This article examines, from an historical perspective, how the idea of the ‘responsibility of power’ speaks to Chinese political thought, and assesses its significance to China’s evolving engagement with global governance today. It argues that a shift in China’s global mentality is now underway: from an aversion to taking the lead to one which sees China reprising its role as a global power and shouldering the responsibilities attached to this status in the management of world affairs. But, contrary to conventional depictions of China’s ‘responsible power’ identity as an externally imposed or purely modern construct, the article illustrates how notions of responsibility and the corollary concept of responsible governance are not new, but have deep roots in Chinese traditions of statecraft and corresponding visions of world order. Taking into account the complex interplay between Chinese conceptions of responsibility and expectations of its global role, change is necessarily situated amidst historical continuity, as linkages are drawn between China’s past and its present.

Introduction

On October 25 1971, China’s seat in the United Nations and its permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was officially transferred from the Republic of China (ROC) to the People’s Republic of China (PRC). But contrary to then ROC Ambassador to the UN Liu
Chieh’s bleak vision of ‘Peiping’s’ admission—dramatically depicted as ‘the beginning of the end for the world organization as an instrument of international cooperation based on law and justice’—the PRC’s entry symbolized Communist China’s formal accession to the comity of nations, and marked the beginning of what has subsequently proven to be its pivotal involvement in the politics of global governance.

As a state actor, China is both an agent and subject of governance processes. On the one hand, it constantly finds itself at the receiving end of the global governance agenda forwarded by other international and non-state actors. The UN, for instance, expects China to actively participate in peacekeeping missions, while international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch call upon the Chinese government to be more transparent and accountable for its practices in accordance with global human rights norms. On the other hand, however, Beijing has succeeded in projecting some of its own concerns and interests on to the global agenda, as evinced by its push for the International Monetary Fund to allocate greater voting rights to emerging states, and its call for ‘rich nations’ to take more initiative in cutting carbon emissions and in providing financial assistance to developing states in their mitigation efforts.

As China rises, increasing scrutiny is directed towards its international behaviour. Crucially, its practices are now frequently judged in relation to value-laden imperatives framed in terms of a ‘moral duty’ or ‘special obligation’ to the global community. Particularly noteworthy are calls for the People’s Republic to become a ‘responsible power’ by assuming a more constructive, leading role in global governance. Robert Zoellick’s 2005 speech, when he called upon China to become a ‘responsible stakeholder’, for example, resonated throughout the international policy community, giving rise to vibrant debates both on and outside the Chinese mainland. Similarly, the United States’ 2010 National Security

2 By referring to ‘China’, I am aware of the risk of reifying China as a monolithic actor. To engage in unpacking the ‘China-black box’ would, however, take this article beyond its intended scope. I therefore ask that readers bear with this abstraction.
4 Alternative translations include ‘responsible major country’ and ‘responsible great power’.
6 It is noteworthy, however, that Zoellick’s ‘responsibility’ concept was not entirely unprecedented. A decade earlier, then US Secretary of Defence William Perry observed in his 1995 speech to the Washington State China Relations Council that United States policy ‘accepts China at its word when it says that it wants to become a responsible world power,
Strategy report, which stressed the need for China to provide ‘responsible leadership’ for the sake of global interests,7 mirrored the Obama administration’s urges that China be more ‘proactive’ in international affairs.

Yet, of significance here is how expectations that China behave responsibly are being imposed as much by other international actors as by China unto itself. This suggests a growing convergence in the country’s domestic and global interests, and also implies a potential convergence of values. In fact, the language of responsibility employed in contemporary Chinese foreign policy predates Zoellick’s ‘responsible stakeholder’ concept by almost a decade, with Jiang Zemin reportedly the first to use the term fuzeren de daguo in his speech to the Russian State Duma in April 1997.8

In his address, Jiang made reference to the close relationship between power and responsibility, observing that, ‘Both being major powers of influence and permanent members of the UN Security Council, China and Russia shoulder an important responsibility for safeguarding world peace and stability.’9

Strategically, there is reason for China to adopt such normative language. By tying the idea of responsibility to the country’s political development, the Chinese government is distancing itself from the traditional expectations of insecurity that are evoked by rising Great Powers, and in so doing, seeking to allay fears of an impending ‘China threat’. Identifying itself as a responsible power, in this regard, becomes a means for China to illustrate its commitment to the current order and its management.

In light of the PRC’s deepening engagement with global governance, an examination of how China, as a reemerging power, perceives its roles and responsibilities is highly pertinent to the conduct of international relations today. Although the notion that power exacts responsibility, or as expressed by Hedley Bull, that the ‘freedom to manoeuvre’ of Great Powers is ‘circumscribed by “responsibility”’,10 tends to be regarded as derived from Western political thought—associated, for example, with such prominent


8 Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily), April 24, 1997, p. 4.


international thinkers as Winston Churchill and Alfred Zimmern, as well as members of the English School of International Relations\textsuperscript{11}—the ‘responsibility of power’ remains an amorphous idea, a quality that lends it to multiple—and at times contested—interpretations.\textsuperscript{12} How an actor’s responsibilities come to be defined thus often proves to be a subjective process, given to variation across time and context.

Seeing the world ‘through Chinese eyes’, as such, promises to be instructive, offering insights into Chinese ways of thinking and governing, as well as motivations for action. Doing so, however, requires us to move beyond depictions of China’s ‘responsible power’ identity as a uniquely modern or ‘foreign-derived’ construct, to appreciate how the very idea of ‘responsibility’ (\textit{zeren}), together with the corollary concept of ‘responsible governance’, are not new but have deep roots in Chinese traditions of statecraft and corresponding visions of world order,\textsuperscript{13} with their evolution over time coloured by the country’s distinctive moral, social, and political legacies. Just as how China conceives of and acts upon its duties and obligations as a major power will have an impact on global governance, so its perceived roles in global governance will influence the definition of its responsibilities at both the domestic and international level.

At this point, three caveats need to be considered. First, in discerning the antecedents of modern-day Chinese ‘responsibility thought’, it is important not to succumb to a narrow outside-in perspective, and to recognize that Chinese conceptions and practices of responsibility can be informed by a plethora of factors—both internally and externally derived. Second, ‘responsibility’ is understood here as a ‘political’ concept. Especially in the conduct of international relations, it would appear that responsibility considerations are invariably filtered through power concerns, and \textit{vice versa}. Viewed in this light, there is no inherent reason why ‘responsibility’ should be seen as fundamentally incompatible with state interests. Rather, much depends on how conceptions of both are framed—that is, as diametrically opposed or complementary and mutually reinforcing. Finally, the purpose of this article is not to pass normative judgements on whether or not the People’s Republic is behaving responsibly; it is to shed light on how Chinese understandings of responsibility have evolved over time and, broadly, what this signifies for China’s international engagement. Accounting for the complex interplay between Chinese definitions of responsibility and expectations of its global


\textsuperscript{12} In this sense, it is possible to speak of the overarching idea of the responsibility of power (i.e. that power comes with responsibility) as well as about notions of responsibility, which effectively refer to the varied guises of this central idea that arise in certain contexts.

