

2012

China's Confucian Makeover

Rachael Gary
University of Puget Sound

Follow this and additional works at: http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/writing_awards

Recommended Citation

Gary, Rachael, "China's Confucian Makeover" (2012). *Writing Excellence Award Winners*. Paper 28.
http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/writing_awards/28

This Social Sciences is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research and Creative Works at Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in Writing Excellence Award Winners by an authorized administrator of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact soundideas@pugetsound.edu.

CHINA'S CONFUCIAN MAKEOVER

The discourse of harmony in state-sponsored Confucianism
and China's "peaceful rise" as national image management

Rachael Gary
University of Puget Sound '12
Department of Politics and Government
PG495: Independent Study
Advisor: Professor Karl J. Fields
Pacific Rim 2011-2012

INTRODUCTION

On 12 January 2011, a 31-foot bronze statue of Confucius, China's most famous philosopher, was unveiled in Tiananmen Square.¹ Prominently displayed in front of the Chinese National Museum in Beijing, the statue faced both Mao Zedong's mausoleum in the center of the square and his iconic portrait on the opposite side, proudly overlooking China's political heart. The installation of the statue is a sign that Confucius has at long last been officially rehabilitated. His prime seat in China's most sacred political space is the highest endorsement the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could give the ancient sage—an ironic honor, considering the abhorrence he inspired in China's not-so-distant Maoist past. During the Cultural Revolution, Confucius was seized upon as the champion of the counterrevolutionary belief system, associated with the oppression and social inequality of imperial China. Attacks on Confucius were therefore understood as attacks on the old regime, and the Anti-Lin Biao and Anti-Confucius Campaign of the mid 1970s are remembered as some of the most violent years of the Cultural Revolution.² The juxtaposition of Mao and Confucius, side-by-side in Tiananmen Square, the grandfatherly-looking Confucius staring into the eyes of his former persecutor, is thus a jarring one, almost paradoxical. However, in recent years, the CCP has increasingly chosen to present just such an image to the world.

Over the past ten years, Confucianism has enjoyed a revival as the state ideology of China: Confucius' unveiling in Tiananmen Square is merely the latest and greatest in a series of moves by the Communist party-state to incorporate the sage into the pantheon of Communist saints. Eager to fill the ideological vacuum left by Marxism's fall from grace, the CCP has championed Confucianism as both a new national code of conduct, emphasizing tenets such as

¹ Chang, 2011

² Sommer, 2008, p.3

social responsibility and harmony, and as a symbol of national identity. The signs of this revival of are everywhere, from books,³ to films,⁴ to new construction projects.⁵ Within China, the resultant rage for “national studies” has even led to the revival of private schools called *shi shu*, where children memorize classical texts under the tutelage of teachers dressed in Han dynasty robes and bow to statues of Confucius.⁶ In large part, the Confucian revival speaks to the failure of Communism to provide an adequate ideological foundation for China’s continued growth. “The rise of a big country requires a cultural foundation, and Chinese culture upholds the spirit of harmony,” said Wu Weishan, the sculptor of the Tiananmen statue. “The essential thoughts of Confucius are love, kindness, wisdom and generosity. And peace and prosperity are what the people are striving for.”⁷ In the absence of an attractive example from more recent Communist history, the CCP has therefore turned to the distant past for a vision of Chinese culture that can inspire audiences both domestically and abroad—and has rediscovered Confucius.

However, it is important to note that not every cadre within the CCP is in favor of Confucius’ comeback. The philosopher’s occupancy of Tiananmen Square was short-lived. The statue was moved during the evening of April 20, 2011, with no prior announcement, from its prominent position in Tiananmen Square to a sculpture garden within the National Museum.⁸ The statue’s removal was met with outrage from Confucius’ descendents, delight from Maoists, and confusion from Western observers. When reached for comment, officials stated that its

³ Yu Dan, a professor of media studies at Beijing Normal University, at last count has sold over 4.2 million legal copies—and an estimated 6 million pirated versions—of her reflections on “The Analects,” which has remained a best seller since its publication in 2007 (Melvin, 2007).

⁴ The CCP authorized the creation of a biopic commemorating the life of Confucius, ironically in celebration of the Party’s 60th birthday. Released in January of 2010 in the midst of tremendous hype, the state-backed biopic “Confucius” featured leading man Chow Yun-Fat in the title role, though the film bombed both in the box office and amongst critics (Bell, 2010).

⁵ The newly constructed Party school in Shanghai is apparently modeled on a Confucian scholar’s desk (Bell, 2010).

⁶ Melvin, 2007

⁷ Chang, 2011

⁸ Jacobs, 2011

position overlooking Tiananmen Square had always been considered to be temporary, until it could be moved to the sculpture garden. However, considering the official ceremony the statue received at its unveiling, this explanation seems unlikely.⁹ Instead, the sudden removal of the statue suggests a behind-the-scenes political decision. Older cadres from within the conservative faction likely saw the statue's orientation across from Mao as a quiet challenge to Marxist orthodoxy, and therefore to the Party itself.

Given the clear ambivalence within the Party and divided feelings amongst Communist leadership about the scope of the Confucian revival, why does it continue to press on? There are as many compelling reasons to suppress the revival of Confucianism as to promote it: as Cheng Li, an analyst at the Brookings Institute, says, Confucianism “is such a big basket you can select whatever you want.”¹⁰ While the Party can invoke Confucian harmony and filial piety in hopes of greater social order and respect for authority, political dissidents can just as easily point to its progressive humanism in their demands for responsible government and ethical leadership. And so, while some commentators explain the revival of Confucianism as a purely anti-democratic move by the CCP—yet another attempt to encourage deference to Party rule—this explanation seems too simplistic in light of the potential risks posed by the very same doctrine.

It is certainly true that the CCP has revived Confucius, at least in part, for a Chinese audience. In the face of widespread public cynicism regarding traditional Communist ideology, particularly since Tiananmen, the Party has been searching for an alternative philosophical tradition for the past two decades. Confucianism can appeal to the public without contradicting the Party's continuing use of official Marxist theories on politics and social development. It also

⁹ Dotson, 2011, p. 13

¹⁰ Yee, 2011

promotes social stability domestically, urging the public to remain calm and loyal despite rising income inequality, environmental pollution, and official corruption.

However, what this explanation ignores is that there is an international dimension to the resurgence of equal importance. In many ways, the revival of Confucius appears to be largely for foreign consumption, a way to reassure nervous international observers of China's good intentions as it continues to grow. While Mao Zedong remains a controversial figure in the West, reviled for the famine, poverty, and political oppression that marked Maoist China, Confucius is seen as grandfatherly, wise, and above all, respectable. The CCP hopes that by presenting a Confucian China to the world, they can harness that respectability to improve their national image and smooth over negative perceptions of China abroad. Indeed, in this light the installation of Confucius in Tiananmen Square takes on added significance. Tiananmen has been the subject of international scrutiny since the events of 1989; the placement of Confucius in a place irrevocably tied with violence in the Western consciousness can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to superimpose a new, peaceful gloss on the square's bloody history.

It seems at least one element of the state-led revival of Confucianism is thus an attempt to put a positive spin on China's rise in the eyes of foreign observers. The rise of the Chinese popular nationalist movement since the 1990s, aggressive, confrontational, and sometimes anti-Western, has negatively influenced popular opinion abroad and contributed to Western fears that China's rise—already an unsettling concept for many—poses a threat to global stability and peace. The development of the Confucian-influenced discourse of “peaceful rise” or “peaceful development” is thus part of a broad, international propaganda campaign to describe China's rise in a non-threatening terms. Although the CCP has certainly been motivated by domestic concerns in the revival of Confucianism, the key factor in Confucius new role as the avuncular

symbol of Chinese culture is the Western conviction of a “China threat”: the invocation of Confucian themes in the discourse of “harmony” or “peaceful rise” is therefore an attempt to rebrand China abroad as a responsible and harmonious world power.

I begin this paper with an overview of the origin of the popular Confucian revival as well as various scholarly perspectives on the motivation for the state-led movement. Next, I will discuss the negative perceptions of China in the West as well as the rationale for the China threat theory, particularly how both are influenced by Chinese nationalism. I will then describe the patriotic education campaign of the 1990s and its role in rise of popular nationalism, arguing that the ability of Chinese nationalists to exert pressure on the party-state has had severe negative consequences for China’s national image. Finally, I will discuss China’s Confucian image adjustment through the development of the CCP approved discourses of the “harmonious society” and “peaceful rise,” pointing to conspicuous examples of the new “Confucian China” as packaged for audiences abroad. I will close with an evaluation of the potential consequences of the revival.

