

‘Community of Common Destiny’ as Post-Western
Regionalism: Rethinking China’s Belt and Road Initiative from
a Confucian Perspective

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‘Community of Common Destiny’ as Post-Western Regionalism: Rethinking China’s Belt and Road Initiative from a Confucian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Conventional explanations of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) focus on how the BRI will be in China’s interest, how it will strengthen China’s geopolitical position, or a combination of the two. We argue that such views are limited because they merely interpret the BRI through ‘Western’ IR lenses. This paper ‘re-worlds’ China by using the BRI as a case study to illustrate how in the discursive field(s) of China’s elite, China as a Westphalian nation state, and China as amorphous *Tianxia* under Confucianism coexist, struggle for recognition, and are interrelated. Consequently, we argue that China, because of the economic miracle it created domestically over the last few decades, is now convinced of its own ‘moral superiority’, and ready to export its self-perceived ‘benevolence’ abroad. In this light, we read the BRI to be undergirded by a combination of ‘Western’ and Confucian values, suggesting a post-Western/post-Chinese form of regionalism.

Keywords: Belt and Road, Post-Western, Regionalism, *Tianxia*, Confucianism

Batı Sonrası Bölgeselcilik olarak ‘Ortak Yazgı Topluluğu’: Çin’in Kuşak-Yol İnisiyatifini Konfüçyüsçü Bir Perspektiften Yeniden Düşünmek

ÖZET

Çin’in Kuşak-Yol İnisiyatifine (KYİ) dair geleneksel açıklamalar, KYİ’nin Çin’in çıkarlarına nasıl hizmet edeceğine, Çin’in jeopolitik konumunu nasıl güçlendireceğine veya bu ikisine birden odaklanmaktadır. Bu tür görüşlerin KYİ’yi yalnızca “Batılı” uluslararası ilişkiler merceğinden yorumlamaları nedeniyle sınırlı olduklarını ileri sürüyoruz. Bu makale, Çinli seçkinlerin söylemsel alan(lar)ında Çin’in Vestfalyen bir ulus devlet ve Konfüçyanizm altında biçimsiz *Tianxia* olarak nasıl aynı anda var olduğunu, kabul görmek için nasıl mücadele ettiğini ve bunların nasıl birbirleriyle ilişkili olduklarını açıklamak için KYİ’yi bir örnek olay olarak kullanarak Çin’i küresel bütüne yeniden yerleştirmektedir. Sonuç olarak, ülke içerisinde son birkaç on yılda yarattığı ekonomik mucize sebebiyle şu anda Çin’in kendi ‘ahlaki üstünlüğünden’ emin ve öz-algısına dayanan ‘hayırseverliği’ yurt dışına ihraç etmeye hazır durumda olduğunu öne sürüyoruz. Bu bakımdan KYİ’nin, Batı-sonrası/Çin-sonrası bir bölgeselcilik biçimi öneren, ‘Batılı’ ve Konfüçyüsçü değerlerin bir birleşiminden destek bulan bir okumasını yapıyoruz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kuşak-Yol, Batı Sonrası, Bölgeselcilik, *Tianxia*, Konfüçyanizm

Introduction

“The Chinese have shown their capacity to adapt their myths to reality; they may also find that new myths will better serve their purpose”¹

The discourse of the ‘Community of Common Destiny for Mankind’ (hereafter CCDM),² introduced by Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2012,³ widely advocated by his successor Xi Jinping and written into the preface of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) constitution in 2018 as part of the fifth amendment,⁴ perceives all the people in the world to belong to a (future) globally connected ‘big family’. Although the CCDM currently seems more like a myth, the Chinese authorities have used all occasions to appear serious about transforming this myth into a reality. In fact, Xi presented the rationale of China’s gargantuan infrastructure project the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in late 2013 to be to “connect[...] the Asian, African, and European continents”,⁵ which, if successful, could lead to further steps to connect this so-called global ‘big family’. It has appeared increasingly relevant amidst the spread of mutually estranging national sensibilities during the Covid19 pandemic in 2020.

This paper is about why and how this way of publicly framing the purpose of Chinese foreign policy has made sense to Xi and his colleagues. This puzzle arises from the difficulty that prevailing⁶ international relations (IR) lenses, especially (neo)realist and (neo)liberal ones, have in aptly explaining these atypical discourses and practices. Observers adopting these lenses tend to delegitimize CCDM/BRI either due to its perceived overly idealistic nature or perceive it as a ‘threat’ due to the fear that China is primarily acting out of self-interest, seeks to change the current international order by overtaking the US’s hegemonic position, or reconstitute the identity of ‘others’⁷ –first in the ‘peripheral’ Global South and ultimately in the ‘Western’ liberal ‘core’ itself—due to the all-encompassing nature of CCDM/BRI. Such views are highly problematic, however, because they effectively impose upon Chinese actors a worldview that is no different from their own Western-centric and ‘provincial’ perspectives,⁸ all the while ignoring or discarding as ‘irrational’ signs that suggest alter-

- 1 Gungwu Wang, “Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia: A Background Essay”, John King Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1968, p. 62.
- 2 In recent years, CCDM has been replaced by the Community with Shared Future for Mankind. “Shared future” connotes or pledges no specific value while “destiny” may. Destiny inadvertently implies enforcement.
- 3 Jintao Hu, “Full text of Hu Jintao’s Report at 18th Party Congress”, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, 27 November 2012, http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/18th_CPC_National_Congress_Eng/t992917.htm (Accessed 17 February 2021).
- 4 “*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Xianfa Xiuzheng An* (People’s Republic of China Constitutional Amendment)”, *Xinhua*, 11 March 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018lh/2018-03/11/c_1122521235.htm?baike (Accessed 17 February 2021).
- 5 National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) People’s Republic of China, “Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”, 28 March 2015, http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html (Accessed 10 March 2019).
- 6 What we mean with ‘prevailing’ are the trained perspectives of IR theories based on primarily European and US experiences and the resulted practice of using them to explain the world.
- 7 Chengxin Pan, *Knowledge, Desire, and Power in Global Politics: Western Representations of China’s Rise*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2012. Nadège Rolland, “China’s Vision for a New World Order”, National Bureau of Asian Research Special Report, No 83, 27 January 2020, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-vision-for-a-new-world-order/> (Accessed 17 February 2021); White House, “US Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China”, 20 May 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/U.S.-Strategic-Approach-to-The-Peoples-Republic-of-China-Report-5.20.20.pdf> (Accessed 21 December 2020).
- 8 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2000; Stephen Chan, *The Morality of China in Africa: The Middle Kingdom and the Dark Continent*, London and New York, Zed Books, 2013.

