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**Revisiting the Chinese World Order:
Soft Power and the Imperialism of Nation-states**

Abstract: There are unexpected convergences between the imperial Chinese order and the emergent global order. The historical evolution of forms of global domination since the end of the 19th century saw modern imperialism succeeded by what I have called ‘the imperialism of nation-states’ which represented the principal form of domination among states during much of the 20th century and in some form also through the Cold War. Despite continued warfare conducted by the US and other states, post-Cold War geopolitical dominance is said to be shaped by the pull of ‘soft power’. While soft power is an inadequate concept, it suggests a new balance between expressions of violent power and other modes of domination. I will examine the extent to which this notion—which is popular in the Chinese media-- has any purchase in understanding the rise of China.

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Excellence Forum CHINA global – ideas, values, practices

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The Excellence Forum CHINA global was established at the University of Cologne in 2017 as part of the German Excellence Initiative, involving the Universities of Cologne, Fudan, Nottingham-Ningbo and Xiamen. The *interdisciplinary research team* of the Excellence Forum believes that a Chinese-centered globalization will bring a different normative perspective to the world, one that has historical and philosophical roots in a Chinese world view of center and margins, in Chinese notions of justice, fair exchange and moral values, and in particular Chinese experiences of modernity and models of development from the 19th century onwards.

In short, we believe that Chinese globalization will globalize or universalize values, ideas and practices particular to a Chinese perspective to the world. In order to better understand the prospects of a China-centered globalization, ***we need to explore these ideas, values, and practices from a historical, philosophical, sociological and anthropological perspective.***

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Revisiting the Chinese World Order: Soft Power and the Imperialism of Nation-states

My goal is to assess the historical significance of the imperial Chinese world order, especially during the Qing period, in relation to later forms of global imperial domination. My argument is not a historicist one suggesting that the present expansion of Chinese power and influence in the One Belt One Road policy (*yilu yidai* OBOR, officially translated as Belt Road Initiative, BRI) is somehow a return to those conceptions. Rather, I suggest that there are unexpected convergences between the imperial Chinese order and the emergent global order, including what I call the imperialism of nation-state and the role of soft power.

The Qing imperial order was very different from both Westphalian-Vatellian, Panchsheela, and Cold War orders. As is well known, it was not a system of theoretically equal states, but a paternalistic, hierarchical order based on tribute. The Westphalian system was formulated theoretically on the equality and non-interference between *recognized* states; in practice these states were highly intrusive in each other's affairs, territorially competitive and dominating. As far as the non-Western world was concerned, imperialism and plunder tended to dominate the relationship between sovereign Western states and the rest. The competitiveness for global resource control, combining both the above factors, generated the two World Wars of the 20th century.

There has been a historical evolution of forms of global domination since the end of the 19th century that I will try to trace here in order to grasp the contemporary Chinese order, poised uncertainly between the logics of the older imperial Chinese order and the more recent

logic impelled by capitalist nation-states. After a brief discussion of modern imperialism, I will move on to what I have called ‘the imperialism of nation-states’ which represented the principal form of domination among states during much of the 20th century and show how it continued in some form through the Cold War. Despite continued warfare conducted by the US and other states, post-Cold War geopolitical dominance is said to be shaped by the pull of ‘soft power.’ In the second part of the essay, I will examine the extent to which this notion—which is popular in the Chinese media-- has any purchase in understanding the rise of China.

The Imperialism of Nation States

During the nineteenth century, as Eric Hobsbawm and Hannah Arendt have argued, imperialism was largely the business of competitive nation-states and nationalism was mobilized to further their interests; but by the twentieth century, *nationalism had become the driving force behind imperialism*. Arendt commented that imperialists appeared as the best nationalists because they claimed to stand above the reality of national divisiveness and represent the glory of the nation.¹ While nationalism represented the incentive of glorious recognition and resources to drive global competition, it also entailed the granting of the rights of citizenship and the obligations of discipline to enable the nation-state to transform itself into a sleek competitive body. In the process, imperialism not only became an important goal for some nationalisms, it also became an important means of the formation of this nationalism.

Even as nationalism became the principal driver of imperialism, the theory of nationalism, in the words of Lord Acton—became its own principal enemy. The late-comer competitors of the premier imperialist powers of Britain and France, including Germany,

Russia, America and Japan were fired by nationalism in their quest for global resources and power, and the turn of the century saw the massive stirrings of nationalism in the colonized and semi-colonized world. Until then, the great imperial powers of Britain and France had established their cultural hegemony in the colonial world with the idea of the *civilizing mission*. V S Naipaul described this project thus, “The Europeans wanted gold and slaves, like everybody else; but at the same time they wanted statues put up to themselves as people who had done good things for the slaves. Being an intelligent and energetic people, and at the peak of their powers, they could express both sides of their civilization; and they got both the slaves and the statues.”