STATE-LED CONFUCIANISM

First I should be clear on what I mean by “Confucian revival.” In this paper, the Confucian revival refers to the resurgence in the popularity of Confucian ideals within the last decade amongst the official narratives of the CCP—or, at least, the promotion of a very selective interpretation of the Confucian tradition by the Party. While this paper addresses the state’s role in the Confucian revival, there is a popular movement that exists parallel to the state-led variety, and it is important to distinguish between the two. The popular movement developed from the bottom-up out of the socio-economic conditions of reform and opening, gaining momentum in the 1990s among Chinese intellectuals disillusioned with the West. As this disillusionment grew,

intellectuals began to rediscover the values of traditional Chinese culture and develop a new ideology that drew selectively from this legacy.¹¹ Chinese intellectuals have thus been experimenting with Confucianism for at least two decades. In comparison, the state-led revival seems somewhat belated. Engineered by Party elites from the top-down, state-led Confucianism did not take off until 2005, when President Hu Jintao first invoked Confucius in a speech, declaring “Confucius said, Harmony is something to be cherished.” Rather than led by intellectuals, the state-led revival reflects the Party’s concerns—that is, harmony and peace—and is mostly propagandic. This resurgence is therefore nothing new. Confucianism has experienced a popular revival for decades. The question is why does this newest, state-led wave come so late?

To answer this, we can turn to the literature. Scholars have studied the official rehabilitation of Confucius with interest and have offered a variety of explanations for the revivalists’ goals. Some scholars see the revival as a conservative reaction against Westernization. Theodore de Bary argues that those disposed to the revival see Confucianism as a bulwark against unwanted change. Revivalists seek to preserve the status quo, and Confucianism is invoked as a symbol of traditional values, which are equated with stability and continuity in the face of modernity and change.¹² Likewise, Suisheng Zhao argues that Confucianism is invoked as insulation from the “spiritual pollution” of the West, pointing to the de-romanticization of the West among Chinese intellectuals in the 1990s for the revival’s origin.¹³

Other scholars see the revival as a response to social unrest. Particularly, they look to the increasing popularity of the Confucian concept of *datong*, or the Grand Harmony, as a evidence of the lack of harmony in Chinese society. Shiping Hua points to the problems created by

¹¹ Zhao, 1997, p. 737

¹² De Bary, 1984, p. 8

¹³ Zhao, 1997, p. 730

unbridled materialism, the widening gap between rich and poor, and widespread political corruption. He argues that the Confucian ideal of the Grand Harmony, with its emphasis on the collective good, fills the spiritual void in a society from which social responsibility has disappeared and each person pursues their happiness at the expense of others.¹⁴ Confucius is thus invoked to promote order and stability amongst an increasingly dissatisfied populace.

Alternatively, a third group of scholars see the revival as a response to calls for political liberalization. They argue that, in the face of mounting pressure from the West and the increasing number of domestic agitators, Confucian benevolence and meritocracy are being presented as alternatives to Western liberal democracy. In the same way that capitalism and communism coexist in the economic sphere, modern day Confucians like Daniel Bell envision democracy and Confucianism together in the political sphere.¹⁵ However, Neil A. Eaglehart argues that the selective application of cultural relativism, such as arguments for unique “Asian Values” or “Confucian Ethics,” are the result of political reasons rather than a reflection of traditional mores.¹⁶ By appealing to Confucius and traditional Chinese values of “harmony” and “stability,” the CCP hopes to put a democratic veneer on its activities and lend academic respectability to their vision of “democracy with Chinese characteristics.”¹⁷

While these interpretations are very different, a common thread runs through these arguments, and that is that the Confucian revival is mainly a reactionary response with primarily a domestic audience in mind. These arguments don’t seriously consider how the international environment might have played a role in Confucius’ rehabilitation, which is ironic considering

¹⁴ Hua, 2005, p. 67

¹⁵ Bell, 1999, p. 465

¹⁶ Eaglehart, 2000, p. 554

¹⁷ It is important to note that “democracy with Chinese characteristics” is not really democracy at all: the Party has repeatedly stated that Western Democracy isn’t suitable for China. A Confucian alternative is thus proposed as a compromise, whereby a benevolent—though authoritarian—leader rules on behalf of the people in order to achieve the benefits of democracy while bypassing inefficient and “culturally inappropriate” democratic processes.

that the revival has grown with China's increased openness to the international community. Some of the most significant moments in the revival have had a conspicuously international orientation: the choice to present a Confucian China to the world during the Beijing Olympics, the installation of a statue of Confucius in Tiananmen Square, the foundation of Confucian Institutes abroad to spread Chinese language and culture, and the creation of The Confucius Peace Prize as a Party approved alternative to the Nobel Peace Prize. The outwardly focused nature of the Confucian revival seems to suggest that there is an international thrust to this campaign of at least equal, if not greater, importance. The CCP thus actively invokes Confucian themes as it projects its power abroad, hoping the rhetoric of harmony and peace will calm Western fears of China.

“THE CHINA THREAT”

*“Sweetie, are you having nightmares about the Chinese again?”
—Cartman’s mother to her son, in an October 2008 episode of South Park that begins with Cartman frightened by a dream of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics.*

While it may seem ridiculous, a funny gag for a late night television show, Cartman's attitude reflects the attitude of a large number of Americans. The majority of people in Western countries view China's rise with a mixture of suspicion and fear. A 2011 BBC World Service poll reveals that the number of people who view China's increasingly powerful economy with unease has grown substantially since 2005, especially amongst China's key trading partners. Likewise, when asked how they would feel if “China becomes more powerful militarily than it is today,” 59% of those surveyed Western countries responded negatively, with only 24% expressing positive feelings.¹⁸ A recent Pew global attitudes survey reports similar findings:

¹⁸ BBC World Service, 2011

“In 32 of 46 countries surveyed, China's increasing military muscle is viewed with alarm. These worries are most prevalent in two countries with a long and sometimes bitter historic connection to China: South Korea, where fully 89% view Chinese military might as a bad thing and Japan where 80% share that view.”¹⁹

The same survey reports that overall attitudes have soured as well, with the largest declines among China's major neighbors (Japan, South Korea, and India) and Western Europe (Britain, France, Germany, and Spain). Yet another survey from the Pew Research Center reports that 20% of Americans now identify China when asked to name the country representing the greatest threat to the US, compared to 12% answering Iran, 10% answering Afghanistan, and less than 10% answering Iraq.²⁰

American pundits fuel popular fears of a rising China. This is perhaps best represented by Bill Gertz, *Washington Times* columnist and leader of the conservative “Blue Team,” a group of journalists, analysts, and politicians loosely unified by their mutual belief that China represents a threat to US national security.²¹ Gertz and his colleagues attack “panda huggers” as capitulators who distract from the reality of the Chinese threat, disguising the evil dragon as a cute panda at the expense of American preparedness.²² Gertz's paranoia in his 2000 book, *The China Threat: How the People's Republic Targets America*, both reflect widespread American suspicions about Chinese intentions and serves to deepen them. Fellow dragon-slayer William Triplett, coauthor of *Year of the Rat* and *Red Dragon Rising* and a former member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, argues that China is determined to challenge the United States for supremacy and

¹⁹ Kohut, 2007

²⁰ Pew Research Center, 2011

²¹ Coined by William Triplett, former counsel to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the name refers to the color of US forces (blue) in war games, as opposed to the red that represents American opponents (Gertz, 2000, p. 46).

²² Gries, p. 2

urges Americans to fight for democracy and freedom from China’s “dictatorial regime.”²³

The Western media often echoes these dark sentiments. Foreign correspondents stationed in Beijing, habitually harassed by government officials, often focus on the negative side of life in China: corruption, censorship, and confinement.²⁴ While there is truth to this portrayal—perhaps especially for journalists, who face more difficulties and dangers in China than almost any other profession—it is just one side to the truth in one of the most diverse and complicated countries in the world. Alone, it is an oversimplification that leads to a very negative depiction of China in the West. Below is a cartoon by Morten Morland from *The Times* that depicts China as a dragon, wreathed in fire, terrorizing the rest of the world.²⁵



²³ Gries, p. 3

²⁴ Journalist Johnathan Watts wrote in an article for the Foreign Correspondents Club of China, “China, I suspect, sometimes gets more negative coverage than it deserves because its old system of restricting the activities of foreign correspondents pushes them into taking sides. To do a sensitive story in the provinces, journalists used to have to choose between going officially and getting an overly rosy view of what was happening, or sneaking in without permission and hearing only the views of disgruntled peasants... Forced to choose, most journalists often gave the benefit of the doubt to the little guy up against the system” (Watts, 2008).