\textsuperscript{13} As one will not always find direct references to ‘responsibility’ in classical Chinese works, it becomes more a case of uncovering articulations that reveal sentiments of responsibility.

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role, change is necessarily situated here amidst historical continuity, as linkages are drawn between China’s past and present.

This article proceeds in two main parts. The first section traces how Chinese thinking on ‘responsibility’ (zeren) evolved in tandem with shifts in the Chinese worldview and practices of (global) governance from the imperial to the Maoist era. Here, classical images of responsible statecraft from Imperial China are juxtaposed with nationalist and socialist interpretations of responsibility that became prevalent in post-1911 China. The second section begins by outlining Chinese perspectives on global governance and subsequently directs attention to how China’s global responsibilities are being debated in the contemporary period. It goes on to examine the practical implications of Chinese responsibility conceptions, taking particular note of the emergence of a distinctive ‘Chinese’ approach to global governance through ‘self-governance’.

Chinese Images of Responsible Governance and World Order: From Imperial China to the Maoist era

The Chinese have a well-known proclivity to link history to policy. In the words of social historian Wang Gungwu, ‘they have always been keen to use historical analogies in their policy analyses... Chinese practice shows that their “timeless” approach, which sought the most helpful and relevant examples to support their current cause or guide their choice of policy, has been used with care, and often with practiced skill’. Accordingly, ideas embedded within Chinese history can serve not only as a repertoire of policy ideas for the present-day, but can also constitute important frames of reference. To arrive at a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Chinese foreign engagement, it is therefore useful to situate Chinese conceptions of responsibility within an historical continuum of thought. The notion that the legitimate exercise of power is tied to the burden of responsibility is one that resonates strongly in Chinese society and political culture, having animated traditions of Chinese statecraft and perspectives on world order. Reflecting the interrelationship between legitimacy, power, and authority, issues relating to the proper fulfilment of state obligations (zhize) have posed recurring challenges to the resilience of the Chinese state throughout its dynamic history. That multiple and—at times, contending—interpretations of responsibility abound when tracing its historical evolution within the Chinese context only underscores its conceptual richness and fluidity.

Chinese literature and philosophy are replete with allusions to state and personal responsibilities. Delving into the literary realm of Chinese chengyu (idioms), we are greeted by such proverbs as *ze wu pang dai*, meaning ‘one should face one’s responsibilities’, and *ze you you gui*, referring to the sentiment whereby ‘one’s responsibility is solely one’s burden to carry’, both of which appear in the works of such notable Qing scholar-officials as Lin Zexu and Liu Kunyi. Certainly, what is meant by the idea of responsibility often comes naturally to most of us as individuals living within a society bounded by norms, values and mores, despite the fact that what the term signifies is habitually left unspoken. Simply put, behaving ‘responsibly’ involves acting in accordance with both the formal and informal rules governing society and its institutions, such that compliance with established norms and values amounts to an observable outcome of responsible behaviour.

Ancient Chinese society was permeated with complex webs of interpersonal responsibility. Much like the ancient Greeks, historical Chinese statecraft (*jingshi*) incorporated a form of ‘soulcraft’, founded upon the belief that success in governing a state stemmed from success in governing oneself. Adherence to the idea of *li* (rules of propriety), together with corresponding Confucian doctrines that dictated how the social order was to be governed, constituted an irrefutable duty that members of society had to fulfil. Hierarchical relationships, as summed up in the ‘Three Bonds and Five Relationships’, pervaded all aspects of social life, including the primary institution of the Chinese family, wherein the strict observance of the codes of filial piety (*xiao*) amounted to expected behaviour and, in certain cases, as the ‘root of virtue’ itself. Deemed an obligation of younger generations, as well as a mark of the ‘superior’ individual (or the Confucian ‘gentleman’) and respectable household, breaking any of these norms meant grave consequences for both the individual and the family unit, which included social ostracism and even legal punishment. During the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC), for instance, the concept of ‘group responsibility’ was enforced to the effect that, were an individual to commit any wrongdoing, their family or the family unit to which they belonged (which could comprise 5–10 families) would be held equally accountable by guilt of association. Apart from deterring individuals from committing crimes, this legal code was intended also to enhance obedience to the state by effectively

16 The Three Bonds and Five Relationships involved regulating the relations of benevolence and obedience between fathers and sons, husbands and wives, sovereigns and ministers, elder brothers and younger brothers, and between friends.
undermining group loyalties. Hence, conformity to such ceremonial rules of propriety was not only a prerequisite for social acceptance, but also a guarantee of social harmony and peace within the Chinese empire by virtue of individuals assuming their proper roles in relation to others within society. In this sense, it was as much a personal responsibility as a collective one.

At the crux of traditional Confucian culture was the idea of ‘positioning’ (dingwei). Confucius’ dictum of ‘Let the ruler rule as he should and the minister be a minister as he should. Let the father act as a father should and the son act as a son should’ serves as one expression of this idea. Derived from Chinese philosophical thought, the concept has its roots in the ‘School of Names’ (Ming jia), known for its preoccupation with interrogating the relationship between ‘actualities’ (shi) and their corresponding names (ming), and the old Confucian doctrine of the ‘rectification of names’ (zhengming).

Despite the frequent association of the School of Names with highly abstract ruminations, it was in fact an objective of Gongsun Long—one of the school’s key proponents—to ‘extend such arguments to rectify the relationship between names and facts in order to transform the world’. As elaborated by Chinese philosopher Fung Yu-lan, ‘We have seen in our world today how every statesman says his country wants only peace, but in fact, when he is talking about peace, he is often preparing for war. Here, then, there is a wrong relationship between names and facts’. It was also the case that rectifying names was advocated by Confucius as a method for instituting ‘correct government’ and, by extension, responsible statecraft. Public life being viewed as almost an extension of family life, political ‘order’ (zhi) also became largely coterminous with social order. In effect, expectations concerning rightful conduct of the individual were likewise applicable to ministers, rulers, and kings. Every ‘name’ (i.e. social position) implied a certain responsibility that must be fulfilled. Only after fulfilment of these responsibilities could a well-ordered society and healthy system of government be possible.