But World War I wrought great disillusionment on the idea of the “civilizing mission.” “The nature of the battle on the Western Front made a mockery of the European conceit that discovery and invention were necessarily progressive and beneficial to humanity,” writes Michael Adas.ⁱⁱ The final triumph of nationalism or national self-determination over imperialism as the hegemonic global ideology was clinched by two political developments: the Soviet revolution and Woodrow Wilson’s advocacy of the right to national self-determination in the aftermath of World War I.ⁱⁱⁱ

The discrediting of imperialism led even the most hardened colonial powers to change their techniques of imperial domination. In Britain, Joseph Chamberlain’s neo-mercantilist ideas of colonial development (which had been largely ignored before the war) and of “imperial preference” began to be taken more seriously. But as a consequence of entrenched ideas of colonial self-sufficiency, post-war capital needs at home, and, not least, demands for

protection by British industry, only once before 1940 did expenditure on colonial development creep above 0.1% of British gross national product.^{iv}

The post-World War I transformation of French attitudes toward the colonies was summed up by Albert Lebrun: the goal was now to “unite France to all those distant Frances in order to permit them to combine their efforts to draw from one another reciprocal advantages.”^v But while the French government extended imperial preference and implemented reforms, particularly with reference to legal and political rights in Africa during the 1930s, investments in economic and social development projects were insignificant until the creation of the Investment Fund for Economic and Social Development in 1946. Both evolutionist ideas of backward races (and their incapacity for modernity) as well as protectionist pressures from agrarian society served as impediments to development.^{vi}

Late-comers and the Imperialism of Nations

The most radical ideas and technologies for embedding the quest for power within a new *global* ideology – of nationalism—was developed by the late-comer competitors and most systematically, as we will see, by Japan. The United States, in part because of the consciousness of its own colonial past, and with the exception of a few places (most notably, the Philippines), had long practiced imperialism without colonialism. After the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States created a system of client states around the Caribbean basin in Central America. These nominally independent states became increasingly dependent on the United States, which accounted for more than three-fourths of the region’s foreign trade as well as the bulk of foreign investment.

During the decade of the 1920s, when Japan was experimenting with indirect imperialism in Manchuria, the United States too was seeking to develop and refine informal control over Central American countries, especially as it faced revolutionary nationalism in the region. Officials, diplomats, and business groups stressed means such as U.S. control of banking, communication facilities, investments in natural resources, and the development of education—particularly the training of elites in American-style constitutions, ‘free elections,’ and orthodox business ideas. But the threat and reality of military intervention remained close at hand.^{vii}

The Bolsheviks—including Stalin, who would famously work from the 1920s to curtail their autonomy-- were theoretically committed to the rights of nations to self-determination based on the right to secede.^{viii} The Bolshevik position on national self-determination entailed territorial autonomy *without* party autonomy. Communist parties in the non-Russian territories were not particularly nationalized, and the Soviet goal was to subordinate national loyalties to “proletarian” (i.e., party) interests. Japanese empire builders in the 1930s were quick to study the Soviet model of the multi-national state for Manchukuo. To these observers, Soviet nationality policy fulfilled the goals of federalism and protected minority rights while at the same time strengthening the power of the Soviet state. Thus, nationalism was not suppressed but utilized positively for the goals of the state.^{ix} Although for different reasons, the strategies of utilizing nationality policy for state control failed in both Manchukuo and the Soviet Union.

Of course, the Soviet Union practically prevented secession until the very end. But according to Rogers Brubaker, it did a great deal to institutionalize territorial nationhood and

ethnic nationality as fundamental categories of political and personal understanding. The Soviet strategy was to contain, control, and even harness different sources of dissent by creating national-territorial structures of administrative control and fostering loyal national elites (including mobilizing modernizing women against the socially conservative men in some Central Asian Republics). The Soviet state may have said to have produced both quasi-nation states and ethnic nationalities where there were often none before.^x Ironically, it ended up fostering national consciousness in places where it had been very weak or non-existent, often at the expense of identification with the Soviet Union which never succeeded in generating its own narrative or symbolism of nationhood.

The Japanese Empire

But it was in Japan that this approach was most systematically developed. While pan-Asianism had emerged of its own, it was encouraged as an ideology incorporating Japan's distinctive role as both victim and victimizer in the imperialist game; this ideology permitted the Japanese the conceit that they were obliged to lead the Asian nations against the West. Such claims were, however, belied by the vigorous nationalism of Asian peoples against the Japanese. In response to this complicated scenario, Japanese colonial bureaucrats, military officers, and intellectuals in the 1920s began to experiment with modes of association and alliance that would reinvent empire and nation.

Japan's imperial ideology during the Pacific War was summed up for the empire and the world in the "East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" which was, in theory, built upon independent nations and nationalities unified by an economically integrated Yen zone and dominated by the imperial military. Perhaps the most coherent of the experiments that

culminated in this mode of imperial expansion was conducted in the puppet state of Manchukuo. Manchukuo sought to synthesize the 1912 Chinese Republican idea of Five Nationalities (itself a mode of federating recalcitrant parts of the Qing empire) with the Soviet theory of nationalities within Manchuria.