²⁵ Morland, 2009

The United States, represented by Uncle Sam, is tangled in the dragon's coils and waving an IOU fan in surrender, representing the American government's dependence on China as its banker. The British bulldog is kept at bay with a single claw and former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is easily shoved out of the picture; meanwhile, the Dalai Lama is kept prisoner in the dragon's claws. The Copenhagen climate deal is shown torn in half by the dragon's scales, while golden pendants hang around the dragon's neck, symbolizing both China's wealth and its exploitation of Africa. Most importantly, though easy to miss in the bottom right corner, the dragon holds the world tightly within its sharp talons. Overall, the picture painted is a grim one, in which a colossal China crowds out potential competition, squeezes the last drops of usefulness from a failing former power, and cruelly silences dissent. This style of depiction of China is fairly typical—the Chinese state as an ill-tempered dragon, presiding over a land of oppression, preparing to further spread its sinister coils over the rest of the world—and reflects the most ominous of Western fears concerning the rise of China.

What is it about China that makes its continued growth so frightening to Western observers? On one level, the international community always fears the rise of a new nation to prominence because of the way this upsets the status quo. Traditional analyses predict that the rise of a great power by nature signifies a threat to international security: as one power rises, another is displaced, resulting in tension, distrust, and conflict as the newcomer uses its newly gained power to force its national interests.²⁶ Further, as an authoritarian state, China faces an extra level of scrutiny and suspicion from liberal democratic countries. However, the fear that surrounds “the China Threat” seems to be more than just than a fear of a changing international order. India is growing at a similarly impressive rate, and yet its rise is viewed as a more benign

²⁶ Ikenberry, 2008

event—at least the “rise of India” does not inspire the same media frenzy,²⁷ perhaps because of India’s status as a fellow democracy. Likewise, although the democracies of the world might wish for the PRC to liberalize, there is little threat that Chinese politics might spread to the West, even at the most pessimistic analysis. This extra measure of China fear mongering can thus be explained by the rise of Chinese popular nationalism. Views of China as a threat to global security stem from Western perceptions of China as an irrational actor, the result of the highly emotional, highly aggrieved popular nationalist movement and increased saber rattling from the Chinese state itself.

As the policies of reform and opening began to take hold during the 1980s, the ideological vacuum created by the failure of communism forced the CCP to turn elsewhere for legitimacy. Re-establishing itself as the paramount patriotic force and the protector of national pride, Party officials actively promoted nationalist themes in the 1990s in order to encourage loyalty to the CCP. On one hand, this nationalism has helped Beijing’s national image within China by reinforcing its legitimacy, quieting potential dissidence, and diverting public attention from domestic problems to foreign enemies. On the other hand, the rise of contemporary Chinese nationalism has complicated China’s relations with both its neighbors in the region and the West. The “victim” mentality of Chinese popular nationalists in regard to Western powers has led to hypersensitivity in issues of territorial integrity and state sovereignty, resulting in indignant demands for respect from other nations and a return to China’s former greatness. The growth of popular nationalism and its influence over Chinese foreign policy has played a significant role in

²⁷ An 30 April 2012 Google search of “rise of China” returns 8,940,000 results, compared to 569,000 results for “rise of India.” The top results for each search are very revealing of the general tone of the coverage that each nation’s growth inspires: the top result for China is a New York Times page entitled “*China Threat*” or a “*Peaceful Rise of China*,” while the top result for India is a Foreign Affairs page that in its first sentence describes India as a “roaring capitalist success story.” Overall, the Western media seems to be more suspicious of China’s growth than of India’s.

shaping the Western fears and in the articulation of the China Threat. As the grumbling of disgruntled youth is given weight by the acknowledgement and attention of the CCP, which is bound to honor nationalist sentiment in order to protect its legitimacy, China's image as a mature and responsible world power is necessarily damaged. In this light, the Confucian revival can be considered an attempt to demonstrate China's commitment to maintaining harmonious relations with its neighbors to the world, despite the agitation of nationalists.

Patriotic education and the rise of popular nationalism

In the wake of reform and opening, the CCP found itself confronted by a profound spiritual crisis,²⁸ largely the result of the social dislocation that accompanied reform and opening: as economic reforms became progressively market-oriented, the official ideology began to lose its credibility. The departure from the Marxist political discourse and the growing awareness of economic inequality, led many Chinese to become increasingly disillusioned in the late 1970s and early 1980s. With rapid decay of communist ideology and the growing possibility of a regime crisis, the Party leadership began to search for an alternate source of legitimacy for its governance in China, and eventually settled on nationalism as a possible solution. While communism had become stale in the face of growing materialism and ideological disillusionment, nationalism remained deeply engrained in the Chinese political consciousness throughout reform and opening. The former greatness of imperial China and its humiliation at the hand of Western imperialists is such an important national myth to the modern Chinese state that it has become cliché.²⁹ Most Chinese, even the most vehement anti-traditionalists,³⁰

²⁸ Known as the "three belief crisis" (*sanxin weiji*), it was comprised of a crisis of faith in socialism (*xinxin weiji*), crisis of belief in Marxism (*xinyang weiji*), and crisis of trust in the Party (*xinren weiji*) (S. Zhao, 1998, p.248).

²⁹ China's "century of humiliation" (*bainian guochi*) refers to the period of subjugation China suffered under foreign imperialists, both Western and Japanese. Its genesis is typically dated to the First Opium War between Great Britain and the Qing Dynasty in the mid-nineteenth century, during which Great Britain smuggled opium illegally into the

desperately yearned for the re-emergence of China as a world power. By redefining reform and opening as a nationalistic campaign for Chinese greatness, the CCP could more easily justify its departure from socialist goals like equality. Nationalism was thus looked to provide the spiritual content to fill the void left by the decline of Communism.

Beginning in the 1990s, the Chinese state thus systematically encouraged patriotism and nationalist sentiment in its student population with a campaign of “patriotic education” (*aiguozhuyi jiaoyu*). The purpose of the campaign was to educate youths in Chinese tradition and history, national conditions, and the nationalist legacy of the CCP in order to inculcate nationalist resentment against foreign pressures, past and present, simultaneously emphasizing the Party’s role as the ultimate protector of Chinese national interests. By emphasizing China’s repeated victimization at the hands of the imperialists, the Party sought to encourage a more critical view of the West, hoping to neutralize the political threat posed by increased globalization. The portrayal of a Western siege of China and the formation of an “anti-China club,” headed by politicians in Washington, would also serve to divert protest away from the Party and towards external sources. As result, sovereignty and territorial integrity have become major themes in Chinese nationalism, with special attention paid to the historical incursions of foreigners and their interference in China’s domestic affairs. In the context of this new narrative, international condemnation of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown could be portrayed to the public as a Western attack on the Chinese political system, China’s failed bid to host the 2000 Olympic Games an anti-China plot constructed by the West, the campaign for international human rights as lies

country in hopes that the resulting addiction would forcibly pry open the formerly exclusive Chinese market, and ends with the expulsion of the Japanese by Communist forces in 1945.

³⁰ Anti-traditionalism is a school of Chinese intellectual thought that sees traditional Chinese culture as the major source of Chinese backwardness and therefore the reason for China’s repeated failures to modernize. The anti-traditionalists reject traditional Confucian culture, values, and norms and seek for their eradication in favor of Western technical knowledge, whose adoption will make China strong (S. Zhao, 2000, pp. 7-9).

meant to disgrace China internationally, the promotion of intellectual property rights an attempt to halt Chinese economic development.³¹ While patriotic education was not necessarily intended to create animosity towards the West, it was intended to raise suspicion of Western “universal values,” such as democracy and free speech, and the supposed benefit of such principles for China. By portraying foreign powers as self-interested and even antagonistic towards China, the CCP is able to assert its own interpretation of international conflicts and cry foul whenever the West’s doesn’t match.

While invocation of nationalism may have saved the CCP from regime crisis, this has come at a cost. The move towards a deeper engagement with history begun by patriotic education has led to a heightened awareness of the trauma of China’s past. The result has been an exacerbation of popular feelings of external siege and persecution from the Western world. These passionate feelings of anger serve as the “psychic fuel”³² behind the more virulent forms of popular nationalism. By creating a dichotomy between China and the West, emphasizing the humiliations of history and the modern “siege” China faces from the Western world, the CCP has created an environment supportive of radical nationalist expression.

