S.) from gaining influence at China's expense and punishes them when they do the opposite (Li, 2016, p. 251). In 2010, Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi spoke to ASEAN, saying, "China is a big country, and you are small countries, and that is a fact" (cited by Cronin & Neuhard, 2020). China has territorial disputes with several ASEAN countries. Although China officially opens to dialogue, it has increased control over claimed territory in the South China Sea and even delegitimizes unfavorable rules of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Cronin & Neuhard, 2020, p. 14). The idea of a "community of shared future" is largely employed to mend fences with those ASEAN countries (Zhang, 2015c, p. 15).

President Xi Jinping's mindset resembles that of a Legalist. Although he frequently references Confucian classics, Xi is a strong advocate of Legalist governance in terms of domestic politics. Early in his tenure, he began emphasizing the phrase "govern the state according to law" (依法治国 *yi fa zhi guo*). He aimed to discipline the CCP through top-down law, launching an

unprecedented anti-corruption campaign within the CCP. The rationale behind these policies is rooted in Legalist methods that emphasize controlling human behavior through rewards and punishments administered by the state. Xi's foreign policy also resonates with the Legalist worldview of interstate competition. Essentially, Xi's ambition is to fulfill the "Chinese Dream" of the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" so that China will not be vulnerable to foreign threats, as it was during the "Century of Humiliation" (Schneider, 2016). On one hand, he prioritizes Chinese core interests; on the other, he advocates for "win-win" solutions. He is likely trying to find a balance that allows him to continue advancing Chinese interests while maintaining a stable environment, which reflects a liaison between Confucianism and Legalism.

Nonetheless, official Chinese exceptionalism is appealing based on the history since 1979. The PRC has not been involved in any military conflicts since the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979. Despite territorial disputes with several neighbors, the PRC has risen peacefully without conquering any countries. This is indeed a remarkable achievement for a major power, and Beijing can tout it to legitimate Chinese exceptionalism. As pointed out before, no one can predict with certainty if China will continue to rise peacefully given the intensifying geopolitical climate.

## VII. Conclusion

This thesis has explored the complex landscape of Chinese exceptionalism, tracing its evolution from imperial assertions of central supremacy to contemporary manifestations as a "civilizational state." The journey through historical, cultural, and political dimensions has unveiled a nuanced picture of how China perceives itself and projects its identity onto the global stage.

A critical insight from this analysis is the dualistic nature of Chinese exceptionalism, which seeks to uphold a peaceful, harmonious world vision while also preparing for strategic dominance. The discourse surrounding China's rise, particularly regarding "benevolent pacifism" and "harmonious inclusionism," contrasts sharply with the realpolitik strategies underpinning its regional and global actions. This juxtaposition reflects a broader struggle within international relations where historical narratives and geopolitical realities often clash.

The exploration of "Sino-speak," mainly through the works of Martin Jacques and Zhang Weiwei, underscores the reimagining of China's role on the world stage. The "civilizational state" notion challenges the Westphalian international system, proposing a model where cultural legacy and moral philosophy drive political engagement rather than the mere pursuit of national interest. However, as this thesis argues, such narratives must be critically assessed against actual policy decisions and historical actions, which sometimes contradict the idealistic frameworks proposed by "civilizational" rhetoric.

Moreover, the discourse of Chinese exceptionalism, while rich in cultural and historical assertions, often overlooks the pragmatic and sometimes harsh realities of governance and international relations, as highlighted by the discussion on Legalism. The integration of Legalism into the conversation on Chinese exceptionalism provides a more grounded understanding of China's approach to power and control, suggesting that its pacifist and harmonious outward expressions may sometimes serve more as strategic facades than reflections of underlying policy intentions.

If the PRC aims to develop a persuasive discourse of Chinese exceptionalism, it can focus on other directions. Chinese civilization is arguably the longest continuous ancient civilization. It is probably the only secular one among major civilizations worldwide. Chinese civilization also emphasizes great unity (大一统 *dayitong*) since 221 BC when Qin unified China. By contrast, Europe has never truly unified into a single polity since the fall of the Roman Empire. Exceptionalism should be developed based on real exceptions. It is unrealistic to frame any hegemon as benign. A hegemon inevitably appears coercive to others, though hegemon itself does not necessarily realize it.

It is not necessarily beneficial to employ exceptionalist discourse to highlight differences or superiority compared with other countries. In the short term, it can promote national glory. However, in the long term, it drives nationalism and chauvinism, which may force the state to be more assertive and aggressive, leading to irrational decisions in its foreign policy.

Finally, this thesis calls for more future research on Chinese exceptionalism. This research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Chinese exceptionalism and aids in predicting

potential shifts in global dynamics as China continues to rise as a significant world power. Future research needs to delve deeper into if Confucianism is simply a gloss to cover Chinese Legalism-style foreign policy. It is equally important to consider how Chinese exceptionalism restrains China from engaging in realpolitik actions. Additionally, future studies can examine how other philosophies, such as Daoism and Moism, influence Imperial China and the PRC in domestic governance and foreign policy.

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