In this way, as one progressed up the social ladder one’s rights would expand in tandem with one’s duties and obligations. In fact, ensuring names were rectified, and consequently disorder (luan) contained, was recognized as a key task of the ruler (junzi). Failure to do so threatened to jeopardize the ruler’s moral authority and equally the dynasty’s political

18 Taken from the ‘Storehouse of Remnants’ (Jifu) chapter of the Book of Gongsun Long (Gongsun Longzi); quoted in Fung Yu-lan, A Short History of Chinese Philosophy, trans. Zhao Xiasan (Tianjin: Tianjin shehui kexue chubanshe, 2007), p. 16.
19 Fung Yu-lan, A Short History, p. 16. According to the Chinese dictum of ‘ming zheng yan shun’, only if one’s name is correct and accords with reason will one’s words and actions be rendered righteous and justifiable.
20 It should be noted, however, that this code of conduct did not really apply to the common people, but was geared more toward the elites.
legitimacy. Interestingly, although of Confucian origin, the Legalists also sought to integrate this idea into their methods of statecraft, as epitomized in the principle of shu—the art of handling men. This became known as the doctrine of ‘holding actualities responsible to their names’ (xun ming ze shi). Han Fei Zi held that it is a ruler’s duty to confer a given office upon a given person. And while the ruler is not held directly accountable for how that official performs, it is their task to distribute rewards and punishments accordingly. Such practices both constituted and reinforced the ruler’s authority (quan shi).

In contrast to the ‘realist’ art of governing propounded by Legalism, those belonging to the Confucian tradition saw personal virtues, rather than penal law, as the driving force behind human agency. From this perspective, any individual ‘in a position of responsibility’ must first learn to speak with moral authority before they are ‘qualified to speak with political authority’. This is echoed in Mencius’ philosophy, which built upon this vision of ‘good governance’ through emphasis on the ‘kingly way’ (wang dao), where a distinction is drawn between the ‘sage-king’ and legitimate rulership on the one hand, and the military lord who relies on rule through force on the other. In eschewing the latter, the conduct of politics was conceived as intrinsically connected to morality (de), whereby the government ideally has ‘no interests or practical responsibilities beyond those associated with behaving as the exemplary and benevolent defender of harmony’.

Responsible statecraft in effect emanated from the ruler, who was perceived as acting on behalf of Heaven (tian) and consequently expected to behave according to the divine will. The distinguishing trait of a ruler was the ability to cultivate power and influence over people through ‘leading by example’. Central to this were the ethical precepts of ren zheng (benevolent government) and ren yi (righteousness). When applied to politics, these principles bring into relief the latter’s embedded normative purpose. In the time-worn words of the sage, ‘By benevolence is meant the distinguishing characteristic of man. When it is embodied in man’s conduct, we have what we call the path of duty’. In practical terms, this took the form of providing for the people’s spiritual and material welfare. The ruler’s capability to cater

21 As remarked by John Fairbank, ‘so great was the dynasty’s dependence on its moral prestige that its loss of ‘face’ in certain instances might set in motion a process whereby the ideology, as it were, turned against the regime and hastened its downfall’. John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, China: A New History (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 48.


23 Alan T. Wood, Limits to Autocracy, p. 136.


to the interests of the people, in other words, became a tangible measure of that ruler’s legitimacy, with the building of society’s material foundations proving important in this regard.\(^{26}\) As rehearsed by Ban Gu in the *Han Shu*, a ruler’s keeping watch over subjects, cultivating society’s members, and yielding to heaven’s morality are all essential to government for the sake of bringing peace to the people.\(^{27}\)

Moving from the domestic to the external sphere, similar modes of thought also animated Imperial China’s relations with the outside world, furnishing Chinese elites with a social paradigm whereby the Chinese people became ‘bound to the world beyond’ through a ‘network of proper behaviour’.\(^{28}\) Assuming its position as the Middle Kingdom, China’s centrality to world order was deemed a practical ‘function’ of both its civilization and immanent virtues, whilst the Chinese cultural system was believed to be materially, aesthetically, and morally superior to that of ‘uncivilised’ foreigners.\(^{29}\) Chinese moral and political leadership under Heaven was hence logical. Even in the wake of Qing China’s tumultuous encounter with European international society during the 19th century, Chinese political and intellectual elites continued to adhere to three vital assumptions that had, until then, served as cornerstones of the Sinocentric world order:

that China possessed a universally valid system of beliefs which were ethically right and ought to be followed by all people; that China had a special role in the world as the guardian of these values, and that, although they could not be imposed on other peoples, China must herself live up to them and set an example by which others could learn how to follow the right path.\(^{30}\)

The legitimacy of the Chinese empire apparently rested on the universal kingship of the Son of Heaven, which was, in turn, predicated upon expectations of an ‘all-encompassing’ responsibility to uphold the cosmic order. Governing the world, therefore, became synonymous with sustaining the Great Harmony under Heaven (Tianxia Datong). And as was the case for statecraft within its borders, employing ethical policies and enhancing moral suasion, rather than the use of force or coercion, were heralded as prerequisites for expanding Chinese power, securing the empire’s prosperity, and maintaining good relations with other states. Mencius’ severe critique of those who claimed to wage ‘just wars’ is illustrative of this view: ‘There are people who say, “I am expert at military formations; I am expert at

\(^{26}\) The Chinese Classics, p. 371.


waging war." This is a grave crime. If the ruler of a state is drawn to benevolence he will have no match in the Empire.\footnote{31}

It warrants note, however, that actual practices did tend to deviate from these philosophical ruminations, such that contention between the Confucian and Legalist schools remained a recurring theme throughout Chinese history. In most cases, even if Confucianism were to be lauded as the dynasty’s dominant ethos, rulers tended to govern their countries through a fusion of Confucian and Legalist thought, relying on the political instruments of both law and ethics. Accordingly, the Chinese idiom ‘Confucian in appearance, Legalist in substance’ (\textit{ru biao fa li}) would appear to speak more to the realities of the time, especially given the intense struggle for power following the demise of the Qin and the founding of the Han dynasty in 206 BC. Even so, the fact that rulers still had to project themselves as ‘Confucian’ necessitated, at the very least, acknowledgement through iteration in official rhetoric of the considerations of responsible statecraft within and beyond their respective territories.

That said, such Confucian ‘responsibility claims’ were not all without basis. A major strength of the Confucian government of the (early) Qing dynasty (1644–1911) was its constant attention to public approbation. Efforts at flood control through initiating water conservancy and hydro-engineering projects, and famine relief by maintaining regular granary supplies and providing grain loans, for example, were intended as manifestations of the emperor’s virtue, and effectively amounted to demonstrations of responsible governance that would help to consolidate regime legitimacy.

Nationalist and Socialist Visions of the Responsible State: the Post-1911 Period

Reminiscent of the intellectual discourses of Socrates and Plato, Mencius averred that should a ruler fail to govern his people responsibly or should he prove to be corrupt, they had the ‘right of revolution’ (\textit{geming quanli}). Though considerably influenced by modern democratic and scientific ideals borrowed from Western learning, popular sentiments that emerged in 1911 through to the May Fourth Movement (1919) still reflected this internally derived notion. Failure to contain European imperialism on one hand and opium addiction among the masses on the other had seriously

undermined the Qing’s ruling legitimacy, rendering inevitable the regime’s ultimate collapse. Natural portents, such as the massive flooding of the Yangzi River in 1911, further convinced onlookers that the Manchu dynasty had lost its Mandate of Heaven.