As noted, Japanese empire builders in Manchukuo were very attentive to Soviet strategy. By allegedly granting different peoples or nationalities their rights and self-respect under a state structure, Manchukuo presented itself as a nation-state in the mode of the Soviet “union of nationalities.” Japanese policy makers saw Soviet nationalities policy as one that fulfilled the goals of federalism and protected minority rights, while at the same time it strengthened Soviet state and military power particularly with regard to “separatists” in the old Tsarist Empire. ^{xi}

While the Japanese empire represented a brutal mode of imperialist expansion, it is important to note that the changes it brought about presaged in many ways, the modes of domination during the Cold War. First, the occupied areas were designated as nations and peoples as nationalities. This entailed having locals occupy government positions at all levels with shadow Japanese officers and military personnel at critical levels. Civic, social and cultural groups were often organized into state mandated and regulated categories. In some places, mobilizational groups resembling the communist or fascist ‘youth’ or ‘women’s wings’ were established.

Second, the new imperialism emphasized the idea of developmentalism. The vision of Matsuoka Yosuke, who argued the Japanese case for the independence of Manchukuo from China at the League of Nations in 1933, transcended the old imperialist game of dealing with

native allies merely to gain concessions and privileges. Rather, his goal was to bring the puppet government, principally through financial and military ties, firmly under Japanese control, and subsequently to pursue economic policies for developing Manchuria as a whole. Development was to take place not by excluding Chinese and others but by encouraging them to contribute to the prosperity of the region. The Japanese, who were presumed to be the principal actors and natural leaders of this effort, could only benefit from this general development.^{xii}

After the establishment of Manchukuo, the Japanese exploitation of colonies such as Korea was accompanied by increases in productive capacity. As the Korean economist Sub Park has demonstrated, while Indian growth between 1900 and 1946 was under 1% annually, the yearly mean growth rate of gross domestic production in Korea was 3% from 1915 to 1940.^{xiii} The accumulated per capita British investment in India and Japanese investment in Korea were eight dollars and thirty-eight dollars, respectively, in 1938.^{xiv} The imperialism of nation-states reflected a strategic reorientation of the (colonial) periphery to be part of an organic formation designed to attain global supremacy for the imperial power.

Thus, if the ‘civilizing mission’ emblemized the old style of cultural imperialism – based on the colonizer’s desire to emulate, the new *imperialism of nation-states* was built on a cultural paradigm of theoretical equivalence of nations based on common or similar institutions, economic models, and rhetoric of brotherhood or family ties. Nonetheless, military and financial power remained at the base of the Japanese imperium as much as it did in the US and Soviet Cold War empires. It simply became more efficient or effective for the imperialists to foster *modern* and *indirectly* controlled institutions in their dependencies. The

aim was to control these areas by dominating the levers of mobilization, such as banks, the transportation infrastructure, and political institutions, which were created to resemble those of the metropole (such as legislative councils, institutions of political tutelage, and political parties like the communist parties or the Concordia in Manchukuo).^{xv} In short, unlike British free trade imperialism, several interwar imperialists attended to the modernization of institutions and identities. They often espoused cultural or ideological similarities—including sometimes anti-colonial ideologies—even while racism and nationalism accompanied the reality of military-political domination.

The Cold War

The competition among the superpowers during the Cold War presents us with the lens to analyze the imperialism of nation-states and soft power. In the era of the United Nations, domination and the means to ‘get others to want the outcome you want’ had to do its work through the framework of national sovereignty which was no easy task. Military and, to a lesser extent, economic controls, to be sure, remained the bases of superpower dominance. But the resistance to their global dominance even among their allies or clients from Vietnam to Marcos’s Philippines and from Prague to Afghanistan was in fair evidence. At the same time, when it did work, it also had a great deal to do with the military, financial and political framework that had been established to maintain that dominance and not simply with soft power.

Although it became more fully developed in the period after WWII, the Soviet Union’s creation of a regional system of militarily dependent states in Eastern Europe reflected many features of the new imperialism. A shared anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist

ideology sanctioned a centralized economic and political system. The Soviet Union combined economic leverage and military threat to integrate what were often states more economically developed than itself into a regional economy. In some ways, the imperialism of the Soviet Union revealed the counter-economic consequences of this logic of empire. Not only were the client-states of the Soviet Union in Europe often more developed, the U.S.S.R. may have been subsidizing their economies by supplying them with cheap oil and raw materials while importing finished products from their economies. This was the price paid by the imperial power to create and maintain dependence upon it and ensure its security.^{xvi}