This radicalization has had serious consequences for China’s relations with foreign powers. The young nationalists of the fourth generation, known as *fenqing* or “angry youth,”³³ care very much about relations with Taiwan, Tibet, Japan, and the United States and their belligerent attitude towards these issues makes diplomatic negotiations difficult for the Party. Since the Party has based its legitimacy on its nationalist inheritance and its role as the protector of the national interest, it must be responsive to nationalist feeling within the country. This complicates foreign relations, sometimes forcing the CCP to take a more aggressive stance on

³¹ S. Zhao, 1998, p. 297

³² Gries, 2004, p. 11

³³ Osnos, 2008

issues than it may otherwise like—or at least to take precautions against appearing overly conciliatory. Compromise with foreign powers thus comes at the risk of the Party appearing unpatriotic, a perception that undermines the nationalist legitimacy it has worked so long to develop.

However, China's aggressive stance towards the West has not gone unobserved, and the high profile belligerence of Chinese nationalists has been a major contributing factor to popular fears of the "China Threat." This is not just a fear of wild-eyed youth, however. There is real fear in the West of the implications of the rise of popular nationalism in China. Too often, commentators mistake the sentiments of Chinese nationalists as merely "party propaganda," ignoring the role that people and their passions play in the further development of this movement. While it is true that the CCP party-state has played a large role in creating a hyper-nationalistic environment in China today, its involvement in its creation does not make the aggrieved feelings of nationalists any less real. At best, nationalism is a method of control and the Chinese state doesn't share the anger of its people; we are still left with a movement out of control, one that the Party must appease with real action to maintain its legitimacy. As Peter Hays Gries cautions, "Western policy makers should...recognize that because the Party's legitimacy now depends upon accommodating popular nationalist demands, the Foreign Ministry must take popular opinion into account as it negotiates foreign policy."³⁴ So long as the Chinese people demand a say in nationalist politics, it must be acknowledged that the fate of the nation is no longer the Party's exclusive province.

The consequence of this tenuous balance is something more serious than the rumblings of discontented youth, and causes Western observers to look with added suspicion to Chinese movements abroad. For example, the shadow cast by Chinese nationalism gives darker

³⁴ Gries, 2004, p. 20

reverberation to concerns in the West over the Chinese military buildup. China's defense budget will double by 2015, making it more than the rest of the Asia Pacific region's combined. Beijing's military spending will reach \$238.2 billion in 2015, compared with \$232.5 billion for rest of the region. That would also be almost four times the expected defense budget of Japan, the next biggest in the region, in 2015.³⁵ Likewise, in this light, China's continued disputes in the South China Sea take on added significance.³⁶ The wave of rising Chinese nationalism has prompted Beijing's recent attempts to recover territory it claims was taken when the country was weak. China maintains its "undisputable sovereignty" over as much as 80% of the South China Sea, including territory claimed by Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei.³⁷ In fact, Chinese leaders have stated that the South China Sea is an area of "core national interest," on par with Tibet and Taiwan. The implications of this statement are enough to give pause to concerned observers: China has reserved the right to use force to establish national unity in the vehemently contested region. With the PRC loudly rattling the sword at its borders, the rising cries of the angry youth represent a larger threat: the CCP must respond to nationalist demands in order to maintain its legitimacy, and such examples are evidence of its ability—and suggest its apparent willingness—to follow through.

At worst, however, Party leaders share in the humiliation of Chinese nationalists—and their desire for vengeance. China does appear to be testing its power, flexing its growing muscles. While it might be comforting to view states as rational actors, it is important to remember that politicians and policy makers are people too, vulnerable to the same passions.

Factionalism within the CCP makes it particularly difficult to divine the Party's motives: is the

³⁵ China's Military Spending to Double by 2015, 2012

³⁶ Clashes with Japan over the ownership of the Diaoyu, or Senkaku, islands have escalated in recent years, with the most recent dispute over the collision of a Chinese fishing boat and a Japanese vessel on 8 September 2010, ending in a ban on the export of rare earth minerals and a material increase in tension between the two nations.

³⁷ Richardson, 2010

Party performing for a domestic audience, exhibiting, in its aggressive stance, its national strength? Or does nationalist posturing reveal something more sinister at work? This paper does not pretend to have an answer to this question, and in some ways it does not matter, since the CCP's nationalist obligations seem both as able and equally likely to lead to conflict as any purposeful maneuver. Either way, the aggrieved tone of Chinese nationalism and the rising influence of popular nationalists have contributed to the fear of a China threat and a negative national image abroad.

The consequences of popular nationalism on national image

Each day, some thirty-five hundred Chinese citizens are going online for the first time.³⁸ With a rapidly growing number of domestic Internet users, the web has become an increasingly popular gathering place for Chinese nationalists. Chinese cybernationalism has focused on foreign policy issues such as China's relationship with Taiwan, the future of Tibet, and Sino-Japanese relations—a perennial hot topic. Cybernationalists have also found themselves particularly moved by perceived slights to China by Western powers, such as NBC's coverage of the 1996 Olympics, the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and the collision of a Chinese F-8 fighter with an American EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft over the South China Sea in 2001. These exchanges between Chinese “netizens” and the rest of the world have had a powerful impact on China's international image. Barred from free expression and political participation in real life, Chinese nationalists often compensate online with added vehemence. Shielded by the anonymity of the Internet, cybernationalists express their opinions with a violent passion that both offends and worries Western observers. Extreme forms of online nationalism directly sabotage Beijing's desired national image as a peaceful and responsible rising power.

³⁸ Osnos, 2008

For example, in April 2008, Grace Wang, a Chinese freshman at Duke University, found herself the target of online persecution. Branded as a “race traitor” after trying to separate a group of pro-Tibet from pro-China protestors on campus, her picture and personal information appeared online in a forum for Chinese students.³⁹ Wang became the subject of heated, personal attacks and received emails threatening her with death should she return to China. “Call the human flesh search engines!”⁴⁰ one user threatened, calling for physical, as opposed to virtual, action.⁴¹ Internet users dug up her address in China and vandalized her home, forcing Wang’s mother into hiding. The unnecessary violence of this response contributes to perceptions of China as defensive, hypersensitive, and childishly vindictive. New York Times columnist Nicholas D. Kristof captured the American reaction to Wang’s story well, sighing that this is the kind of incident that makes Western observers so uneasy about rising Chinese nationalism:

“[This] kind of Internet bullying seems more common in China — there have been many such cases — than in most other countries, and it has shades of the Cultural Revolution in it: The mob of crazed students clinging blindly to an ideology, denouncing a cosmopolitan intellectual as a “stinking No. 9” and demanding that he or she repent to the crowd. This kind of nationalism is blinding, just as Maoism was in 1967, and it’s not good for China or for the world. And those fiery nationalists are doing far more damage to China’s image around the world than a million Grace Wangs could ever have done.”⁴²

Such stunts compromise Beijing’s attempts to portray a confident and self-assured rising power to the international community. Likewise, this image of hypersensitivity also causes Western audiences to question China’s ability to provide international leadership: if China is unwilling to open itself to dialogue, how will it manage the responsibilities of a global power?

Chinese nationalists assemble offline as well, sometimes resulting in violent protests. In

³⁹ Osnos, 2008

⁴⁰ While this term implies physical action, it does not necessarily mean the commenter is calling for physical violence. Rather, it may simply refer to identifying individuals offline and exposing them to public humiliation.

⁴¹ Dewan, 2008

⁴² Kristof, 2008

1999, after NATO bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese people, tens of thousands of protestors—mainly students and youth—took to the streets in what later became known as the “May 8th” protests, throwing bricks, rocks, garbage, and Molotov cocktails. The rioters kept US Ambassador Jim Sasser and his staff trapped in the American embassy for days, shouting slogans like “Blood for blood!” and burning American flags.⁴³ Students organized boycotts of American goods, targeting American-owned businesses like McDonalds by calling for the government to “Kick American hamburgers out of China!”⁴⁴ The Party at first implicitly encouraged protestors, constructing web pages devoted to protesting the Belgrade bombing and publishing confrontational articles, like this op-ed from *The People’s Daily*:

“This is 1999, not 1989...China is a China that has stood up; it is a China that defeated the Japanese fascists; it is a China that had a trial of strength and won victory over the United States on the Korean battleground. These Chinese people are not to be bullied, and China’s sovereignty and dignity are not to be violated. The hot blood of people of ideas and integrity who opposed imperialism for over 150 years flows in the veins of the Chinese people. U.S.-led NATO had better remember this.”⁴⁵

The US media was shocked by the Chinese reaction. Unable to understand its strength, they quickly directed the blame at the Chinese government, who they accused of inflaming the passions of protestors. A review of editorials from 11 May by Peter Hays Gries reveals that most major US newspapers believed government propaganda was to blame for the mistaken view within China that the bombing was intentional, and that the Chinese people were not genuinely angry. The *San Francisco Chronicle* maintained that Beijing had “failed to tell its citizens that the US attack was an accident and that President Clinton has apologized to Beijing.” The *Washington Post* echoed this sentiment, announcing “the Big Lie is alive and well in Beijing”

⁴³ Gries, 2004, pp. 14-15

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 14

⁴⁵ Han, 1999 (as cited in Gries, 2004, p. 11)

while the *Boston Globe* accused the Party of orchestrating displays of “state-approved anger.”⁴⁶ While Gries denies these interpretations, the violence of the anti-American nationalist backlash was seized upon by the majority of Western commentators as proof of the Communist menace, evidence of an emerging China threat.