native ways of understanding the world (i.e. Chinese political narratives). A recent quote from *The Economist*⁹ can serve as a representative example of such a mentality: the “ultimate aim [of the BRI] is to make Eurasia (dominated by China) an economic and trading area to rival the transatlantic one (dominated by America)”. This quote enlists two competing ‘regions’ –i.e. Eurasia vs. the transatlantic one – apparently with the goal of essentializing the differences between these two regions –i.e. China dominated vs. US dominated, ‘them’ vs. ‘us’, and even ‘enemy’ vs. ‘friend’¹⁰—and therefore not only re-constitutes the monotonous Cold War division of the world, but also entirely silences and thus negates the legitimacy of the alternative provided by the imagination of a potentially de-territorialized China. That is, the idea of a globally connected ‘big family’.

To make sense of CCDM/BRI from Xi’s own point of view, Chantal Mouffe’s epistemology is an inspiring first step: “we should acknowledge that the world is a pluriverse and realise that to accept a diversity of political forms of organization will be more conducive to peace and stability than the enforcement of a universal model”.¹¹ Therefore, given Xi’s repetitive references to Confucian values since assuming Presidency,¹² we propose a Confucianist lens to look at CCDM/BRI. We reckon that such a lens may be previously familiar only to a Sinophone audience. And yet, this cultural lens has the potential to address much more spectators due to its particular take on the quest for modernity, originally introduced to the world by European colonialism. Consequently, a picture of post-Western/post-Chinese regionalism emerges that characterizes CCDM/BRI as an alignment of intellectual rather than territorial regions where borders are at best undetermined. We hope that our trans-border sensibilities contribute to ‘post-Western’ IR theory in general and the ‘Chinese School of IR’ in particular, both of which still register territorializing temptations.

The article is built up as follows. Section two discusses China’s developmental model of ‘directed improvisation,’ and illustrates how this model is strongly connected to Confucian thought. Moreover, the section also argues that the domestic success of this ‘China Model’ gave it the moral duty to display and share this model of development, which led to the BRI. Section three then introduces the worldview of *Tianxia* (All-under-Heaven), which to us undergirds the idea of a ‘Community of Common Destiny for Mankind’ (CCDM). The section argues that the BRI is an attempt to make into a reality the supremely moral myth of CCDM. As such, the inclusive and potentially ever-expanding BRI under the presumed (or ‘pretended’) impartial and virtuous leadership of China constitutes a form of post-Western regionalism. However, the content of this post-Western regionalism is not only based on Confucianism, it is also based on resistance against the ‘West’ in general and ‘Western’ practices of development and imperialism/colonialism in particular. Finally, Section four concludes the paper.

9 J.P., “What is China’s Belt and Road Initiative?”, *The Economist*, 15 May 2017, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/05/14/what-is-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative> (Accessed 27 December 2018).

10 Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London, verso, 2005, p. 550.

11 Chantal Mouffe, “Democracy in a Multipolar World”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No 3, 2009, p. 561.

12 See Xi’s first speech at the United Nations, “*Xi Jinping zai di qishi jie lianheguo dahui yibanxing bianlun shi de jianghua (quanwen)*” (Xi Jinping’s Full Statement at the General Debate of the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly), *Xinhua*, 29 September 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-09/29/c_1116703645.htm (Accessed 17 December 2020), in which he stated “When the great way prevails, the world is equally shared by all”, which is a direct quote from the Confucian classic the *Book of Rites*, Chapter 9. And, Xi’s Communique of the 4th Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of CPC, during which he directed that “we must [...] combine the rule of law with the rule of virtue”, Jinping Xi, “Communique of the 4th Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of CPC”, 2 December 2014, http://www.china.org.cn/china/fourth_plenary_session/2014-12/02/content_34208801.htm (Accessed 18 December 2020).

Crossing Boundaries: the Display of China's Just World and Developmental Model of 'Directed Improvisation' through the BRI

In a Confucian just world, morality leads to power rather than vice versa.¹³ Consequently, the emperor signifies the 'supreme moral being'. His supreme morality is constituted by his selflessness and ability to self-restrain, embodied by his reign without governing (also, non-intervention into the natural flow of things). This makes his citizens (the small men) naturally feel secure with him and look up to him as a supreme moral example.¹⁴ Moreover, all citizens within a Confucian world are hypothetically related to each other through spontaneous kinship relationships. Confucian relationships are typically dyadic and hierarchical and each relationship has attached to it a role obligation to reciprocate benevolence in accordance with their role relationship.¹⁵ In other words, everyone has to (pretend to) perform their proper roles –and in doing so give 'face' and hence confirm the validity of a specific relationship—to people higher as well as lower on the hierarchic ladder through a certain ritual.¹⁶ Confucius names five possibilities of such relationships, namely "Emperor and subject; husband and wife; father and son; older and younger siblings; and friend with friend".¹⁷ The rights and obligations attached to each role ensure that "[i]n this Confucian doctrine there was therefore no possibility of naked exploitation",¹⁸ since this would violate moral behavior. The essence of Confucian *guanxi* (i.e. a mutually obliged benevolence) is to contrive compatible roles through ritual and gift giving.¹⁹ Practically, this is reflected in the sense that the emperor is obliged to provide his citizens with "secure [...] conditions for people's basic means of subsistence and intellectual/moral development".²⁰ The imagined audience of Confucian morality is not just the nation-state China, but the entire world, as will be elaborated on in Section three below. First, however, the following section will elaborate on the connection between Confucianism and China's model(s) of development.