The role of the US as a superpower during the Cold War may be understood in terms of its interests, military violence as well as its *designs of enlightenment*. Carl Parrini has added another factor which he calls ‘ultraimperialism.’ The latter refers to U.S. efforts to maintain cooperation and reduce conflict among imperialist nations who were busily scrambling to create monopolistic or exclusive market conditions in various parts of the world during the first half of the twentieth century.^{xvii} ‘Ultraimperialism’ is secured by a chain of military bases around the globe—and structures such as the International Monetary Fund, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and World Bank—to enable the conditions of cooperation among advanced capitalist powers and to facilitate the new (developmental or modernizing) imperialism in the decolonized world. With the Cold War, the US developed a global empire employing, in the words of Arrighi, et. al, a vast system of ‘political and military vassalage’ and fostering a ‘functional specialization between the imperial and vassal (*nation*) states....’ (301)^{xviii} The empire was fortified by a chain of about 1700 military bases in over a hundred nation-states that had varying degrees of clientelist ties to it. These

garrisons were strategic enclaves supervised by the Pentagon and sustained by--as much as they sustained-- a vast military industrial complex. In this respect, the post-war United States represents the apogee of the imperialism of nation-states.^{xix}

My point is not that the Cold War represents the essence of imperialism. Rather, we cannot understand the Cold War fully without analyzing how the historical relationship between imperialism and nationalism came to be configured anew in the post-war circumstances. Imperialism no longer emphasized conquest on the basis of innate differences among peoples and their inevitable destinies of superiority and exploitation. Moreover, as noted, it was development oriented and there were opportunities for Cold War allied states to move up the economic ladder, chiefly by investments, technology and knowledge transfer and easy access to US markets for those with the capacity to produce for it.

To be sure, the post-war international order was not only dominated by the Cold War powers and their allies. The new nation-states sought to form a non-aligned sector which remained extremely weak during this period. However, in Asia a new type of inter-state relationship by the name of Panchasheela was adumbrated by the Indians, Chinese and the Indonesians. Panchasheela was a kind of Westphalian agreement for the postcolonial states where states would respect each other's territorial integrity and not intervene in their affairs. Given that there were few non-nation states left in the world, the question of agreements regarding colonial domination did not arise. Most aspirations for national independence or separation emerged within the territories of these new nation-states such as Kashmir or Tibet. But even without direct imperialism, the Westphalian practices of intrusiveness, territorial and resource competition did not by any means disappear.

Soft Power and/or the Imperialism of Nation-states

The concept of ‘soft power’ has gained much traction in the post-Cold War era and we will explore its explanatory potential for contemporary international relations. On first sight we note that the imperialism of nations also involved considerable soft power, particularly in the case of the US. Among the Asian client or dependent states of the US, there were great discursive and attitudinal transformations— whether through popular culture, American university education or the institutions of democracy.

At the same time, the underlying military and economic power of the superpower makes it difficult to distinguish this form from the cultural imperialism of nation-states. The imperialism (of nation-states) lay in the imposition of *designs for enlightenment* upon emergent nations by an enormously superior national power backed by military force. These enlightenment designs were often shot through with paternalism, national interests and covert racist prejudices that constantly produced contradictions and tensions. Indeed, one could argue, that it was this configuration of national imperialism that led to resistance to both the Soviet Union (contributing to its decline) as well as the United States in many parts of the world.

Joseph Nye has several descriptions of what he calls soft power and it is not easy to get a coherent view of it. At one place, Nye defines ‘soft power’ as “getting other countries to want the outcomes that a particular country wants—coopts people rather than coerce them” (4-5).^{xx} This is actually a more stringent definition than many other statements by Nye and others about soft power being about the desirability of a power’s cultural and political institutions and “the ability to entice and attract” others to it. While there may be some causal

relationship between the two factors, desiring the goodies of another country does not mean yielding to its political will. Indeed, this is what nationalism is all about.

To be sure, Nye's 2004 book *Soft Power* suggests that the thrust of his work is to critique the G W Bush administration and the Neocon failure to secure a sufficient consensus or even coalition in making the decision to attack Iraq. The work points to the *non-deployment* of US soft power to win allies in Iraq and internationally which could have functioned to win the peace. While this is a worthwhile critique, the notion of soft power appears here to be reduced to the quest for legitimate engagement or legitimacy. There is only a remote connection to the other stuff of soft power—educational and administrative exchanges, Hollywood, democratic institutions, etc.

Besides, the Iraq case states the problem negatively: how soft power was not utilized. There does not appear to be a substantive instance of how soft power was positively utilized in the book (except perhaps during the Marshall Plan which point, however, is not developed). The causes of the end of the Cold War can be attributed to the soft power of the US in a very diffuse and contentious way. All successful instances of soft power, such as the Marshall Plan, Cold War Pacific Asia, were also based on prior military control or dependence on military.

Moreover, this prior dominance allowed the creation of similar institutions which fostered a similarity of interests and goals between *elites* in the metropolitan and dependent and allied societies. It would appear that co-opting the people to want your outcomes often takes place *post-factum*: after the hard intervention has been made, and soft power is used to mollify and accommodate key allies. It leads me to believe that hard power – military and

economic – is an important if not invariable condition of soft power. The question, in other words, is what combination of hard and soft power is necessary to get “other countries to want (its) outcomes.” When does that combination *not* work?