Violent displays of nationalism, both online and off, affect both China’s domestic stability and international image. From the perspective of already suspicious observers in the West, the quickness with which nationalists turn criticism into slight, their conviction that Western powers deliberately deny China “face,” and their propensity for overreaction all serve to discredit China’s claim to a “peaceful rise.” Minxin Pei argues that the aggrieved tone of Chinese nationalism damages China’s image as a responsible stakeholder, arguing “a very nationalistic public makes foreigners very wary of China and harms China’s image.”⁴⁷

While some observers accuse Beijing of consciously harnessing popular nationalism as a way to counter elements of Western political values, still more worrying is the idea that the movement is organic, genuine, and beyond the control of the CCP. While a certain percentage of angry youth is reasonable—perhaps even beneficial for a country still battling with injustice—the thought that the management of China could be handed over to them is horrifying.⁴⁸ Susan Shirk, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian affairs under President Bill Clinton, has explored this potentiality, arguing that the combination of China’s growing military and growing popular nationalism present concrete dangers: “It creates the risk, not a high probability, but a risk, that one day China’s leaders could feel that to look strong in the eyes of their public they have to make a threat to Japan or to Taiwan and that they will feel that they cannot back down from that threat without jeopardizing their own domestic support or even their own survival in

⁴⁶ Gries, 2001, p. 25

⁴⁷ Bajoria, 2008

⁴⁸ Zhao, 2008

power.”⁴⁹ This uncomfortable balance of power thus informs Western perceptions of China as an unpredictable and potentially irrational actor, a perception that complicates the party-state’s foreign policy dealings.

A state’s reputation can have real consequences in terms of its relations with other states: a state that projects a tough and aggressive image may be interpreted by other international actors as potentially threatening or as less willing to cooperate. These interpretations can have serious consequences for that state’s foreign policy goals. A judgment of a state’s character, national image is used to predict future behavior.⁵⁰ Robert Keohane argues “the most important aspect of an actor’s reputation in world politics is the belief of others that it will keep its future commitments even when a particular situation, myopically viewed, makes it appear disadvantageous to do so.”⁵¹ Developing and maintaining a positive national image becomes an important task for all states in order to work effectively with other international actors and achieve its foreign policy goals.

National image is also an important dimension of national power. Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye argues that the subtler power that comes from attraction, otherwise known as soft power, is a more cost effective way to lead:

“A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries admire its values, emulate its example, aspire to its level of prosperity and openness. This soft power—getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them.”⁵²

A state’s soft power, Nye contends, rests on three major resources: its culture, its political values, and its foreign policies.⁵³ As a result, a state with an attractive culture, appealing political values,

⁴⁹ Grammaticas, 2009

⁵⁰ Ding, 2011, p. 295

⁵¹ Keohane, 1984, p. 116

⁵² Nye, 2004

⁵³ Nye, 2002, pp. 8–12

and persuasive foreign policy can more effectively achieve its international goals: if a country can present an attractive culture or ideology to the international community, more people will willingly follow; if people are willing to follow, the country can shape international norms and values in ways that benefit its own interests with less suspicion or resistance.⁵⁴ Therefore, national image matters. By cultivating a positive or attractive national image, states have access to a wider range of options in wielding their national power. In contrast, a state with a negative national image will constantly find itself constrained, struggling against the low expectations of the international community and contained by suspicion.

The conviction of the dragon slayers of the West in the existence of a “China Threat” is therefore partially the result of a negative national image, and by extension poor national image management. This negative national image affects China’s relationship with other international powers, and thus its ability to conduct effective foreign policy. As China continues to develop, it has a greater capacity to pursue its national interests. However, if every flexing muscle is met with cries of alarm from the international community, its power is necessarily constrained. The problems for China’s national image posed by the aggression of many Chinese nationalists have thus created the need for an international campaign to revitalize the Chinese “brand.” In response to Western accusations of a “China threat,” China’s Former Director of State Council Information Office, Zhu Muzhi, has said,

“Some (foreign countries) have prejudices or have wrongly believed rumors, therefore what they think about China is not the true image of China. We will try every means to present a comprehensive and real picture of China to the outside world so that you can see the true image of China.”⁵⁵

Indeed, in recent years Western governments have called on China to do just that:

reassure the international community of its intentions. “Just as we and our allies must

⁵⁴ Ding, 2011, p. 295

⁵⁵ Wang, H. 2003

make clear that we are prepared to welcome China's arrival as a prosperous and successful power, China must reassure the rest of the world that its development and growing global role will not come at the expense of the security and well-being of others," said James Steinberg, former US Deputy Secretary of State.⁵⁶ Therefore, in order to calm nervous observers in the West, Beijing's top priority has been to maintain peace at home while continuing to take a greater role in international affairs. By rebranding China as a Confucian China, the CCP hopes to superimpose the image of harmony and peace over its aggrieved nationalist movement and recast the People's Republic as a smiling panda in place of a snarling dragon.

THE CONFUCIAN REVIVAL

The Harmonious Society and peaceful rise

The new, state-led revival of Confucianism was initiated by President Hu Jintao who began to emphasize the importance of harmony in response to increasing social tension. He first invoked the ancient sage in a February 2005 speech to the National Congress, declaring, "Confucius said, Harmony is something to be cherished."⁵⁷ Since then, the concept of harmony, or *hexie*, has become central to the Party's social discourse, as the mantra for both domestic and foreign policy. The idea of harmony is the key feature in China's brand management, and is used to paint a picture of a peaceful China. Official propaganda looks beyond the tumultuous present, past the violent chaos of the Communist period, and back to a harmonious golden age in China's imperial past where sage kings ruled with wisdom and benevolence.

⁵⁶ Grammaticas, 2009

⁵⁷ Schell, 2008, p. 24

The state-led revival of Confucianism is tied closely to the Party's official narrative of a "Harmonious Society" (*Hexie Shehui*).⁵⁸ Although first introduced in 2005, not long after Hu's first public flirtation with Confucianism, the Harmonious Society did not become official Party canon, enshrined in the CCP's charter, until the 17th National Congress in October 2007. The unifying concept of the Hu administration, Hu describes the Harmonious Society as one that "puts people first."⁵⁹ A shift from China's primary focus on development to a more balanced, "Confucian-style" approach, it seeks to maintain economic growth while addressing social issues such as increasing income inequality, environmental degradation, and domestic political corruption.⁶⁰ This propaganda theme emphasizes the Party's benevolent concern for all Chinese citizens, their efforts to balance growth more evenly, and the implied price for this new socially responsible growth—loyalty to the CCP.⁶¹

Hu has also extended the Harmonious Society beyond domestic policy and into the international sphere with its foreign policy alter ego, China's "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*). A response to the "China threat theory," the conviction in the West that China's rise represents a threat to the international order, the term peaceful rise refers to China's commitment to pursue "harmonious" and "peaceful" relations with its neighbors as it continues to develop. Peaceful rise was first introduced by Zheng Bijian, former vice president of the Central Party School and current Chairman of the China Reform Forum, at the Boao Forum in November of 2003. In his speech, Zheng described peaceful rise as China's new strategic path: to continue to build

⁵⁸ The Harmonious Society is a reference to the Confucian ideal of *datong*, or the Grand Harmony, a state that existed long before Confucius' own time. It is important to note that, for the Chinese, *datong* is not an abstract concept but a phenomenon that may be realized on earth in a human community. The achievement of *datong* has therefore been an important goal for Chinese intellectuals and rulers throughout history, and dominates even modern beliefs about the ideal society. Even Mao had his own vision for a socialist *datong*, one of utopian harmony, and spoke of the need to "eliminate class and realize *datong*." Any discussion of Confucian harmony thus strongly echoes the call for *datong* and the realization of the perfect society (Hua, 2005, p. 62).