The consensus among Western policy makers, academics, and international institutions like the World Bank and IMF has long been that markets can only grow if one first 'gets the governance

13 Lucian W. Pye and Mary W. Pye, *Asian Power And Politics: The Cultural Dimensions Of Authority*, Cambridge, Belknap Press Of Harvard University Press, 1985.

14 Chih-yu Shih, *China's Just World: the Morality of Chinese Foreign Policy*, London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993.

15 Henry Rosemont and Roger T. Ames, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2009.

16 Henry Rosemont and Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Moral Vision for the 21st Century?*, Taipei, National Taiwan University Press, 2016.

17 Stephen Chan, "A Chinese Political Sociology in Our Times", *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 3, No 3, 2009, p. 332-334; In his analysis of China's role in African countries, Chan, *The Morality of China in Africa*, characterizes the relationships between China and African countries as one of an older brother towards younger brothers. However, this is not the only possibility, and roles are adjustable instead of fixed over time.

18 Chan, *The Morality of China in Africa*, p. 16; L.H.M (Lily) Ling, "Squaring the Circle: China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) and the Ancient Silk Roads", Alan Chong and Quang Minh Pham (eds.), *Critical Reflections on China's Belt & Road Initiative*, Singapore, Palgrave MacMillan, 2020, p. 23-40, conversely, bases her view on the BRI mostly on a combination of Daoism and Buddhism, which is useful for illustrating the inherent interrelatedness of selves and others (and the existence of the self in every other and vice versa), but says less about how relationships are practiced and the role obligations inherent in Confucianism.

19 Yunxiang Yan, *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village*, Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 1996.

20 Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 143.

right' (meaning: the implementation of neoliberal governance).²¹ The reason rests upon the identity of a community of practice that distinguishes an insider-self from an outsider-alter: "All prosperous economies share a common set of strong, law-bound governmental institutions".²² Hence, when 'developing' a country, actors taking these ideas for granted first seek to replicate this model of strong institutions and "best practices found in wealthy democracies"²³—i.e. the implementation of a free market, democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights, social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, and good governance—and hope that this will naturally lead to the growth that exists in their own countries too. In other words, they seek to convert developing nations ('Others') into entities like the 'self'. Unfortunately, reality has shown that this is a method that usually fails because the historical and cultural contexts differ too much.²⁴

According to Yuen Yuen Ang, however, the successful model the top reformers in China implemented to pull 800 million people out of poverty is different. The Chinese authorities rely on what Ang calls 'directed improvisation', which means that "central reformers direct," whereas "local state agents improvise".²⁵ She points out, though, that the center does not direct through providing fixed guidelines that localities are not allowed to deviate from. Instead, the center offers three types of relatively vague guidelines within which local actors can improvise using the resources they have within their own context. This room for 'adaptation' or 'experimentation' can be summarized in three steps: 1) "authorizing yet delimiting the boundaries of localization (variation)," 2) "clearly defining and rewarding bureaucratic success (selection)," and 3) "encouraging mutual exchanges between highly unequal regions (niche creation)".²⁶

The process that ensues is a 'coevolutionary process' between institutions and markets that provide mutual feedback to each other and can be summarized in three steps: "Harness weak institutions to build markets → emerging markets stimulate strong institutions → strong institutions preserve markets".²⁷ Note that these cycles are not premised upon a prior design or staging design.

The process Ang describes is in tune with a Confucian perspective. As such, neither the center nor the locality has a self-interest to care as an actor would usually, but all are relationally pressured to craft a proper self-role that fits the mandate of reform. The center provides the moral guidelines. However, these guidelines are supremely moral, meaning that they are perhaps incomprehensible and even seem vague (multi-interpretable) to a person lower on the moral hierarchy to derive their actions (e.g. 'economic development' and 'social stability' are the shared goals, however there are no fixed rules on how to achieve them). The local elite then starts ruling its population following the emperor's example, but according to his or her own interpretation and local conditions (variation). Also, from the successful regions other regions would be obliged to learn something, the emperor and his advisors decide (select)

21 Yuen Yuen Ang, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 2016; Justin Yifu Lin, *New Structural Economics: A Framework for Rethinking Development and Policy*, Washington, The World Bank, 2012; Justin Yifu Lin, *Demystifying the Chinese Economy*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

22 Ang, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*, p. 2.

23 Ibid.

24 Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel Huntington (eds.), *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, New York, Basic Books, 2000.

25 Ang, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*, p. 17.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p. 14.

which ones should be used and try to improve order in the entire *Tianxia* through connecting the advantages/success stories of different regions (niche creation). Note that the duty of the political center understood in accordance with the cultural memory is to encourage conditions of production for the population to enrich *itself* by allowing more resources to be retained for its improvisational use while restraining the center from intervention in mundane governance at the lower level.

On the one hand, reform more easily proceeds in those places where the local elite answers the call for reform.²⁸ On the other hand, however, rent-seeking has been rampant in actuality. Officials at different levels have not been selfless. Creative gift-giving, in terms of embezzlement, fake statistics, kick-back, insider-trading, and monopoly, etc. between individuals for their personal or collective gains undermines selfless gift-giving (e.g. exemptions, privileges, and subsidies) that the center provides to the locality and the locality, to the population. One of the hottest debated topics during the 1990s was whether or not the bribery was more conducive than destructive to reform. It was conducive because it familiarizes local reformers with material incentives necessary for reform in a greater scope and at a later stage, but destructive to selfless role play required for credible leadership of the Party in the long run.²⁹ Where the balance lies relies on intersubjective judgment of actors belonging to the same relational hierarchies such as center-local, party-government, government-business, national-county enterprises. Intersubjectivity is necessarily in itself a practical combination of selfless and mundane considerations. Making endless judgments on proper relationships in the public and in the private spheres deconstructs the plausibility of clear boundaries between actors. Rules hardly apply. Such a relational lens has important implications for not only understanding the BRI but also reform anywhere.