Although it is from a very different period and context, in some of its structural features explored below, the Chinese imperial order can be seen as an exercise of soft power. Can we conceive of a Chinese soft power? Can a power convey a sense of ‘fair exchange’, of providing desirable goods and values without the threat of overwhelming military and financial power? If so, how will it be established?

The Imperial Chinese World Order (Qing 1644-1911)

I propose that we consider Chinese imperial tribute practices as a Wittgensteinian ‘language game’ that is opposed to the idea of a system which presupposes stabilities, repetition, rules, abstract principles and essences.^{xxi} Language games are not well-bounded systems constituted by a single principle or doctrine—say of sovereignty-- but open-ended. Rules, norms and codes (which are learned) are provisional, capacious and flexible.

Moreover, different games do not have the common essence of ‘games’ but are recognizable by *family resemblances* of overlapping codes and practices. Thus, for instance when the Qing emperors performed the roles of both the Bodhisattva Manjusri, as well as the patron who descends to meet his spiritual mentor the Dalai Lama half-way, the Tibetans and Qing were engaged in overlapping language games (the ambiguity of which would become problematic in a different epistemic context of sovereign states). All this is of course, different from his role as the Son of Heaven or having treaties signed on his behalf (such as the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689, which approached the principle of Westphalian sovereignty). We may

think of the East Asian tribute order as a complex language game which incorporated various modes of ritual and other performative procedures with diverse and *changing* roles for the players. Note that the Chinese Song dynasty (10-12th centuries) also had to deliver large values of tribute to the Khitan (Liao) and the Tanggut (Xi Xia).

The kind of flexibility granted by these performative procedures permitted a number of advantages to the parties, their economic interests and the political values that were involved. In the imperial Chinese rhetoric, tribute, paid by states and communities peripheral to China, was an expression of the subordination of these groups to the imperial state, in return for which the emperor bestowed gifts upon the tribute bearers. However, as Hamashita Takeshi has shown, in practice it represented a wider web that did not involve merely the relationship between China and the tribute bearer, but a host of “several other lesser or satellite tribute relationships not directly concerning China and forming a considerable more complex system of reciprocal relationships.”^{xxii}

By the middle of the Qing dynasty in the 18th century, tribute trade became meshed with this wider trading order. Commercial transactions based on the price structure in China became intertwined with tributary relationships. For instance, private trade between Thailand and South China was fueled by profits from tributary missions, but when trade in this region declined, traders in South China were able to switch to trading alongside other tributary missions, for example, missions from Ryukyu to Nagasaki. Even earlier, when the Song had to pay tribute to Khitan and Tanggut (10-12th), its superior economic power ensured that the great amounts of silver and silk paid to these “barbarian” states was exceeded by the silver

and cash the Chinese gained in return for their merchandise exports to these states (through trade made possible by the tributary mechanism).

During the Ming, China was the ‘global sink’ for silver which became the primary medium of exchange both internal to China as well as regionally and globally. The entire tribute-trade zone became loosely integrated through the use of silver as a medium for settling China’s trade surpluses. Key to this development was the huge demand for Chinese goods outside China, the demand for silver within China (especially for tax payments) and the difference in prices inside and outside China. Economic opportunities were for a long time sufficient to keep most of those involved—even the East Indian Company—vested in the tributary mode until the British government replaced its monopoly of the China trade in 1833. Arguably, the flexibility of the tribute order enabled the interlacing of cultural and economic goals for various players without significant use of military violence.

This is hardly to say that military violence was absent. The Ming naval expeditions led by Admiral Zheng He in the first part of the 15th century, forced tribute, captured slaves and even a king in Sri Lanka in a bid to demonstrate the power of the Chinese emperor. However, such military authority over the sea route was not maintained beyond a brief window in the 15th century. Nor did China control the land routes over Central Asia; these routes were controlled by nomadic groups.

Rather one might say that Chinese military power outside the empire was mostly expressed as expeditions undertaken largely as punitive measures against bordering states, including Korea, or tribes who often harassed and threatened the empire at its periphery. For example, during the 18th century, the Burmese state conducted raids along the southwestern

frontier. This prompted several punitive military expeditions with mixed results.^{xxiii} Military campaigns were often very expensive and were designed principally to stabilize the tribute order and manage the bordering states rather than for colonial and territorial expansion beyond the empire.

The restricted, albeit ultimately credible, use of military power and the more important economic, financial and political-cultural dimensions of the tribute trade zone suggests the possibility of thinking of this mode as the exercise of soft-power. If we can conceive of OBOR/BRI as combining culture and economics of investment and trade with an apparently cooperative and light military presence, it could well be comparable to the Chinese imperial tribute system of the last millennium. Can the contemporary Chinese strategy express a ‘neo-traditional soft power’?