⁵⁹ Hu, 2007

⁶⁰ Gries and Holt, 2009, p. 75

⁶¹ Dotson, 2011, p. 6

socialism with Chinese characteristics, while participating in rather than detaching from economic globalization.⁶² However, almost as soon as the term “peaceful rise” was introduced, some senior leaders and analysts expressed their concern about the use of the word of “rise.” Concerned that the talk about “rise” might further fuel Western fear of the “China threat,” it was decided to transition to a less loaded word. Thus, when President Hu Jintao delivered a speech in April 2004, again at the Boao Forum, he avoided any mention of “peaceful rise,” instead stressing China’s “peaceful development.”⁶³ Since then, “peaceful development” has become the official slogan, though scholars and Western commentators have continued to use both “peaceful rise” and “peaceful development” almost interchangeably.

Despite the amount of ink the Chinese propaganda machine has dedicated to its promotion, it is difficult to further define exactly what “peaceful rise” entails beyond a few broad generalizations. Rather than a concrete policy program, it appears mostly to be a reassurance to the international community of China’s intentions. In this way, the discourse of “peaceful rise” seems to be mostly this—a discussion. The idea of peaceful rise is thus intended to send a message to China’s international observers: that China is moving into a new stage of development, that it is finally stepping out into the world, and that it is doing so in a confident—but non-aggressive—manner.

What is it about Confucius that makes him so particularly suited to send this message? For one, the breadth of Confucian teachings makes the ancient sage a particularly convenient figurehead; remembered mostly for a large collection of disconnected proverbs, it is easy to pick and choose from a wide variety of teachings for practically any occasion—and equally important, easy for the Party to leave out what they would rather ignore. Confucianism is a

⁶² Zheng, 2003

⁶³ Liu, 2008, p. 545

flexible philosophy, at least in its state-led incarnations, and has a long history of reinterpretation. Likewise, Confucianism was the ruling political ideology of China for centuries, long before Mao and the arrival of Marxism. Its legacy as the bulwark of Chinese imperialism means that the CCP can base their modern day appeal solidly in Chinese culture. Unlike Marxism, there is a cultural foundation for Confucianism in China, which give its ideas more staying power and added credibility, for both domestic and foreign audiences. Within China, Confucianism can provide the CCP with a kind of cultural legitimacy—an element missing from previous appeals to socialism and nationalism, both foreign imports—as well as the moral authority that the Party has lacked since the iron rice bowl was broken.⁶⁴ Abroad, Confucianism serves to prioritize China's ancient past over more controversial Communist history, glossing over painful memories from the Mao period with a colorful imperial palette. Confucius has thus come to replace Mao as China's national mascot, the uncontested symbol of the greatness of Chinese civilization. In this way, the CCP hopes the Confucian revival will focus international attention on China's cultural contributions to the world and emphasize its philosophy over its politics.

At a more basic level, though arguably the most important, the CCP hopes the revival of Confucius will break the association of brash irrationality produced by the angry complaints of popular nationalists. The personification of wisdom, judgment, and restraint, Confucius acts as the perfect foil to the angry youth and his revival can be understood as performance of China's good qualities for an international audience. Through the invocation of Confucius in a series of conspicuous international events, institutions, and awards, the CCP thus seeks to present a vision

⁶⁴ The system of state-guaranteed lifetime employment and access to basic social services that existed during the Mao period. Symbolically, the breaking of the iron rice bowl was a serious act; the promise of cradle-to-grave employment had been made by Mao himself and had served as one of the fundamental appeals of the communists since the early revolutionary period (China's communist revolution, 1999).

of a mature and responsible China to the world: one who can be trusted with the responsibly of a great power and to rise without making waves.

Confucius rehabilitated

Confucius in the 2008 Opening Ceremonies

Although the CCP has appealed to Confucian narratives increasingly since the early 2000s, the Western mass media didn't take serious notice of its propagandic repurposing until 2008, when the new CCP spokesman was reintroduced to the West in style during the Beijing Olympic Games. The Harmonious Society was featured prominently in the official themes surrounding the Games, starting with the running of the Olympic Torch, christened the "Journey of Harmony."⁶⁵ Confucian themes were even more prominently featured in the opening ceremonies. Directed by Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou, the opening ceremonies emphasized the contributions of Chinese civilization throughout history, deemphasizing China's communist history in favor of its cultural legacy. The ceremonies began with 2,008 drummers, beating electrically lit Fou drums and chanting a welcome from the Analects: "Friends have come from afar, how happy we are."⁶⁶ The second act of the artistic performance of the ceremonies, entitled "Beautiful Olympics," echoed this message with a choir of 810 performers dressed as the 3000 Disciples of Confucius, carrying bamboo scrolls inscribed with text from the Analects and chanting Confucian aphorisms: "Isn't it great to have friends coming from afar?" and "All men are brothers within the four seas." They were followed by a fantastic display of rolling blocks representing the moveable type printing press, one of China's great inventions, rising and falling

⁶⁵ This name became ironic as pro-Tibet and pro-PRC protestors clashed at one relay location after another. Often violent protests in London, Paris, and Seoul became the object of international scrutiny, as well as the Chinese government's furious reaction to both the protests and the tenor of their coverage. Demonstrations in Athens, London, Paris and San Francisco dominated media coverage of the relay, overshadowing the harmonious message of the Olympics and causing in a public-relations nightmare for officials in Beijing.

⁶⁶ Chinese culture shines at dazzling Olympics opening ceremony, 2008

to music. The narration noted the resemblances to wind rolling across a field of grass, a reference to Confucius' famous proverb on the virtue of rulers.⁶⁷ The blocks then rearranged themselves to produce three variations of the character 和 (*he*), which means both “peace” and “harmony.”⁶⁸

Even Yimou's nod to modern China prioritized the Party's harmonious narrative, featuring a dove of peace constructed from the bodies of a thousand illuminated dancers.⁶⁹

The Beijing Olympics are often spoken of as China's “coming out party,” and in many ways they were. For China, the chance to host the Olympics represented both higher status in and greater respect from the international community, and so the Games were seized as an opportunity to present the face of the “new” China to the rest of the world—the fact that it chose a Confucian face is highly significant. The opening ceremonies deemphasized China's Communist history in favor of the achievements of Chinese civilization. This selective interpretation of Chinese tradition, particularly the Confucian themes of harmony, brotherhood, and peace, was meant to put a kinder, gentler face on the PRC at a time where it faces enormous criticism from the international community on everything from human rights to trade policy. Ironically, the extravagant spectacle and militant precision of the opening ceremonies themselves were enough to incite fear among China Threat theorists—“*Honey, are you having nightmares about the Chinese again?*” However, the emphasis the opening ceremonies placed on China's cultural contributions the world, its commitment to peace, and Confucian harmony represented a drastic departure from the blood and revolution of the Mao days.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ “The virtuous leader can pass across his subjects with the ease of the wind” (Confucius, Book 12, Chapter 19 of *The Analects*).

⁶⁸ Dotson, 2011, p. 9

⁶⁹ Beijing welcomes world to 2008 Olympic Games, 2008

⁷⁰ This change in narratives was especially timely given the Western ambivalence surrounding the 2008 Olympic Games. International outrage following the crackdowns in Tibetan prompted calls to boycott the Opening Ceremonies. Western journalists, like Fareed Zakaria, cautioned spectators not to “feed China's nationalism” at the

Confucius in the Classroom

Abroad, the rapid spread of “Confucius Institutes,” state-sponsored Chinese-language and culture centers, is by far the most visible foreign symbol of the Confucian revival. By the end of 2010, there were a total of 322 “Confucius Institutes”⁷¹ and 369 “Confucius Classrooms”⁷² in 96 different countries. In the United States, there are currently 73 Confucius Institutes and 51 Confucius Classrooms, the most of any country.⁷³ In 2009, over 260,000 registered students attended these institutes (a twofold increase from the previous year), and over 17,000 Chinese teachers and volunteers have reportedly been sent to Confucius Institutes between 2005 and early 2011.⁷⁴

The Confucius Institutes have become a key instrument of Chinese soft power abroad. China itself admits this: Li Changchun, China’s propaganda chief, has described the institutes as “an important part of China’s overseas propaganda setup.”⁷⁵ The CCP thus provides funding for Chinese studies abroad hoping to popularize them, making Chinese language and culture more attractive to the next generation of global decision makers. At the same time, by doing so under the banner of Confucius, it hopes to project a benign image of China within the international community to soften the impact of its rise.

However, the implications of these Confucius Institutes have raised eyebrows in higher education circles. The influx of Chinese government funding into classrooms abroad has come at

Olympics with public humiliation while others, like David Shambaugh, warned the world to brace itself for xenophobic outbursts (Zakaria, 2008; Shambaugh, 2008). Contrasted against all this, however, was the huge outpouring of sympathy from the international community following the Sichuan earthquake. The introduction of a peaceful, Confucian face amidst this drama thus had an especially strong impact amidst Western confusion. Those observers who expected to see China’s belligerent nationalism on display were greeted by dignified restraint—or as restrained as is possible on a 44 billion-dollar budget—as a Confucian China graciously welcomed its fellow states as brothers.