No longer just a ‘right’, anti-Qing protesters—particularly the new generation of Chinese youth that constituted the New Culture Movement (Xin Wenhua Yundong)\(^32\)—would come to view the fomenting of revolution as a paramount ‘responsibility’. It was their manifest duty to effect socio-political change and rid China of its imperial shackles and ‘national humiliation’ (guochi). Critics of early reform and Westernization like Ye Dehui, who argued that ‘the upholding of Confucianism leads to good government while the adoption of foreignism leads to disorder’ and that ‘in so far as there is morality, there must be Confucianism’, alerted this generation of thinkers to the close association between stagnant conservatism, Confucianism and the status quo, and also convinced them of the need to expunge such remnants of the old dynastic order.\(^33\) But although members of the New Culture Movement advocated a break with China’s traditional past, while the Self-Strengtheners of the late 19th century advocated a fusion of classical Chinese traditions with Western ideas and technology, the two movements bore important similarities. Cognisant of China’s post-Opium Wars identity as the ‘Sick Man of Asia’, both sought to popularize new conceptualizations of China’s place within European international society and, by extension, a novel understanding of its responsibilities. Upon forwarding a slate of reforms, for instance, Li Hongzhang and Zeng Guofan—two major figures of the Self-Strengthening movement—recognized that China was no longer insulated from the outside world, and that their country’s ‘outdated’ practices of statecraft needed to be reconfigured to adapt to a changing and precarious international environment. Responsible statecraft, in this respect, prompted the Chinese state to undergo socio-political, industrial, and military modernization undergirded by a stronger sense of Realpolitik pragmatism. Interestingly, despite having been condemned by some as a ‘traitor’ at the time (and posthumously by the Chinese Communists), Li Hongzhang, with his adept diplomatic skills, the role he played in quelling the Taiping Rebellion, and ardent support for the country’s political transformation, was extolled in the West as an exemplar of the ‘responsible’ statesman.

For the Self-Strengtheners and the New Culture generation alike, the responsible state was not one that obstinately adhered to the teachings of Confucius, Mencius or the Legalist Shang Yang, but one capable of

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restoring the country’s ‘lost’ prestige and acting pragmatically in its dealings with the foreign powers to safeguard national interests. Here, the country’s political and intellectual elites gradually shifted from the inward-looking conceptions of responsible statecraft prevalent during the imperial period to embrace more outward-looking understandings of a state’s responsibilities that would pave the way towards new thinking on China’s role within the prevailing world order. Interest-driven pragmatism, as opposed to high-sounding moralizing, thus became the basis for responsible conduct. Republican China’s decision to participate in the First World War serves as an illustration of this. Seeking to re-join international society and reinstate its autonomy as a sovereign nation-state, China had both an ideational (i.e. status) and material (i.e. reclaiming lost territory) interest in thrusting itself back onto the world stage. According to public intellectuals-cum-reformists like Liang Qichao, the war provided a unique opportunity for China to advance its policy agenda, as well as ‘inject its own ideas into shaping the new world order’. This would, in turn, entail a renegotiation of the Chinese worldview, whereupon the Chinese people came to see themselves as citizens of a modernizing nation-state and of the world.

The blatant disregard at Versailles for Chinese interests with respect to the ‘Shandong Question’, which resulted in an outpouring of nationalist sentiment, only confirmed Chinese pundits’ belief in the exigent need for China to be recognized as a ‘legitimate’ and equal member of the comity of nations. Significantly, these sentiments would later resurface as part of the 1990s patriotic movement led by Chinese intellectuals seeking to reclaim their country’s past grandeur. Founded on the belief that China’s greater participation in world affairs would constitute a major contribution to peace and stability within the international system, the movement and its supporters focused on the prospect of China achieving its long-awaited ‘great power dream’ (qiangguo meng).

What these instances reveal is how indigenous Chinese perspectives coalesced with externally-derived ideas to generate novel perspectives on China’s roles and responsibilities which have since shaped the course of Chinese international engagement. Arguably, the new Chinese Republic that emerged from the rubble of Imperial China was constructed as much from the legacies of its past as from the new ideas that came with close foreign contact. This was also the case for Communist China under Mao Zedong, when socialist narratives on class-based struggle and emancipation converged with nationalist narratives on expunging national humiliation. At

35 Xu Guoqi, China and the Great War, p. 83.
the height of the PRC’s ‘revolutionary’ foreign policy, ‘responsibility’ was
defined in terms of bolstering Communist revolutionary zeal at home and
abroad. Domestically, the expulsion of foreign influence, protection of the
‘motherland’ (zuguo), and national rejuvenation were framed as a ‘sacred
duty’ (shensheng zhize), with the objectives of ‘self-reliance’ (zili gengsheng)
and ‘working hard to strengthen the country’ (fafen tuqiang) to be achieved
through collective effort on the part of the Chinese state and people.
Interpreting responsibility at the state and societal levels in this way not
only reinforced the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) ruling legitimacy,
but also contributed to mobilizing popular support of the Communist cause.

As aptly noted by Samuel Kim, ‘if the traditional Chinese image of world
order was an extension of the Confucian moral order, so was the Maoist
image of world order an extension of revolutionary order and justice at
home’. Having inherited the legacy of the New Culture Movement and
its aspirations to rebuild the Chinese state, the Chinese Communists likewise
sought to re-establish the country’s role in ordering the world. Through the
prism of Marxist–Leninist thought, they forwarded a conception of order
diffused with the values of proletarian internationalism, revolution, and
human emancipation. From this point of view, effecting change to the exist-
ing system was tantamount to Maoist China’s primary duty to itself as well
as to the rest of the developing world. Revolutionary leadership, in other
words, epitomized the country’s national and international responsibility.
As seen in Chapter I of the CCP’s 1973 Constitution, opposing ‘big-power
chauvinism and hegemonism and supporting the liberation struggles of ex-
posed peoples in the Third World constituted recurring themes in state
discourses:

the CCP upholds proletarian internationalism and opposes great-power chau-
vinism; it firmly unites with . . . the proletariat, the oppressed people and nations
of the whole world and fights together with them to oppose the hegemonism of
the two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—to overthrow
imperialism, modern revisionism . . .