Mencius' classic advice underscores why and how improvisational developmentalism differs fundamentally from rule-based 'Western' developmentalism. According to him, leaders do not specify how people learn rules and norms. Rather, they should make sure that people have enough to eat first and that their living conditions have improved enough to safely support wives and children. As long as this has been achieved people will spontaneously learn morally/intellectually their proper roles.³⁰ Thus, in China's relating of countries along the BRI, a long-term view, in addition to the development of the underdeveloped population, would point to the ultimate capacity for the making of reciprocally benevolent roles between actors and populations under different regimes. Underdevelopment jeopardizes relational security of all because people are incapable of caring for their relational needs and learning their role obligations. Their self-identities and understanding of the world would be reduced to biological needs, which is detrimental to relationship building as well as emergence/resumption of harmonious order. 'Best practices found in major democracies' is neither developmental nor relational.

From a Confucian perspective, self-restraining and selfless leadership ought not to speak to populations of a specific scope, but to all. China as a national category would otherwise be reduced to self-centrism and jeopardize its very being by becoming a definable target. If the rise of China has

28 And, as Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Nicola Dean, "Experimentation under Hierarchy in Local Conditions: Cases of Political Reform in Guangdong and Sichuan, China", *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 218, 2014, p. 339-358, point out, in localities where the relationship (*guanxi*) between provincial secretaries and general secretaries is closer.

29 One ardent supporter of the conducive argument is Steven N. S. Cheung, "A Simplistic General Equilibrium Theory of Corruption", *Contemporary Economic Policy*, Vol. 13, No 3, 1996, p. 1-5; on the destructive side, the strongest voice is probably Qinglian He, *Xiandaihua de Xianjing (The Pitfall of Modernization)*, Guangzhou, Today's China Press, 1998.

30 Mencius 1A7 (see also 3A3) in Bell, *The China Model*, p. 143.

become the popular image, the only sensible approach to survival from the Confucian perspective is to exercise 'proper conduct' and improvise gift giving everywhere, including in distant lands,³¹ so that no such target called China can be possible. Wishfully China would become an approach or a system emulated by all due its supreme morality. Confucius said, "[t]o be poor without feeling resentful is difficult; to be rich without feeling arrogant is easy".³² Therefore, "[e]xemplary persons help out the needy; they do not make the rich richer".³³ Chinese work in either Africa or Europe should be perceived in such a light.³⁴ On the one hand, it is important to help the needy because poverty encourages negative emotions, whereas prosperity facilitates acting in moral ways. For those who take reciprocal roles that are backed by good living, their relations with China would resemble a kind of self-relations. That is, mutual constitution of relational selves, ultimately meaning the physical safety of all. It is likewise important, on the other hand, for a self-perceived victimized China to mingle with, and become intrinsic to, a historically imperialist Europe in ways that testify to the overcoming of such a shameful past of a distinctive alter China. To say the least, the rich will not make a distinctive target to be blamed for the poverty of the poor. We will argue that this is the embryo of the deterritorialized notion of post-Western regionalism.

Therefore, the BRI composes a metaphor of gift giving³⁵ or exemplification of China's 'vague' developmental model of 'directed improvisation' to the rest of the world. This causes the BRI to be in the nascent process of becoming a center in China's self-realization. However, its recognized rise is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it constitutes a lauded recognition by the world that compensates for the historically felt shame and, on the other, an alarming acquisition of the reputation as a threat to international order. The danger is particularly acute with the territorial disputes between China and neighbors reproducing self-other binaries to the detriment of its relational/moral quest. This parallels the mix of corruption and selflessness in the directed improvisation. The BRI is thus urgent and vital in the sense that togetherness with the BRI nations may lift China up from its maritime self-centrism and evolve into a system, which many now label with the classic notion of *Tianxia*.³⁶ The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) of the PRC on 28 March 2015 provides that its goal is "connecting the Asian, African, and European continents," "realize ... sustainable development," "opening up" and "integrating" China and the BRI region.³⁷ The "Silk Road Spirit" presumably encompasses "peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit". Moreover, it symbolizes "communication between the East and the West" and "is a historic and cultural heritage *shared by all countries around the world*". Finally, "[t]hough proposed by China, the Belt and Road Initiative is a *common aspiration of all countries* along their routes".³⁸

The NDRC narrative renders the logic of power almost irrelevant, if not completely illegitimate at all. The vagueness and the level of abstraction make no ready plan or mechanism of control as realist analysts would have their readers believe. Granted the identity of China is self-positioned

31 Confucius, *The Analects*, p. 185.

32 Confucius 14.11 in Bell, *The China Model*, p. 143.

33 Confucius 6.4 (see also 16.1) in *Ibid*.

34 Yaqing Qin, "Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China's International Strategy", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No 3, 2014, p. 285-314.

35 For the importance of gift giving in Confucian culture see Yan, *The Flow of Gifts*.

36 Tingyang Zhao, *Redefining A Philosophy for World Governance*, Singapore, Palgrave, 2019.

37 NDRC, "Visions and Actions Plan".

38 *Ibid.*; emphases by authors.

in a kernel, the actual benefit that China is to accrue is likewise vague until actual negotiations begin at a particular site. Even what constitutes China can be more complicated than thought. Note that different Chinese local authorities have to improvise their ways of connecting neighbors and faraway countries alike through BRI.³⁹ Such a decentralizing approach renders China a problematic category in practice. Neither control nor influences, if any, are centralized. Note, though, the simple practices and the processes that exhibit China's unprecedented initiative and goodwill at the international level comes with widespread bribery at the national level. The security of this nascently achieved high position relies on recognition embodied in each of those negotiations that bring resources to the sites. Without a blueprint to transform the local conditions or control over the local resources, BRI nevertheless fails realism badly.