⁷¹ Affiliated with universities

⁷² Affiliated with primary schools

⁷³ About Confucius Institute/Classroom, 2010

⁷⁴ Dotson, 2011, p. 16

⁷⁵ Redden, 2012

a crucial moment, allowing for a significant expansion of language and cultural programming despite budget cuts caused by the global recession. In spite of this, the presence of these institutes, particularly on university campuses, has raised concerns about academic freedom.⁷⁶ The Confucian Institutes are partnered with Chinese universities overseen by Hanban, a subsidiary of the Chinese Ministry of Education. Hanban provides yearly funding to host universities, pays the salaries and travel costs of Chinese teachers, and provides teaching materials.⁷⁷ Critics complain that this relationship causes universities to self-censor themselves on sensitive issues, such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Falun Gong, curtailing freedom of speech and constraining faculty research.⁷⁸ If true, the “peacefulness” of these institutes may be questionable; it would certainly constitute a barb within China’s soft power projection. Still, the use of Confucius’ name to brand this effort is telling and reflects again the desire of the CCP to put a friendly face on its maneuverings abroad. The association of Confucius with harmony is thus intended to take the edge off any discomfiture felt by the Institutes’ foreign hosts, and the philosopher’s peaceful reputation is used as a guarantor of good Chinese intentions in the face of Western suspicion.

The Confucius Peace Prize

One of the Party’s most memorable—though perhaps the least successful—attempts to put a Confucian gloss on their public image is the “Confucius Peace Prize.” The controversial 2010 Nobel nomination of Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo was met with anger and alarm by the CCP leadership. An outraged state press accused the Nobel committee of pandering to the Western, anti-China agenda, stating there is “reason to question whether the Nobel Peace Prize

⁷⁶ Redden, 2012

⁷⁷ Redden, 2012

⁷⁸ Redden, 2012

has been degraded to a political tool that serves an anti-China purpose. Instead of peace and unity in China, the Nobel committee would like to see the country split by an ideological rift, or better yet, collapse like the Soviet Union.”⁷⁹

In response to the nomination, China launched an “anti-Liu” public relations campaign, which included the creation of a competing award, the “Confucius Peace Prize.”⁸⁰ While the identity of the ostensibly private nominating organization was never made clear, invitations to the award ceremony were sent by the Ministry of Culture, which falls under of the CCP Central Propaganda Department.⁸¹ The chairman of the organization explained that the goal of the prize was to reflect the Eastern vision of world peace, one influenced by Confucius.⁸² The first recipient was former Vice President of Taiwan and KMT Party Chairman Lien Chan, for his work “[building] a bridge of peace between the mainland and Taiwan.”⁸³ Lien, however, did not attend the ceremony—the award was instead accepted on his behalf by an extremely uncomfortable looking 6-year-old girl—and when reached for comment, Lien denied every hearing of the Confucius Peace Prize.⁸⁴

In many ways, the Confucius Peace Prize did exactly the opposite of what was intended. Although clearly intended as a challenge to the Nobel Peace Prize, neither the international media nor the prize’s recipient took the Confucian alternative seriously. The dramatics surrounding its unveiling reinforced the image of China as childish, prompting ridicule and contempt from observers in the West. However, it does demonstrate the extent to which the Party relies on Confucianism when in need of an appealing image to project abroad. The brandishing

⁷⁹ 2010 Nobel Peace Prize a Disgrace, 2010

⁸⁰ Tran, 2012

⁸¹ Dotson, 2011, p. 17

⁸² Jiang, 2010

⁸³ Tran, 2010

⁸⁴ Foster, 2010

of Confucius name and image has become the kneejerk response to trouble with China's national image, regardless of how inappropriate the association or how outrageous the cause.

CONCLUSION

While parts of the Confucian revival have certainly been performed for the benefit of a domestic audience, the most significant moments of the revival have all had an international orientation, projecting Confucian themes of harmony and peace abroad—the 2008 Olympic Games, the growth of Confucius Institutes, and the Confucian Peace Prize. Likewise, Confucius is invoked in each of these episodes to put a harmonious gloss on China's growing power that will assuage fears abroad connected with China's rise. By projecting a more benign image of China into the international community, embodied by the grandfatherly Confucius and the harmonious world order he is associated with, the CCP hopes to combat negative perceptions of China, largely created by the aggression of Chinese nationalists and the wild card they represent within Chinese foreign policy. The CCP depends on the nationalist legitimacy created during the 1990s in order to maintain its hold on power; as such, it cannot stifle the agitation of China's angry nationalists without risking Party leaders appearing unpatriotic themselves. Likewise, the Party must occasionally meet nationalists' demands, even if these demands offend neighbors and upset the West. Basing its claim to continued party-rule as the guarantor of the nationalist goals of greatness and glory for China, the CCP dares not to give over this role to actors in civil society for fear of becoming irrelevant. Since the Party cannot curtail the expression of nationalists themselves, it attempts to manage the impact of these expressions instead. The large-scale rebranding of the People's Republic in Confucian terms is the CCP's answer to the China threat theory propagated in the West: its used as proof that the new Confucian China is a mature, cooperative, stable, and responsible world power.

The question remains, however: is the revival all rhetoric, or is there some substance behind it? Do we see a more harmonious, peaceful China rising to prominence, or is the positive image associated with Confucius being used to mask malicious intentions? It is difficult to say, partly because Communist Party cadres may not yet know themselves. The tenuous balance that exists between China's aggrieved nationalists and the party-state that is forced to represent their interests makes it almost impossible to divine whether the motives for the Confucian revival are "genuine," if there is such a thing. Chinese leaders may sincerely desire a peaceful rise for China, but so long as its legitimacy remains grounded in nationalism, the CCP must continue to deliver victories in the name of Chinese national greatness or risk being perceived as weak by China's rabid popular nationalists.

Regardless of whether we understand China as a peaceful power, the Confucian revival is decidedly lacking in Confucian values. Revivalists use the historical Confucius as a symbol of traditional culture, and as an ambassador of the new, peaceful China, while either grossly oversimplifying or completely ignoring his teachings. The "Confucian" element of Chinese foreign policy is thus essentially contentless; the Confucian revival is an attempt to put a Confucian "gloss" on China's image abroad and calm the fears of Western observers over China's rise.

However, this selective interpretation of particular themes, such as harmony, while ignoring others, like the Confucian concept of the ethical and transparent rulership, is a contradiction that has been noted. Party ideologues should take care to remember Mencius, one of the most famous neo-Confucian philosophers: a ruler retains the authority to rule only so long as he retains the mandate from heaven, which depends on his virtue. A king without generosity, self-sacrifice, humility, receptiveness to instruction, or responsiveness to the needs of his

subjects is not a king at all. When asked about the regicide of the King of Zhou, Mencius responded, “Someone who does violence to the good we call a villain; someone who does violence to the right we call a criminal. A person who is both a villain and a criminal we call a scoundrel. I have heard that the scoundrel Zhou was killed, but have not heard that a lord was killed.”⁸⁵ Mencius makes it clear: those who lose the moral authority of rulership have lost the right to rule. By invoking Confucius in the political sphere once again, the CCP dredges up old expectations of the ethical imperatives of benevolent rule. It is difficult to break the association between Confucianism and the mandate of heaven, and by using Confucius as the new stand-in for contemporary Chinese culture, the party-state draws attention to and invites an evaluation of their performance—and opens the door to possible regime challenge should the perception rise that the mandate of heaven has been lost.

Finally, we might question the wisdom of this latest attempt at cultural engineering. Party leaders continue to believe they can create and guide mass movements to solve problems, manipulating readily recognizable cultural mores for political ends, but if we look to the past this is not proven. These attempts usually have unforeseen consequences—like the nationalism engineered in the 1990s in response to the political fatigue following the excesses of revolution and the failure of socialism. Now, in the 2000s, we see the Party trying again, responding to the failures of a mass movement with yet another mass movement. Why should the CCP’s attempts be any more successful this time around? Such state-engineered movements have proven both to be disingenuous, thus unable to pass ideological muster, and very difficult to control. In the same way that the state-led nationalism has veered out of control in recent years, causing the Party arguably more problems than it solved—including much of the negative press that is currently

⁸⁵ Ebrey, 1993, p. 22

forcing China to rebrand—so too could state-led Confucianism. Only time will tell what pitfalls lie hidden for the new Confucian China, but Party leaders should look to the past for caution and know that they revive Confucius, and the accompanying baggage, at their own risk.