Echoing the normative language of Imperial China, the PRC’s foreign
policy was firmly situated within a language of justice and morality, such
that the idea of social justice became an intrinsic component of national
power. Coinciding with the ideological fervour of the Cultural Revolution,

37 Samuel S. Kim, China, the United Nations, and World Order (Princeton: Princeton
University Press, 1979), p. 82.
38 Taken from the ‘Constitution of the Communist Party of China’ (adopted on 28 August
p. 820.
39 Samuel S. Kim, China, the United Nations, and World Order, p. 88. Even Mao himself drew
parallels between China’s past and its situation then: ‘The Chinese nation is known
through the world not only for its industriousness and stamina, but also for its ardent
love of freedom and its rich revolutionary traditions. The Han People, for instance, dem-
onstrate that the Chinese never submit to tyrannical rule but invariably use revolutionary
this discourse became markedly powerful during the 1960s and 1970s, especially after publication of Lin Biao’s *Long Live the Victory of the People’s War* in 1965. These sentiments are clearly reflected in Zhou Enlai’s declaration in 1967, amid North Vietnam’s armed struggle against American intervention, that ‘The Chinese people… have further strengthened their sense of duty to [proletariat] internationalism and will certainly render still more effective aid to the Vietnamese people… thus contributing to the revolutionary cause’.  

In this sense, promoting ‘people’s revolution’ was not regarded as being at odds with ‘peace among states’; rather, it was the latter’s *sine qua non*. Although the PRC’s policy of ‘exporting revolution’ and of providing ‘no strings attached’ assistance to developing states—a policy that continues today—has elicited considerable external criticism and concern, particularly from the United States, for countries that had just emerged from protracted anti-colonial struggles, Chinese support (even if only verbal) was deemed within ‘the bounds of appropriate behaviour’. Here, the People’s Republic managed to carve out a unique role for itself in world politics as it sought to reform the international system for the sake of a more ‘just’ order.

Ultimately, what is evident from Chinese foreign policy during these turbulent years is how, as China came into closer contact with international society, it became more deeply involved in the politics of responsibility. In its efforts to occupy both the strategic and moral high ground the process through which the People’s Republic came to identify itself and construct its outward role conceptions vis-à-vis other actors became invariably tied to the process of defining its obligations and corresponding worldviews. To this end, both implicit and explicit use of a language of responsibility during the Maoist era performed a constitutive function of framing Chinese interests and foreign-policy objectives as well as rationalizing the nature of its international engagement.

As demonstrated in the next section, elements of historical Chinese conceptions of responsibility continue to be reflected in contemporary

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43 Having said this, it deserves note that just as the Chinese accused foreign powers—more precisely, the United States and the Soviet Union—of being ‘irresponsible’ and ‘revisionist’, so were similar labels of ‘irresponsibility’ attached to China by the very actors whom it sought to shame. If anything, this highlights the multivocal nature of responsibility claims in international relations.
articulations of this key idea. In particular, the notion of assigning responsibility commensurate with a state’s power status remains a *leitmotif* in China’s engagement with global governance, as is the tendency for the Chinese to filter domestic obligations into the international sphere. While this is not to overestimate the continuity of Chinese political thought on responsibility—the pathways through which ‘responsible’ governance is to be actualized (e.g. rectifying names or exporting revolution) have indeed varied over time—it does lend credence to the argument that certain resources in China’s past can be drawn upon to illuminate Chinese behaviour today.

Donning the Mantle of Responsibility: China’s Evolving Engagement with Contemporary Global Governance

As an agent and subject of globalization and global governance, China’s involvement in the management of world affairs is crucial not just to its own interests but to those of the international community as well. As the world’s second-largest economy with more than a quarter of the world’s population within its borders, China’s non-participation could putatively undercut the effectiveness of any international treaty or institution. This brings to mind the climate change negotiations, where efforts to devise a legally-binding treaty with concrete targets to curb national carbon emissions were frustrated by the reticence of major powers—most notably China and the United States—to commit. Certainly, had China reacted any differently to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis or any slower to the SARS outbreak in 2003, these events would have undoubtedly had far more serious repercussions for the rest of the world. Ensuring Chinese participation in the governance of such shared challenges has, in short, become vital to world order and stability. In the words of Pang Zhongying, global governance without Chinese participation is not truly ‘global governance’, and a world without China cannot be rightfully called a ‘globalized’ world.44

At the same time, as stressed by Chinese intellectuals and policymakers, maintenance of a stable and secure international environment constitutes a prerequisite for China’s peaceful development at home and abroad. In fact, the country’s development is often phrased in official rhetoric as inextricably tied to that of the world—a point that even the Constitution of the People’s Republic duly acknowledges. As iterated in the Constitution, ‘China’s future is the world’s future, both are closely linked together’.45 This mirrors long-standing Chinese concerns centred on the preservation of order or social

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'harmony' which, as previously explained, was a foremost duty of the Chinese emperor.

For this reason, although popularized claims that the PRC is a revisionist power bent on challenging the international system appear to resonate strongly with Maoist China’s revolutionary zeal, they fail to capture the political and ideological complexity of China today. The PRC is neither in singular terms a rule-maker nor a rule-taker; it is both. Rather than electing for drastic changes to the international system, China has arguably come to advocate a ‘gradualist’ approach that favours incremental reforms and, above all, the pursuit of world order and stability, if not maintenance of the status quo itself.46

Unravelling Chinese Perspectives on Global Governance

The idea of ‘global governance’, however, is far from uncontested within China. This, in part, stems from the fact that the term remains relatively ‘new’, having entered mainstream Chinese discourses only within the past decade.47 And just as certain Western scholars have grumbled that “‘global governance” appears to be virtually anything”,48 so have Chinese scholars and practitioners remained wary of the variegated meanings and implications of this originally ‘foreign’ idea. Lingering suspicions persist as to whether or not the ‘global governance project’ is merely a means for the West—namely the United States—to pressure China into conforming to pre-existing (Western-dominated) rules of engagement, and whether or not the norms and values promoted by global governance are any more than a veil for the vested interests of the ‘powers that be’.49 Indeed, some continue to question if the very concept of global governance is fundamentally flawed, given the anarchic nature of the international system, while others remain sceptical of its ability to keep abreast of a rapidly changing global landscape.50

At issue are unresolved questions with respect to global governance by whom, for whom, and in accordance with whose standards. While heated

debates over these issues are not confined to China, it is within the Chinese context that the normative import of these questions becomes particularly salient to the conduct of contemporary international relations. To be sure, the Chinese penchant for justifying its non-compliance or derogation of responsibility by making recourse to the ‘injustices’ brought about by the imposition of Western neoliberal values masquerading as ‘international’ norms reflects this mentality. These norms are perceived as discriminating against developing, non-Western powers like China and are also accused of impeding the development of a truly ‘global’ system of governance—one representative of the cultural heterogeneity and diversity of interests of an evolving world society. Others, in like fashion, have voiced concerns that China constitutes a ‘latecomer’ to global governance, beleaguered by the unfamiliar and rapidly changing ‘rules of the game’ and uncertain of its actual ‘place’ in the system. From this perspective, China is at a disadvantage and is understandably reluctant to commit wholeheartedly to the current system. Some scholars have even proposed that instead of ‘global governance’, the PRC should adhere to its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.52

The PRC’s unyielding stance towards these issues, especially with regard to sovereignty and territorial integrity, is instructive. That China, unlike the Western powers, will never seek hegemony, nor seek to ‘dominate’ other peoples, remains a pledge reiterated by the Chinese leadership today. Building on the assumption that any progress or development must be internally driven, as opposed to externally imposed,53 the Chinese have closely observed the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity as part of a statist discourse that purportedly prioritizes ‘mutual respect and benefit’ in its foreign policy. As Pan Wei puts it, ‘I can only wish that Europeans could see that this approach offer a chance to achieve real progress rather than presenting the West with a crisis of “global governance”’.54 Given their continuing attachment to these issues it appears, however, that Chinese leaders—much like their Western counterparts—have yet to fully grasp

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the nuanced differences between ‘global’ (in the sense of ‘globalized’ and ‘beyond borders’) and ‘international’. Needless to say, any attempt to govern the globe must first clarify problems associated with the opaqueness of this concept.