No absolutely clear method in any official document in which the NDRC goals can be achieved can be found. Hence, there is plenty of space for local adaptation. Moreover, extreme rhetorical statements that 'communication between the East and West' is 'cultural heritage *shared by all countries around the world*' and that BRI is a '*common aspiration of all countries along their routes*' are quite big assumptions. From a Confucian perspective though, these statements constitute superior moral examples posed by China. In short, the current plan is just the first stage of a developmental process, experimentation will follow along local conditions. While lacking clear rules for all to abide by attests to a problematic method, from the perspective of Confucian theory, only an attempt at substantiating political control by the purportedly ritual center can destroy the improvisational prosperity; the local actors cannot.⁴⁰

However, apologism is not sufficiently convincing to external watchers of BRI. Analyses regarding how China merely needs outlets for its surplus construction materials, squeezes competitors, e.g. India, in its expanded sphere of influence undergirded by the BRI projects, and inspires for a hegemonic kind of Eastern Marshall Plan are more and more widespread.⁴¹ Xi contrarily is able to convince his Chinese audience. Abundant and award-winning publications in China to promote the selfless image of BRI indicates how Xi's logic resonates well with the Chinese cultural logic.⁴² Given the financial capacity and the ambitious conception of the BRI, the real and ulterior, if any, purposes of its host China can only suffer contending views that make sense primarily to the narrators each embedded in their own relational world.

To summarize the above, we argue that the BRI reflects the same relational logic of China's domestic developmental model of 'directed improvisation' that obliges the recipients of resources to make and enact their own benevolent roles. In fact, as the BRI Visions and Actions plan has mentioned, the Chinese leaders seek to 'integrate' China and the BRI region. Section Three below will

39 Zhimin Chen and Junbo Jian, "Chinese Provinces as Foreign Policy Actors in Africa", China in Africa Project Occasional Paper No 22, January 2009, https://media.africaportal.org/documents/SAIIA_Occasional_Paper_no_22.pdf (Accessed 19 February 2021).

40 For instance, after the new Malaysian Prime Minister Mahatmir Mohammed called off a China-backed High Speed Rail (HSR) project on 20 August 2018, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said that China's 'friendly approach' toward Malaysia would not change; Catherine Wong, "Malaysia Big Part of Beijing's Belt and Road Vision for Future, Says Xi Jinping", *South China Morning Post*, 20 August 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2160469/debt-laden-malaysia-wants-fair-and-free-trade-china> (Accessed, 26 December 2018).

41 Srikanth Kondapalli and Xiaowen Hu (eds.), *One belt, One Road: China's Global Outreach*, New Delhi, Pentagon Press, 2017.

42 Yiwei Wang, *The Belt and Road: What Will China Offer the World in Its Rise*, Beijing, New World Press, 2016.

argue that the BRI for China constitutes an extension of the Chinese concept of *Tianxia*. As such, the joining of BRI will simultaneously mean the joining in an order or a system. However, this 'joining' does not require the 'conversion' of the 'self' into a 'Chinese' entity. Rather, joining indicates mutual acceptance and guarantees exemption from pressure to conform.

A 'Community of Common Destiny' as Post-Western Regionalism

The notion of *Tianxia* arguably defined 'Chinese' worldviews over the last 3000 years or so.⁴³ Due to the failures of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) to fend off imperialist nations the concept of *Tianxia* largely lost legitimacy.⁴⁴ *Tianxia* was discarded in favor of imported Western modernity and its adhering concepts of the nation-state and national sovereignty, mainly due to the need to invent and secure a discernable scope of Chinese territory from foreign imperialists. However, with the Chinese nation-state and most of its sovereign territory 'secured' after 1949, the need emerged to explain to the world how China looks at the world. This was the case presumably because of the practical and psychological finding that imported Western theories in various fields—economic, developmental, international relations—failed to provide the frameworks to both explain Chinese contexts and practices and to solve Chinese local problems.⁴⁵

The concept of *Tianxia*, famously brought back into the picture by Zhao Tingyang,⁴⁶ refers to the ancient Chinese world order in which China is the 'Middle Kingdom' or 'the center of the (known) world' (by China). It is therefore more a symbol of 'oneness' than a piece of land. Only since the end of the Qing Dynasty have Chinese scholars started translating the Western concept of 'the world' as '*shijie*' instead of *Tianxia*.⁴⁷ "The word *shijie*, formed from *shi* (generation or 'this life') and *jie* (circle or boundary) [...] described the modern world in which the Chinese capital ceased to be the central place of *tianxia*."⁴⁸ Instead, the 'West' became the new (exemplary) center and China moved to the periphery.⁴⁹ However, it is possible that with the control of contemporary territorial China enabling the rise of legitimacy and power in the world, its leaders and academics will reimagine China as the symbol of oneness acceptable to all again. Hence, (re)making China as the center of *Tianxia*.⁵⁰

Originally, *Tianxia* was given meanings in the diverse activities of those who ventured both intellectually and politically to make sense of an "*asymmetrical relationship* between earth and heaven".⁵¹

43 Mingming Wang, *The West as the Other: A Genealogy of Chinese Occidentalism*, Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 2014; Tingyang Zhao, *Tianxia de Dangdaixing: Shijie Zhixu de Shijian yu Xiangxiang (A Possible World of All-under-heaven System: The World Order in the Past and for the Future)*, Beijing, China Citic Press, 2016.

44 Gungwu Wang, *The Chinese State and the New Global History*, Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 2013.

45 Lin, *Demystifying the Chinese Economy*.

46 Tingyang Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi: Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun (The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of a World Institution)*, Nanjing, Jiangsu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2005; Tingyang Zhao, "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-under-Heaven' (Tian-xia)", *Social Identities*, Vol. 12, No 1, 2006, p. 29-41; Tingyang Zhao, "A Political World Philosophy in terms of All-under-Heaven (Tian-xia)", *Diogenes*, Vol. 56, No 1, 2009, p. 5-18.