WORKS CITED

- “2010 Nobel Peace Prize a Disgrace.” (2010, October 9). *Global Times*. Retrieved from <http://opinion.globaltimes.cn/editorial/2010-10/580091.html>.
- “About Confucius Institute/Classroom.” *Hanban*. Retrieved from http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm
- Bajoria, J. (2008, April 23). Nationalism in China. *Council on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved from <http://www.cfr.org/china/nationalism-china/p16079>.
- BBC World Service. (2011). Global poll reveals rising concern about China’s increasing power [Press release]. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2011/03_march/28/china.shtml.
- “Beijing welcomes world to 2008 Olympic Games.” (2008). *The official website of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games*. Retrieved from <http://en.beijing2008.cn/ceremonies/headlines/n214519367.shtml>.
- Bell, D. A. (1999). Democracy with Chinese characteristics: A political proposal for the post-Communist era. *Philosophy East and West*, 49(4), 451-493.
- Bell, D.A. (2010, February 19). “The Chinese Confucian Party?” *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/the-chinese-confucian-party/article1475141/>.
- Chang, A. (2011, January 13). “Confucius shows up in Tiananmen Square.” *Associated Press*. Retrieved from http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/41061323/ns/world_news-asiapacific/.
- China’s communist revolution: A glossary: Iron rice bowl. (1999, October 6). *BBC News*. Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/special_report/1999/09/99/china_50/iron.htm
- “China’s Military Spending to Double by 2015.” (2012, February 14). *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2012/02/14/chinas-military-spending-to-double-by-2015-report/>.
- “Chinese culture shines at dazzling Olympics opening ceremony.” (2008, August 9). *Xinhua News*. Retrieved from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-08/09/content_9063343.htm.
- Confucius. *The Analects*. Translated by D.C. Lau. London: Penguin Group, 1979.
- De Bary, W. T. (1984). Neo-Confucian education and post-Confucian East Asia. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 37(5), 7-17.

- Dewan, S. (2008, April 17). Chinese student in US is caught in confrontation. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/17/us/17student.html?pagewanted=all>.
- Ding, S. (2011). Branding a rising China: An analysis of Beijing's national image management in the age of China's rise. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 46(3). 293-306.
- Dotson, J. (2011, July 20) The Confucian revival in the propaganda narratives of the Chinese government. *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Research Report*. Retrieved from www.uscc.gov/researchpapers/2011/Confucian_Revival_Paper.pdf.
- Eaglehart, N. A. (2000). Rights and culture in the Asian Values argument: The rise and fall of Confucian ethics in Singapore. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 22(2), 548-568.
- Ebrey, P. *Chinese Civilization : A Sourcebook*, 2d ed. New York: Free Press, 1993.
- Foster, P. (2010, December 9). "Confucius Peace Prize: Never Heard of It, Says Winner." *The Telegraph*. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8191835/Nobel-Peace-Prize-Confucius-prize-Never-heard-of-it-says-the-winner.html>.
- Gertz, B. (2000). *The China threat: How the People's Republic targets America*. Washington, DC: Regnery Pub.
- Gies II, J. P. and B. Holt. (Winter 2009). Harmonious society: Rise of the new China. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 75-94.
- Grammaticas, D. (2009, November 17). "China's rising nationalism troubles West." BBC News. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8363260.stm>.
- Gries, P.H. (2001). Tears of rage: Chinese nationalist reactions to the Belgrade Embassy bombing. *The China Journal*, 46, 25-43.
- Gries, P. H. (2004). *China's new nationalism: Pride, politics, and diplomacy*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Han, Z. (1999, May 12). "This is not 1989 China." *The People's Daily*. Translated by Peter Hays Gries.
- Hu, J. (2007, October 15). "Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in all." *Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China*. Retrieved from <http://www.china.org.cn/english/congress/229611.htm>.
- Hua, S. (2005). A Perfect World. *The Wilson Quarterly*, 29(4), 62-67.

- Hunt, M. (1994). Chinese national identity and the strong state: The late Qing-Republican crisis, in L. Dittmer and S. S. Kim (Eds.), *China's quest for national identity* (62-79). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2008) The rise of China and the future of the West: Can the liberal system survive? *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved from <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63042/g-john-ikenberry/the-rise-of-china-and-the-future-of-the-west>.
- Jacobs, A. (2011, April 22). "Confucius statue vanishes near Tiananmen Square." *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/23/world/asia/23confucius.html>.
- Jiang, S. (2010, December 8). "China to Hand Out Its Own Peace Prize." *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/12/08/china.confucius.prize>.
- Keohane, R. (1984) *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kohut, A. (2007). How the world sees China. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/656/how-the-world-sees-china>.
- Kristof, N. D. (2008, April 19). "Grace Wang and Chinese Nationalism." *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/19/grace-wang-and-chinese-nationalism/>.
- Lieberthal, K. (2003). *Governing China: From revolution through reform*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Liu, G. (2008). Domestic sources of China's emerging grand strategy. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 43(5), 543-561.
- Melvin, S. (2007, August 29). "Yu Dan and China's return to Confucius." *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/29/arts/29iht-melvin.1.7298367.html>.
- Morland, Morten. (2009) Originally shown in *The Times*. Retrieved from <http://bridge2china.wordpress.com/2010/01/31/100-years-difference-of-dragon-stories/>
- Nye, J. S. (2002). *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). The benefits of soft power. *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*. Retrieved from <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/4290.htm>.
- Osnos, E. (2008, July 28). Angry youth: The students who reject the West. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/07/28/080728fa_fact_osnos.

- Pew Research Center. (2011). Strengthen ties with China, but get tough on trade. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1855/china-poll-americans-want-closer-ties-but-tougher-trade-policy>.
- Pye, L. W. (1993). How China's nationalism was Shanghaied. *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 29, 107-133.
- Redden, E. (2012, January 4). Confucius Says: Debate over Chinese-funded institutes at American universities. Inside Higher Ed. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/01/04/debate-over-chinese-funded-institutes-american-universities>.
- Richardson, M. (2010, September 30). "What China Has Joined Together." *The Japan Times Online*. Retrieved from <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/eo20100930mr.html>.
- Schell, O. (2008, October 20). China's quest for moral authority. *The Nation*, 23-26. Retrieved from <http://www.thenation.com/issue/october-20-2008>.
- Shambaugh, D. (2008, May 5). China's competing nationalisms. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/05/opinion/05iht-edshambaugh.1.12573434.html>.
- Sommer, D. (2008). Images for Iconoclasts: Images of Confucius in the Cultural Revolution. *East-West Connections: Review of Asian Studies*, 7(1), 1-23.
- Tran, T. (2010, December 8), "Confucius Peace Prize: China to Award Nobel Rival." *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/08/confucius-peace-prize-china_n_793610.html.
- Wang, H. (2003). National image building and Chinese foreign policy. *China: An International Journal* 1(1): 46-72. As found in S. Ding, Branding a rising China: An analysis of Beijing's national image management in the age of China's rise. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 46(3). 305.
- Wang, Z. (2008). National humiliation, history education, and the politics of historical memory: Patriotic education campaign in China. *International Studies Quarterly*, 52, 783-806.
- Watts, J. (2008). "One journalist's view." *Foreign Correspondents Club of China*. Retrieved from <http://www.fcchina.org/reporters-guide/one-journalists-view/>.
- Yee, A. (2011, February 5). "China: The coming of age of political Confucianism?" *Global Voices*. Retrieved from <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/02/05/china-the-coming-of-age-of-political-confucianism/>.
- Zakaria, F. (2008, April 12). Don't feed China's nationalism: Public humiliation does not work as well on the regime in Beijing as private pressure. *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2008/04/12/don-t-feed-china-s-nationalism.html>.

- Zhao, M. (2008, May 10). "China's nationalism and how not to deal with it." China Digital Times. Retrieved from <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2008/05/chinas-nationalism-and-how-not-to-deal-with-it/>.
- Zhao, S. (1998). A state-led nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in post-Tiananmen China. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 31(3), 287-302.
- Zhao, S. (1997). Chinese intellectuals' quest for national greatness and nationalistic writing in the 1990s. *The China Quarterly*, (152), 725-745.
- Zhao, S. (2000). Chinese nationalism and its international orientations. *Political Science Quarterly*, 115 (1), 1-33.
- Zheng, B. (2003). "A New Path for China's Peaceful Rise and the Future of Asia." Retrieved from www.brookings.edu/fp/events/20050616bijianlunch.pdf.