Promise and Perils of BRI as neo-traditional Soft Power

Of course, as a modern nation-state with great power ambitions, the goals and imperatives of the Chinese state have undergone a revolutionary transformation. The same conditions of capitalism, nationalism and statism did not exist in the imperial era. As is well known, OBOR/BRI represents a massive expansion of Chinese economic investments in infrastructure partnerships including high speed railroads, telecommunications, new ports, energy cooperation. This has been facilitated by the Exim Bank and the newer Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2015 to enhance investment and development of the region from China’s reserve of its 3 trillion US dollars’ treasure-chest.

China, which has taken a great interest in soft power debates, places a significant role for culture in this initiative. Chinese leaders have taken historical memories as their launching

pad. Invoking the ancient Silk Road at the start of the Chinese “One Belt One Road’ (OBOR) policy in the fall of 2013 on a visit to Central Asia, President Xi Jinping said, “My home, Shaanxi province, is the start of the ancient Silk Road. I can almost hear the ring of the camel bells and smell the wisps of smoke in the desert.” In his speech to the Boao Forum for the Asia Annual Conference in 2015, Xi declared that the Belt and Road will “promote inter-civilization exchanges to build bridges of friendship for our people, drive human development and safeguard peace in the world.”

The Central Asian Belt remains particularly important in Chinese thinking of BRI because as Wang Jisi of Peking University declared, “Not only is Central Asia rich in natural resources and ripe for investment, an “anti-China alliance” led by US is unlikely to be formed because of diversity of powers and interests”. Tim Winter has suggested that the various countries on this road from Kazakhstan to Iran, to Turkey and the Gulf states have started to develop their heritage sites—each striving to get as many sites on the World Heritage list-- on the Silk Road to enhance their status and craft contemporary commercial and political strategies on this emergent platform.^{xxiv} Although the historical reality of the overland Silk Road was also marred by warfare and disease, the image promoted in these countries is that it represents the legacy of peace and prosperity.

In general, BRI may be seen as a principally cultural and economic approach to the earlier strategic Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) founded in 2001 and consisting originally of the Russian Federation and Central Asian republics. China’s SCO initiative was designed to increase military, counterterrorist and anti-separatist cooperation in the region, but BRI encompasses these strategic considerations under a much wider plan that covers not

only the ‘one belt’ across Central Asia to Europe but also ‘one road (*sic*)’, the maritime route that historically linked Eurasia from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea.

According to William Callahan, Xi Jinping’s foreign policy embodied in BRI is a vision of a Sinocentric world order contained in the rhetoric of a ‘community of shared destiny’ (*gongtong mingyunti*). It is a comprehensive plan integrating domestic needs, relations with neighboring countries and other partners. The goal is to weave these countries into a network of economic, political, cultural and security order that reflects China’s vision of global governance that includes its norms and rules. It is thus a deeper version of soft power that builds upon infrastructural investments and finance. At the same time, this vision is informed by non-liberal ideals of harmony and authority that is non-contentious if not non-pluralistic. ^{xxv}

At the same time, Chinese investments abroad – whether state-owned or private--have tended to be extractive and energy hungry. It is also alleged that investments in mammoth logistical and infrastructural ventures have tended to by-pass the interests of local communities, favoring state elites. Chinese state corporations are seen to be hand-in-glove with crony capitalists particularly in states with weak governance structures and civil society. Moreover, Chinese investors will have to tread very carefully across minefields of local conflicts, civil wars, extremism and separatist movements.

An important case in point is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which was formally signed in 2014. Chinese authorities are still reeling from the shocks that their engagement with Pakistan have generated. Pakistan is a lynchpin in the initiative because it is the crossroads of BRI, linking the Central Asian belt with the maritime road through the new

port city of Gwadar. But, as Robert Bianchi has shown, the Chinese did not bargain for the difficulties in dealing with the contentious pluralism of Pakistani political society. Caught between ethnic, tribal, regional, fundamentalist and civilian-military disputes, the blueprints of Chinese investments of over 50 billion US dollars have had to be re-drafted to satisfy different segments while still producing dissatisfaction among those who are left out and expected to bear the future debts.^{xxvi}

While Pakistan may represent a more extreme instance, these same trends have and will be reflected in several other countries, especially where civil society is active. In Sri Lanka, where Chinese companies are building massive, and as yet little used, infrastructural and port facilities in Hambantota and Colombo, indebtedness is already a very troubled political issue. While on the one hand, the Chinese will gain important experience in management of Asian societies different from theirs, some of these problems may endanger Chinese projects and plans.

My goal in this presentation is not to assess the merits and demerits of BRI which will require a detailed and wide study. It is rather to assess the ways in which military violence and other forms of hard power such as deep and disruptive state indebtedness and dependence on China may be involved as China expands its economic and political-cultural presence across the world. To what extent can a sense of fair exchange and mutual benefit prevail as China's power and influence grows? To be sure, the details of BRI agreements and its effects on a country, its people and the environment will be extremely important to answer this question. For instance, will China export its hi-tech connective sector or its energy-intensive, overcapacity sectors?^{xxvii} At this point, however, I will simply outline some of the contexts

and parameters in which the inter-play of hard and soft power is involved in the spread of Chinese supremacy.