47 Mingming Wang, "All Under Heaven (Tianxia): Cosmological Perspectives and Political Ontologies in pre-modern China", *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Vol. 2, No 1, 2012, p. 337-383.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 339.

49 Chih-yu Shih, "The West that is not in the West: Identifying the Self in Oriental Modernity", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 23, No 4, 2011, p. 537-560.

50 *Ibid.*

51 Wang, "All Under Heaven", p. 338.

On the one hand, this relationship was asymmetrical because of the common-sensual fact that “the earth is smaller than heaven.”⁵² On the other hand, however,

“in relation to *tianxia* as a polity, this asymmetrical relationship specifically referred to the gap between the *realistic geography* of the territorial coverage of *tianxia* as an actual political system and the *imaginary cosmography* in which *tianxia* was situated. The former is limited, whereas the latter is infinite. *Tianxia*, in other words, was a *world-scape*, built into the larger cosmology that covered earth, heaven, and everything-in-between.”⁵³

Such distinction between a *realistic geography* of *Tianxia* and an *imaginary cosmography* corresponds to Wang Gungwu’s distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘myth’ mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Over the course of Chinese history, the size of the realistic geography of *Tianxia* shifted, whereas the imaginary cosmography remained the same. *Tianxia* is therefore an inexpressible system in which all are bound to relate and in a spontaneously hierarchical way.⁵⁴ The function of mundane politics is exactly to figure out how to properly relate. This relies on improvisation in context. In practice, all improvised hierarchies can be disputed, though. Recording and assessing the various ways in which *Tianxia* was ruled was the major function of classic Chinese historiography.

This line of historiography highlights the course of Chinese history being cyclical rather than teleological.⁵⁵ Such historiography is keen on the tension between material power (*wei*), as emphasized by legalism, and virtuous humane rule (*de*), as propagated by Confucianism.⁵⁶ However, Confucian historians conclude that, in practice, one could not live without the other. After the successful unification of the Middle Kingdom under the Sui and Tang emperors, the unprecedented consensus emerged among Confucian scholars that “good government manifested itself through the concept of *te* [*de*] (virtue, *vertu*, power).”⁵⁷ Moreover, “it was the presence of this *te* [*de*] that persuaded people within and outside the empire to offer submission and accept the leadership of the Son of Heaven.”⁵⁸ Consequently, the strategies of the Tang and Song Dynasties became to use *de*, or virtuous leadership, to “persuade the world to submit to Chinese moral superiority.”⁵⁹ However, the Mongols who established the Yuan Dynasty (emphasizing the significance of *wei*), overthrew the Song Dynasty. The Yuan, in turn, focused mainly on *wei* and ignored *de*. The classic wisdom suggests that when a Dynasty focused too much on *de* and ignored *wei* (such as during the Song Dynasty), the Dynasty would fall. And vice versa, as shown above with the cases of the Qin and Yuan. It thus became a common sense for Chinese Dynasties to mind the balance between *de* and *wei*. In other words, “[t]he Mongols had reminded the subsequent dynasties of what had been the winning combination in the past [particularly the Han Dynasty], a hard core of *wei* surrounded by a soft pulp of *te*.”⁶⁰ In fact, this is something that the Chinese elite reiterated again after facing Western and Japanese imperialism in the 19th and 20th

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Chih-yu Shih, “Bound to Relate: Retheorizing International Order through Chinese Culture of Power”, Huiyun Feng and Kai He (eds.), *China’s Challenges and International Order Transition: Beyond the ‘Thucydides Trap’*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2020, p. 182-201.

55 Wang, *The West as the Other*.

56 Wang, “Early Ming Relations”.

57 Ibid., p. 43.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., p. 49.

60 Ibid.

centuries.⁶¹ "Good government manifested itself through the concept of *te [de]*", however, it was not enough to survive. When faced with foreign invaders, material 'power' (*wei*) was necessary to defend the Middle Kingdom or vassal states it had relationships with, or to punish those who did not stick to maintaining harmony within this system/family.⁶²

Given both the materialist approach during crisis and the aforementioned tendency of being inclusive and indifferent toward regime type or institutional values, not only could *Tianxia* accommodate Marxism, but it can also enable an intellectual twist that re-imagines China on the rise in the 21st century into a system of *Tianxia*. In a nutshell, all are bound to relate, except that they have to prepare proper gifts each time according to the context and the status of the other party in order to improvise, oblige, and reproduce mutual role obligations. In such a way, these discourses go beyond boundaries of 'inside' and 'outside,' 'self' and 'other,' since by existing one actually already belongs to *Tianxia*. The obvious caveat is that China is simultaneously susceptible to both sovereignty and *Tianxia*. Given that sovereignty has been the role first contrived in the 20th century for China to oppose imperialism, it defines a contemporary proper relation of *Tianxia*. In the 21st century, sovereignty is insufficient to guide the dramatically expansive influences of Chinese people. Different role relations are called for. Role conflicts emerge between lingering sovereign sensibilities and renegotiation for different role relations.

From the above, nevertheless, the skeleton of a post-Western regionalism framework can be constructed. First of all, while China-as-nation triumphs primarily upon economic development, China-as-*Tianxia* obliges its agents to aim at selfless leadership and seek to 'help out the needy,' as if, together, they share sensibilities of regionalism. Such regionalism can be substantiated by 'connectivity' through which localities can enrich themselves and be able to provide in their 'basic means of existence.' Second, China-as-*Tianxia* cannot help but be inclusive. "The Belt and Road Initiative is an economic cooperation initiative, not a geopolitical or military alliance",⁶³ Xi said at a recent seminar in Beijing celebrating the five-year anniversary of the BRI. "It is an open and inclusive process, and not about creating exclusive circles or a China club".⁶⁴ In other words, this regionalism does without a definitive scope but corresponds to the traditional idea of "show nothing left outside", so "all rulers of foreign lands could benefit".⁶⁵ However, under regionalism without borders, distribution of benevolence is inevitably contextual and judgmental, so some strategically more relevant localities (e.g. Malacca and Samudra for the Yongle Emperor, who reigned from 1402-1424) did receive more attention, but better related neighbors (Cambodia or Brunei, for instance), much less.⁶⁶

Although not without much romanticism, the BRI and the CCDM are respectively the material and discursive instruments for China to relate to the rest of the world. They assert a romantic form

61 Kai Wang, "Scientific Gentry and Socialisation of Western Science in China's Modernisation during 'Self-Strengthening' Movement (1860-1895)", *Almagest*, Vol. 9, No 1, 2018, p. 69-95; Zhuran You et al., *The Philosophy of Chinese Moral Education: A History*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

62 Suisheng Zhao, *Power Competition in East Asia: From the Old Chinese World Order to Post-Cold War Regional Multipolarity*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997.