Beijing is, of course, known for being risk-averse, preferring ‘low-key’ diplomacy based on Deng Xiaoping’s oft-cited axiom of tao guang yang hui (‘bide our time and build our capabilities’), wherein the notion of ‘not seeking leadership’ (bu dang tou) has been particularly influential. At times characterized as ‘reluctant’, ‘fragile’ or ‘conflicted’, China is prone to sending mixed signals with regard to its international engagement. This derives, to a considerable degree, from the challenges posed by China’s socio-economic development, of which ongoing disparities between its rural and urban areas constitute striking reminders. The fact that the country’s average GDP per capita remains comparatively low, despite its rapid comprehensive GDP growth, remains a predominant concern among Chinese pundits and policy-makers alike. To call China a fully-fledged ‘Great Power’ would, in this sense, be somewhat misleading. Interestingly, the implications are such that China, in contrast to the historical proclivity of Great Powers to overestimate their capabilities, tends to be overly aware of its limitations and cautious of making ‘onerous’ international commitments that may inadvertently jeopardize its sovereign ‘rights’ and, to borrow from Hedley Bull, its ‘freedom to manoeuvre’.57

Amid growing consensus that the PRC can no longer afford to stand idly by on the sidelines of world politics, such an attitude contrasts sharply with more recent discourses advocating a ‘globalist’ approach to Chinese international engagement. Simply put, the reasoning behind ‘globalism’ (quanqiu zhuyi) is as follows: having ‘stood up’ (zhanli qilai) in 1949 as a


56 This contrast tends to be made in relation to how, by 2007, their country’s GDP growth had already surpassed Germany (effectively becoming then the world’s third largest economy), and yet, its GDP per capita remained 1/16 of that of the United States.


reinvented nation-state, China has undergone significant transformations and has since been ‘growing and prospering’ (fuqiang qilai) at an unparalleled pace. Given the remarkable growth in both its global political influence and economic competitiveness, this has led some to assert that China has gained ‘many of the special characteristics’ of a Great Power, and that now is the most opportune time for China to learn how to become a moderate ‘hegemon’ different from the United States (or in other variations, a ‘non-hegemonic’ global leader) by assuming a greater role in the management of world affairs.

Dialogue between these rival perspectives has given rise to the equivocal identity of China as a ‘developing great power’ (fazhan zhong daguo). Expressed through the notion that China is ‘big but not strong’ (da er bu qiang), derived from Deng Xiaoping’s remark in the early 1980s that ‘China is a big country . . . but in practical terms, it is a small country, an undeveloped country, or otherwise called a developing country’, China’s status as a ‘rising great power’ (xinxing daguo) is thus tempered with the state’s limited capabilities and resources. Nowhere is the paradoxical duality of China’s identity more apparent than in its involvement in the global aid regime, where it is at once a recipient and provider of international aid. China’s participation in the climate change regime is likewise riddled with tensions stemming from this duality inherent in its international identity. Although the PRC has become more ‘proactive’ in addressing global climate change in recent years, its engagement remains constrained by adherence to developing-country status and insistence on the right of industrializing countries to develop.

60 Interview with Professor Yu Wanli, School of International Studies, Peking University, Beijing, China, December 14, 2009. China’s tacit recognition of its reemerging global role can be traced back to the mid-1990s when the notion of ‘managing relations among great powers’ (chuli daguo guanxi) first appeared officially as part of a diplomatic strategy at the 16th Party Congress. Chih-yu Shih, ‘Breeding a Reluctant Dragon’, p. 755.
61 This has also been alternatively termed as ‘big developing country’ (da fazhan zhong guojia). See Li Shaojun, ‘Lun Zhongguo shuangchong shenfen de kunjing yu yingdui’ (‘On China’s Dual-Identity Dilemma and Its Responses’), Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi (World Economy and Politics), No. 4 (2012), http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_61ab00b9010157rb.html (accessed July 10, 2013).
62 Deng Xiaoping, ‘Geming he jianshe dou yao zou ziji de lu’ (Revolution and Development All Have to Proceed on Their Own Paths), in Deng Xiaoping wenxuan (Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping), Vol. III (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1994), p. 94.
63 Interview with Professor Zhang Haibin, School of International Studies, Peking University, Beijing, China, December 16, 2009.
64 This also harks back to the notion of allocating responsibilities in proportion to a state’s capacities. For an interesting application of the Rawlsian ‘difference principle’ to states’ responsibilities in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, see Li Kaisheng, ‘Lun quanqiu wenshi qiti jian pai zeren de gongzheng fendan’ (‘On the Equitable Sharing of Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction Responsibilities’), Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi (World Governing the World 347 The Chinese Journal of International Politics, Vol. 6, 2013

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Following attempts to balance globalist and more conservative attitudes in its international interactions, Chinese foreign policy has arguably come to embody what can be termed Zhong-Xi-Ma—or ‘Chinese-Western-Marxist’—thought, which represents the confluence of traditional Chinese values with Western technology and modes of management (guanli), as well as enduring remnants of socialist thinking. One need only revisit official discourses on ‘constructing a harmonious world’, as based upon the principles of ‘harmony’, ‘justice’ and ‘egalitarianism’, to appreciate how elements of continuity and change have coalesced.

It is possible to discern here a gradual shift in Chinese policy attitudes: from an aversion to taking the lead to one that sees China repositioning its identity as a global power and acknowledging, to varying degrees, the obligations and expectations ascribed to this status. No longer the ‘Sick Man of Asia’ (Dongya bingfu), nor the revisionist power that ‘exports revolution’, the People’s Republic has entered a new phase in its foreign relations wherein active involvement in world affairs is a necessity. Whether it be to counter negative portrayals of an impending China threat, to guarantee its representation in global decision-making processes, or to act as a counterweight to the United States’ political clout on the world stage, Chinese academics and practitioners alike are increasingly cognisant of the imperative for their country to adjust its existing strategies and policies to better suit the shifting international terrain. Arguably, it is not the notion of ‘global governance’ per se that is ‘new’ to China, but rather the novel tasks that China faces as a re-emerging world power—responsibilities that Beijing can no longer afford to sidestep or simply ignore.