BRI in Southeast Asia

Beyond Central Asia, Southeast Asia is a valuable site to gauge the effects of China's neighborhood strategies. Long before BRI, during the 1990s, China had begun to cultivate very good relations with ASEAN, managing ethnic relations between Chinese (a critical investment group in China's development in the 1990s) and non-Chinese with sensitivity. China's relation with integrating Asia was dramatically enhanced during the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998 when China did not de-value its currency. This restraint was particularly meaningful because the region felt abandoned by the flight of Western capital and helpless in the face of unsympathetic Western criticism and stringent IMF policies imposed upon their straitened economies. Subsequently in October 2003, China was the first country to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN, indicating a commitment to participate by the norms set by ASEAN. Fifteen years since the Asian crisis, China is the largest importer of Southeast Asian products and an increased number of Chinese students preferred to pursue degrees in Southeast Asia rather than in the US.

Despite steadfast support from Cambodia, China has lost much of the goodwill and trust that it had built up in ASEAN. The most obvious reason for this is the geopolitical tension over the South China Sea that has been building up since 2012 and which needs no description. More puzzling, of course, is why this new aggressive attitude has built up now and why China does not care about alienating the core of ASEAN. All that seems to be known is that domestic and global geopolitical considerations are both implicated in the

militarization of the sea. Less conspicuous but perhaps more damaging to China's image in the hinterland of Southeast Asia is the involvement of Chinese hydropower in the construction of gargantuan dams on the Lancang/Mekong and Nu/Salween rivers as well as on the Brahmaputra in the Himalayas. This is beginning to take an enormous toll on the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of communities who live by these rivers and even more on the environmental damage caused by disrupting the natural flows of the rivers. Experts warn that colossal security disasters made up of food shortages, destruction of livelihoods and irregular movements of people could—and have already-- eventuate in violence and civil war.

While governments in these regions are more willing to compromise with these hydropower companies (because of the energy harvest), it is the large-scale protests of civil society groups –both local and international—and their persistent activism in both Yunnan and SE Asia that has stopped several projects and alarmed the establishment on both sides of the Chinese border. Perhaps the most effective of these was the Myitsone dam being built in Myanmar in 2011 when a coalition of dozens of Myanmar NGOs with the blessings of Aung San Suu Kyi forced the termination of the Chinese project. The small proxy wars along the Myanmar border conducted by the Chinese also do not bode well for future relations. China has undertaken several other large-scale logistics and infrastructural projects in Southeast Asia which also show mixed results. For instance, the high-speed railroad that it wants to construct across Southeast Asia has faced resistance even from the Laotian government which has for several years been protesting what they say are excessive Chinese demands and unfavourable financing conditions for its construction.

Under these circumstances, to what extent can the cultural, economic and political flexibility displayed in the imperial Chinese tribute framework prevail over militaristic, nationalistic and expansionist ambitions of some groups in the Chinese political system? The 2016 South China Sea ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague is a test not only of the extent of China's expansionist aspirations but also the pushback by a world steaming with (national) rights consciousness. If similar militarist, expansionist and extractive tendencies prevail in the overland silk route, the pushback is likely to be more extreme and less predictable. Indeed, China will have to begin by re-examining its role within its national boundaries. The increased militancy in Uighur Xinjiang, caused largely by the increased demographic and cultural Sinicization of the province, has also aroused Turkic nationalism in several parts of Central Asia and Turkey.

China: Options for the Future

To what extent can the cultural, economic and political flexibility of the imperial Chinese tribute framework prevail over militaristic, nationalistic and expansionist ambitions? China is not playing in the same world as fifty years ago when the US was able to combine its cultural soft power with military and economic infra-power. Unquestionably, China will continue to 'walk on two legs' to apply a Maoist phrase. Soft power, including infrastructural development and economic diplomacy will proceed even while military flexing and threats will be undertaken in some zones. Sooner or later China will be called upon to secure its investments and commitments.^{xxviii} In the age of many deterrents to open warfare, the military component will probably also be found in proxy wars: outsourced either to allies, mercenaries, rebels and terrorists.

In a second scenario, soft power, economic negotiation and diplomacy will play a greater role. Recently, it has been noted that the Chinese state-owned companies are responding to demands from civil society where they are organized and push back on agreements deemed unfair. This is happening in parts of Southeast Asia such as in the Irrawaddy zone or the Mekong region and also in parts of Africa. Where such pressure is not organized, such as in Central Asia, Chinese companies can ignore local interests. In a multi-polar world with constraints on its military power, China will have to deploy its soft power to ‘influence outcomes’ among other nations with financial and economic leverage and a sense of fair exchange. If China can pull off such modalities of dealing with other nations, not only can we expect the peaceful rise of China, but the idea of ‘soft power’ will have much greater value and purchase, as it were.

ⁱ See Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Program, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990: 102; and Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973: 152–53.