63 Xi Jinping in Catherine Wong, "Xi Jinping says belt and road plan isn't about creating a 'China club'", *South China Morning Post*, 27 August 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2161580/xi-jinping-says-belt-and-road-plan-isnt-about-creating> (Accessed 26 December 2018).

64 Ibid.

65 Brantly Womack, "Dongfang yu Xifang de 'Tianxia' ('Tianxia' East and West)", *Jilin Daxue Shehui Kexue Xuebao (Jilin University Journal of Social Sciences)*, Vol. 51, No 2, 2011, p. 85-91.

66 Wang, "Early Ming Relations", p. 58.

of regionalism—no borders, no general rules, and yet mutually beneficial (i.e. ‘win-win’). In order to maintain China as *Tianxia*, its agents have to yield where the targets of relating show reluctance or regret (e.g., in Pakistan or Malaysia), and remain patient where disinterests prevail for the time being. Selling the idea and the project of the BRI too hard would appear self-centric. Rigidity in enforcing payment schedules indicates lack of self-restraint. Fluid and expansive regionalism, once aggressively pushed, would undermine *Tianxia* under these circumstances. In this light, European countries, for instance, can only become partners of BRI regionalism when they are ready. From a Chinese perspective, they are bound to relate eventually.

Below follows an example of how a Chinese actor tries to convince the European Union of the ‘win-win’ benefits of BRI. Six reasons follow why the EU should support the BRI by Professor Song:⁶⁷

1. BRI provides economic opportunities for both China and the EU all along the BRI: China provides low-/middle-end technology, EU high-end technology.
2. BRI facilitates trade increase between China and the EU, allowing the EU to strengthen the cohesion and legitimacy of the EU and thus lead to further unification of a “destined community”.
3. BRI shifts the “civilizational structure” from a “US-Atlantic-Western EU single core” to a “China-Eurasia hinterland-Western EU double core”. Within the latter, Europe’s status in the world will be even higher than in the former.
4. BRI passes through a large amount of poor countries (below 60% of global average GDP). The economic development of these countries will limit the pressure from immigrant streams for Europe and the spread of radical Islam over the globe.
5. BRI represents a new phase of globalization which the EU hopes will eradicate right-wing populism in the US and Europe.
6. The success of BRI will give existing multilateral institutions pressure to compete, improving their workings and giving the world new motivation to develop.

The above six points all illustrate how this particular agent imagines China to stand in the shoes of the EU (i.e. think from the perspective of the ‘Other’ and hence exhibit ‘selfless’ behavior). This is done to establish relationality between the two actors. Numbers 1 and 4 have BRI regionalism offering resources to cope with problems in Europe. Numbers 3, 5 and 6 present BRI regionalism as an alternative model that Europe can appreciate. Number 2 seeks to relate to the EU through establishing kinship ties. Adherence to such a tie would impose moral obligation on Europe to act in accordance with relational rituals so as to keep the CCDM intact.

This makes the CCDM a form of post-Western regionalism. It is similar to ‘Western’ regionalism in the sense that it practically seeks to connect localities through ‘modern’ means. However, it goes beyond ‘Western’ regionalism in the sense that for joining the BRI one does not need to ‘convert’ its own identity. On the contrary, one merely needs to (sincerely pretend to) acknowledge through ritual China qua *Tianxia*, in return for which China qua relational self will ensure the ‘autonomy’ of a locality and install benefits upon it (mainly through gift giving). Moreover, this post-Western regionalism

67 Luzheng Song, “Guandian: Ouzhou yinggai zhichi ‘Yidai, Yilu’ de liu da liyou (Opinion: Six Reasons why the EU should Support the Belt and Road Initiative)”, *BBC*, 8 May 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/world-39847203> (Accessed 26 December 2018).

also calls upon both actors of a bilateral relationship to avoid harming each other's 'core interests'. Finally, there is the spirit of directed improvisation in the sense that regions emerge and evolve only where encounters successfully take place. These are where Chinese diplomats and businesspeople can strike deals with hosting regimes each with their differing relations to constitute the mandate of the CCDM. Thus, BRI regionalism that abides by no permanent or universal rules can come and go in cycles at any particular site.

In light of the above, a statist scheme to connect China to Central and East European Countries (CEEC) through the 16+1 framework and the bilateral agreements with Greece, Italy, and Spain can be actually considered relational gift giving to preserve Europe remaining viable in its own network, something which the EU itself does not have the will or funding for, particularly after the 2008 economic crisis. An alternative perspective could be to see 16+1 as an effort to reconnect and develop formerly communist/socialist countries, in effect showing *Tianxia's* selfless character as opposed to the former Soviet Union. In fact, BRI can also be seen as 'shaming' self-centric performances past as well as present—the US (for giving up its role as the leader of globalization), the EU leadership in Brussels (for failing to develop its Eastern and Southern countries), and the former Soviet Union (for its disintegration). Otherwise, these strategies could also be a way of 'shaming' former colonizers and imperialist nations. After all, the fact that the Chinese elite now initiated BRI carries bifurcating messages, either a China successfully on top and out of the 'Century of Humiliation', leaving the Allied Forces nearly 'begging' for China's help this time, and another China ready for evaporating into formless *Tianxia*.