**Defining China’s Responsibilities as a Global Power**

These noteworthy developments in Chinese attitudes toward global engagement have prompted the emergence of the so-called ‘China responsibility’ thesis (Zhongguo zeren lun), essentially an alternative to the ‘China threat’ and ‘China collapse’ theses. At least since 2000, Chinese political commentators have noted the need for China, as a UN Security Council member and nuclear power, to rethink its national interests in accordance with the heavier international responsibilities it is expected to meet.

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65 Interview with Professor Wang Yizhou, School of International Studies, Peking University, Beijing, China, December 4, 2009. It should be noted, however, that some scholars have argued that this concept is now conceptually ‘outdated’, especially considering the waning influence of Marxist thought in contemporary China. Even so, it remains useful for spotlighting the prismatic quality of Chinese foreign policy.

66 See, for example, Wang Yizhou, ‘Mianxiang 21 shiji de Zhongguo waijiao: sanzhong xuqiu de xunqi ji pingheng’ (‘Looking towards Chinese Diplomacy in the 21st Century: Pursuing and Balancing the Three Requirements’), Zhanlue yu guanli (Strategy and Management), No. 6 (1999), http://www.cssm.org.cn/view.php?id=31448. In this piece,
participation in such issues as curbing carbon emissions, conducting joint ocean explorations, and safeguarding ‘peace and stability’ in the Asia-Pacific region are now recognized as platforms for showcasing the PRC’s benign intentions in the long term, along with the significant strides the country has made in advancing its social, technological, economic, and political modernisation. It becomes not so much a matter of arguing whether or not China is responsible, but rather how much responsibility it ought to carry.

Debates over China’s responsibility have proven congruent with broader discussions on its contributions to global governance. Accordingly, contemporary Chinese thinking on responsibility can be divided into four major camps: (i) those who believe China needs to embrace its international responsibilities as both a global and regional power; (ii) those who claim that fulfilment of China’s domestic responsibilities needs to come before its external duties and commitments, given its identity as a major developing country; (iii) those who see the People’s Republic as having historical responsibilities only to the global South (that is, in terms of encouraging south–south cooperation)—a narrative reminiscent of Chinese diplomacy during the 1950s and 1960s; and (iv) those who distrust the idea of responsibility, considering it an offshoot of China threat rhetoric intended to hinder China’s development by over-burdening the country with obligations that may include those that other powers (i.e. the United States) seek to derogate.

Wang elaborates at considerable length on China’s ‘responsibility requirements’ (zeren xuqiu) as its power grows globally.


See Zhu Liqun, ‘China’s Foreign Policy Debates’, Chaillot Papers (September 2010), pp. 43–44.

It is nonetheless noteworthy that, varied interpretations notwithstanding, Chinese policymakers and pundits have yet to fundamentally contest the idea of ‘responsibility’ itself: that is, the notion that China has a duty to respond to pressing issues of collective concern in a way that corresponds to its position as a major rising power. As Wang Gonglong concedes, ‘International responsibility is a derivative attribute of a member state of international society. Countries, big or small, should bear certain international responsibilities.’\(^{70}\) Even critics of the ‘responsible stakeholder’ and ‘responsible sovereignty’ concepts, who view them as part of a Western diplomatic campaign to discredit China by portraying it as ‘irresponsible’, do not dispute the fact that the PRC does have certain responsibilities. Rather, they contend that China needs to avoid undertaking ‘superfluous’ international responsibilities that inhibit its own security and development.\(^{71}\) Once again, the logic of *taoguang yanghui* is invoked, a similar mentality also permeating alternative perspectives that stress the primacy of Chinese domestic concerns over its global responsibilities. Further, such views reveal implicit recognition of the paradoxical implications of using the language of responsibility, whereby references to responsibility can, at once, enable Chinese actions by legitimating them, as well as undermine Chinese power by delimiting the country’s freedom to manoeuvre.

At issue here is the question of commensurability of responsibility with power. Harking back to classical political thought, scholarship on China’s responsibilities is often undergirded by the notion that a state’s responsibility should be proportionate to its power, defined primarily in terms of practical capabilities, political influence and national conditions. It is with these considerations in mind that Chinese demands for the allocation of shared, but not equal, responsibilities at the international level have been made. For while the PRC is perceived to have a common obligation to help secure stability and order within the international system, due to its developing economy it faces priorities and prerogatives different from those of a ‘conventional’ Great Power. An example of this outlook can be distilled from Xiao Huanrong’s study, which identifies a trichotomy of ‘powers’ as based on their varying degrees of influence within the system: general powers (*yiban daguo*), regional powers (*diqu daguo*), and super powers (*chaoji*).

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These, in turn, are matched by three distinct levels of responsibility—‘local responsibility’ (benshi zeren), ‘regional responsibility’ (diqu zeren), and ‘global responsibility’ (quanqiu zeren). The realization of these responsibilities is dependant on the soft- and hard-power endowments of the state in question. For super powers, their local (or domestic) responsibility is to consolidate security and wealth; their regional responsibility is centred on acquiring ‘spheres of influence’; and their global responsibility is to take charge of the international order.\textsuperscript{72}

While this particular rendition of the three-tiered nature of state responsibilities might sound rather outdated, reminiscent of a Cold War mentality, it does underscore an important trait of Chinese thinking on responsibility that sees the idea disaggregated into local, regional, and international conceptualizations. Indeed, the Chinese vision of ‘self-governance’ (discussed later) constitutes one potent manifestation of this approach. Creating such categories, to the Chinese mind, is necessary. As previously explained, responsibilities and rights, whether personal or official, in traditional Chinese society were expected to be appropriated in relation to the social status of an actor, effectively feeding back into the Confucian idea of positioning wherein one’s ‘place’ within the moral hierarchy determines how one ought to exercise power. Attempts to transpose this concept onto the international realm have resulted in the corollary concepts of China’s ‘self-positioning’ (ziwo dingwei) and ‘international responsibility positioning’ (guoji zeren dingwei), both of which speak to how intersections between power and responsibility should impinge on Chinese understandings of its proper roles in governing the globe and \textit{vice versa}.\textsuperscript{73} This perspective is, nevertheless, not unique to China. Reflected in such ideas as \textit{noblesse oblige} of the 19th century and the modern-day principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ as articulated in the Kyoto Protocol, as well as in the allocation of ‘special’ rights and responsibilities to select members of the UNSC, it becomes the case that, just as power asymmetries constitute an institutionalized facet of international life, so are asymmetries in responsibility characteristic of global governance dynamics.