ⁱⁱ Michael Adas, “The Great War and the Decline of the Civilizing Mission,” in *Autonomous Histories: Particular Truths*, ed. Laurie Sears. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 109.

ⁱⁱⁱ Geoffrey Barraclough, *Introduction to Contemporary History*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967. 118–22.

^{iv} Stephen Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy, 1914–1940*, London: Frank Cass, 1984: 25, 276; Michael Havinden and David Meredith, *Colonialism and Development: Britain and its Tropical Colonies, 1850–1960*, London: Routledge, 1993: 148–59.

^v As quoted in D. Bruce Marshall, *The French Colonial Myth and Constitution-making in the Fourth Republic*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973: 44.

^{vi} Marshall, *French Colonial Myth*, 48, 224–26.

^{vii} Robert Freeman Smith, ‘Republican Policy and the Pax Americana, 1921-1932,’ in William Appleman Williams, ed., *From Colony to Empire: Essays in the History of American Foreign Relations* (New York: John Wiley, 1972), 273-275.

^{viii} J. V. Stalin *Marxism and the National Question* Transcribed by Carl Kavanagh. *Prosveshcheniye*, Nos. 3-5, March-May 1913.

^{ix} Tominaga Tadashi, *Manshūkoku no minzoku mondai* Shinkyō , 1943, 43-45.

^x Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 18-24.

^{xi} Tadashi Tominaga, *Manshūkoku no Minzoku Mondai*, Shinkyō: Manshu Tomiyamabo, 1943: 43–45.

^{xii} Yoshihisa Tak Matsusaka, *The Making of Japanese Manchuria*, 285. For similar views of Pan-Asianist economic and political thinkers see the essays on Sugimoro Kojirō and Rōyama Masamichi in Sven Saaler and J. Victor Koschmann ed, *Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History: Colonialism, Regionalism and Borders* Routledge, London and New York, 2007.

^{xiii} Sub Park, “Exploitation and Development in Colony: Korea and India,” *Korean Journal of Political Economy* 1, 1 (2003): 5.

^{xiv} Sub Park, “Exploitation and Development,” 19.

^{xv} Further, creating similar institutions fostered a similarity of interests and goals between elites in the metropolitan and dependent societies. Thus Latin American societies have found it difficult to sustain socialist states or even large-scale public expenditures without incurring the disfavor of the United States, and the Soviet Union would not tolerate “market-happy” bourgeoisies. Manchukuo too began to resemble (and in several instances, led) the military-dominated *dirigiste* economy and centralized political system that developed in Japan beginning in the 1930s.

^{xvi} See Paul Marer and Kazimierz Z. Poznanski, “Costs of Domination, Benefits of Subordination,” in *Dominant Powers and Subordinate States: The United States in Latin America and the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe*, ed. Jan F. Triska, 371–99, Durham: Duke University Press, 1986.

^{xvii} Carl Parrini, ‘The Age of Ultraimperialism,’ *Radical History Review*, 57 (1993), 7–9.

^{xviii} Giovanni Arrighi, Po-keung Hui, Ho-fung Hung and Mark Selden, “Historical Capitalism, East and West” in G. Arrighi, T. Hamashita, and M. Selden, eds., *The Resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 Year Perspectives*. (London: Routledge, 2003), 259-333.

^{xix} Chalmers Johnson *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the end of the Republic* Henry Holt, New York, 2004, 23-37.

^{xx} Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* Public Affairs, 2004.

^{xxi} Ludwig Wittgenstein (2001) [1953]. *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell Publishing. I have also been influenced by Jean-Francois Lyotard's understanding of language games; see his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). Trans. of *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

^{xxii} Hamashita Takeshi, 1994. "The Tribute Trade System and Modern Asia" in AJH Latham and Heita Kawakatsu eds, *Japanese Industrialization and the Asian Economy* Routledge: London and New York pp 91-103.

^{xxiii} Zhou Fangyin, "Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System" *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, 2011, 147–178 doi:10.1093/cjip/por005

^{xxiv} Tim Winter "One Belt, One Road, One Heritage: Cultural Diplomacy and the Silk Road" *The Diplomat* March 29, 2016.

^{xxv} William A Callahan "China's "Asia Dream": The Belt Road Initiative and the new regional order" *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 2016, Vol. 1(3) 226–243 DOI: 10.1177/2057891116647806

^{xxvi} Robert Bianchi, *China's Statecraft in the Islamic World: The New Silk Road and the Rise of Afro-Eurasia* Forthcoming, Oxford Univ. Press.

^{xxvii} See for instance ***Why Build Kenya's First Coal Plant? Hint: Think China***
https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/27/climate/coal-kenya-china-power.html?emc=edit_mbae_20180227&nl=&nid=60001475&te=1

^{xxviii} Of course, the issue of enforcement of debt payments may loom largest in this era, as we have seen in the case of Greece and the EU and the current trade war between the US and China where US indebtedness to China is critical. This is a different subject that cannot be addressed here.