China as *Tianxia* needs no definite or fixed agents who come and go depending on the reception of their selfless performance. China as nation faces serious challenges, though. First and foremost is the communication issue. What happens when such 'vague guidelines' (such as the ones provided by the BRI Visions and Actions plan) are provided over national boundaries and cultural contexts where actors are culturally unprepared to conceive of reciprocal benevolence as a role obligation of theirs? Looking at 'Western' media, they are severely misunderstood. How and why should BRI watchers trust Chinese diplomats or investors and their usually authoritarian local allies? Granted that conversion may not be an option for Chinese authorities anywhere and at any level, idiosyncratic problems at each different site inevitably call for certain interventionary arrangements that would lead to charges of new imperialism or colonialism.

Second is the issue that 'the world' outside of cultural China is used to the situation of theoretically 'equal' nation states. How can *Tianxia* ever successfully convince countries unaware of its inevitability and alert the world to the moral superiority conveyed by enactment of self-restraint? Moreover, would not a respected China welcomed by allegedly failing regimes ruin the rules and liberalism that undergird the current global order? Ironically, the protection of local autonomy from intervention is for China to ensure the capacity of a regime to fulfill its role obligation that reconstitutes its relational self-identity. Such an irony actually testifies to the conviction of *Tianxia* embedded in the oneness of varieties—all being accepted by one another because all are attracted to selfless China. This is how, as the contemporary thinker Zhao Tingyang can imagine, sovereignty and *Tianxia* contribute to each other but why it is alarming to the critics who regard *Tianxia* as no more than an extremely enlarged Chinese sovereignty.

Third, the proposal of the BRI/CCDM connotes resistance to (past) 'Western' developmentalism for its problems, mainly initiated by the US and the EU, but also Russia and Japan for their

failures to maintain a region—i.e. the Soviet Union and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. As such, an all-encompassing claim of China as *Tianxia* which is discursively confused with China as national agent of *Tianxia*, immediately invites suspicion toward revisionism, not to mention the lingering territorial disputes between China and neighbors that plague their relationships. While neither the US, Japan, nor Russia have officially ‘joined’ the BRI, Japan and Russia both prefer to ‘cooperate’ with China by aligning the BRI with their own developmental projects.⁶⁸ For the US, the reason seems more that it seems stuck in its ‘bifocal’ neorealist/neoliberal lens.⁶⁹

In short, this type of post-Western regionalism faces quite considerable challenges and legitimacy issues inside and outside of territorial China. As we have argued above, this is not only a communicative or issue of understanding, but moreover that in the current global system of theoretically equal nation-states, the acceptance of one country as ritually (i.e. morally) superior is highly problematic. However, agents of *Tianxia* can adapt to local situations. Unless material strength is insufficient, the drive to stay related through gift giving may continue to rise among increasing numbers of subscribers to *Tianxia*. China as nation may fare badly in the world due to its intense and competitive self-centrism, China as *Tianxia* without such a label will continue to inspire people elsewhere.

Conclusion

This paper has constructed a rough framework of post-Western regionalism based on the ‘Chinese’ practice of directed improvisation in the shape of developmental experiences and philosophy. We have argued that the BRI should be perceived as a conceptual developmental project through which the Chinese authorities seek to bridge the gap between the ‘myth’ of a CCDM and the gradually more and more connected (open-ended) and inclusive BRI ‘reality’. We have illustrated that the primary motivation of the Chinese elites for doing so is to be acknowledged by others for its ‘moral superiority,’ albeit implicitly, due to its ‘selflessness’ and ‘inclusiveness,’ particularly when contrasted with former ‘Western’ attempts at developmentalism, thus enhancing their legitimacy. And, a system of ultimate and permanent security, peace, and harmony, which will presumably ensue upon the yielding of a bordered China to a constant process of practicing oneness, informs a romanticized motivation. By doing so, we have not only further ‘provincialized’ Europe and Western-centric IR theories such as neorealism and neoliberalism, but also contributed to research on non- and/or post-Western IR theories and Globalizing IR.

Next to this, however, due to its historical experiences facing foreign invaders (Mongols, Manchus, Western imperialists, Japan, etc.) the elite is also acutely aware of the importance of material power (*wei*) to back up its moral power (*de*), as well as sovereign institution that affirms dignity and equality. The need to defend itself against future invaders underscores the need for the Chinese leaders to make the BRI profitable as well as strategic, too. This highlights the main problematique of this state-centric post-Western regionalism: it has not yet escaped the binaries of ‘Western’ IR theory/regionalism or sovereign statehood. As such, China-as-nation continues to stress the protection of national interests instead of mutual interests, despite *Tianxia*, which serves as a constant reference to relationality as the ultimate base of survival. Consequently, rising national China humiliates its neighbors with *Tianxia* China placating them.

68 Kumakura Jun, “China’s Influence in Central Asia and Sino-Russian Relations”, Lecture at the Institute of Political Science, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan R.O.C., 4 September 2018.

69 Pan, *Knowledge, Desire, and Power in Global Politics*.

The next step will be to analyze the connection between this conceptual framework and Chinese practices along the BRI. Questions can be asked such as, 'what mix of motivation between nationalism and *Tianxia* can explain BRI regionalism, and in whose eyes?' and 'does the mix vary across issue areas, regions, and regime types, and differ with leadership changes in China and over time?'

Moreover, this post-Western regionalism model could be improved upon to make it a better fit for the contemporary world. In such a light, perhaps BRI could symbolize for China a sort of pluriversal *Tianxia* or even post-*Tianxia*, i.e. consisting of fast changing or plural moral centers in different regions and on different policy agendas. In the spirit of *Tianxia*, balance of gift giving, e.g. investments in economic corridors by different national groups with overlapping memberships, substitutes for balance of power, along with actors practicing gift-giving each of their own style.

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