While recent allusions to responsibility in Chinese foreign policy have undeniably been influenced by prevailing international rhetoric, particularly as advanced by the United States, to posit that the idea of responsibility is one that has only been imposed exogenously would be to endorse a misconception. Certainly, a major problem in existing literature on this subject is its proclivity to treat Chinese references to responsibility as contemporary artefacts, driven exclusively by external pressure and discursively influenced by

\textsuperscript{72} Xiao Huanrong, ‘China’s Duty as a Big Power’, p. 48.
Western political traditions. As mentioned at the outset of this article, official recognition of the PRC’s responsibilities as a major power was first made by Jiang Zemin back in 1997. The cumulative effect of Robert Zoellick’s 2005 speech thus served more to rekindle debates over this idea as opposed to instigating a ‘new’ concept altogether. According to one Chinese analyst, it was initially the case in China that, rather than being interpreted ‘negatively’ as a call for China to become more responsible, Zoellick’s statement was perceived as recognition that China is already a responsible stakeholder. Chinese commentators apparently made the mistake of presuming that their country’s responsible power image is patently obvious.

**Actualizing China’s Responsibilities to Global Governance**

Mounting expectations that China will play a leading role in the management of world affairs have resulted in a tremendous gain in currency within Chinese policy and intellectual circles of contemporary understandings on how power exacts responsibility within and beyond national borders. Cognisant of the need to project a positive image on to the world stage as scrutiny is cast on its ascendance, China’s shift towards a more explicit language of responsibility in recent years has arguably been matched by overtures in its foreign policy towards deepened international cooperation.

Compared to when it joined the UN Security Council in the 1970s and remained fairly aloof from its duties as a Permanent Five member, the PRC now demonstrates a greater willingness to participate constructively in UN decision-making processes. Its endorsement in early 2011 of some of the UN’s proposed sanctions against the Gaddafi regime in Libya and its support for the ‘responsibility to protect’ as a ‘guiding principle’ at the

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74 Interview, Beijing, China, December 15, 2009. Additionally, some scholars have made further claims that discussions concerning China’s identity as a responsible great power actually date back to the foreign-policy debates of the 1980s. Presumably, this coincides with Deng’s ‘reform and opening up’ period and efforts then to normalize Chinese relations with the rest of the world.


2005 UN World Summit are notable examples. The PRC has, moreover, actively contributed to the remedying of global and regional challenges, such as piracy in the Gulf of Aden, where a Chinese Naval Task Force was deployed to join the international naval expedition there in patrolling the surrounding waters and escorting commercial convoys transporting humanitarian supplies; large-scale natural disasters, the Chinese government having provided financial and technical assistance to affected countries in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the 2010 Pakistan Floods, and most recently the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake; and complex humanitarian emergencies in different parts of the world, with over 2000 Chinese peacekeeping personnel having been dispatched to 11 of the UN’s 19 peacekeeping missions currently taking place. This is not to mention the PRC’s successes in spearheading and supporting multilateral and regional initiatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) programme, which have helped forge closer regional ties and promote a shared sense of collective security and development.

Chinese involvement in each of these issue-areas has clearly been framed in highly normative terms, wherein China is depicted as ‘undertaking its share of international obligations’ as a responsible global power. As such, regardless of whether or not such responsibility claims are made with strategic considerations in mind, they remain inherently normative, so conveying what China is and ought to be doing. In the case of the People’s Liberation Army Navy’s excursion into Somali waters, for instance, the high-profile public relations campaigns in the lead-up to Beijing’s official announcement of its deployment of a three-ship fleet to combat piracy, which marked the first time Chinese warships have patrolled outside Chinese territorial waters, was carefully framed not only with reference to UNSC resolutions and international maritime security, but also in terms of China’s benign intentions as a responsible power. In an attempt to forestall any international censure of its perceived ‘assertiveness’, naval action in this issue was portrayed as a ‘strong political message to the international community’ that ‘a China with its improved economic and military strength is willing to play a larger role in maintaining world peace and security’. It was also lauded by Chinese analysts as a major shift in the country’s strategic mindset and threat perception, as the unprecedented deployment

signalled a move towards a focus on non-traditional security challenges of common concern.

Assertions of responsibility are also abundantly found in relation to the PRC’s well-documented participation in UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs). Aimed at ‘demonstrating China’s sentiments of responsibility (zeren gan) as a great power’,80 Chinese involvement in UNPKOs has garnered the PRC much praise from the international community. As one Chinese scholar observes, China has ‘important responsibilities to maintain world peace and security’, and participation in peacekeeping missions constitutes one such responsibility that China must shoulder.81 The import of Chinese contributions is remarkable given the PRC’s past recalcitrance towards international humanitarian operations, which it suspected of being façades for Western interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. Such scepticism was especially prevalent in the years prior to Communist China’s ascension to the UNSC seat. In this respect, it has taken merely a matter of decades since China first articulated an interest in contributing to peacekeeping, subsequently joining the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations in the late 1980s,82 for the People’s Republic to accommodate an ethic of humanitarian responsibility—as enshrined in the notion of human security (ren de anquan) and the R2P principle (baohu de zeren)—and by extension, open up to more flexible interpretations of state sovereignty. To date, China constitutes the world’s 14th largest contributor of personnel to UNPKOs, and it is first among the other four Security Council members.

What these instances reveal is how Chinese efforts at ‘carrying out responsibility’ (chengdan de zeren) are increasingly made in relation to non-traditional security concerns, ranging from environmental and public health-related problems to issues concerning the global economic order, illegal migration and transnational crime. Non-traditional security concerns, of course, formally entered the Chinese policy realm through the issuance of the ‘Position Paper on Enhanced Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues’ in the lead-up to the 2002 ASEAN Regional Forum.83 In view of the assorted challenges that are now transcending state
borders, the paper acknowledged that ‘as a responsible member of the international community, China stands ready to develop coordination and cooperation with other countries in the field of non-traditional security issues…to make positive contribution to the maintenance of regional peace and stability’. This policy stance was reinforced in the report of the 16th Congress of the CCP, which in its proposed blueprint for the country’s socialist modernization and development recognized the ‘intertwined’ nature of traditional and non-traditional security issues.

To cope with these collective challenges that exceed the capabilities of any one state to address, and which threaten global security as well as China’s own internal stability, Chinese conceptions of responsibility need to ‘know no limits’ and ‘know no boundaries’, according to Zhang Haibin. This falls in line with the New Security Concept (xin anquan guan) of the late 1990s, which prioritized the development of ‘common security’ as one of the country’s main foreign-policy objectives. Interdependence between states continues to be stressed as an inevitable fact of contemporary international life, while emphasis is also placed on ‘mutual trust, mutual benefit and mutual respect’ as guiding principles for facilitating cooperation and governance on the basis of cultural diversity and political differences among members of the global community.

Of particular note is how the multifaceted nature of Chinese responsibilities has prompted the emergence of a distinctive approach to responsible governance in the contemporary period: one predicated upon the notion of ‘self-governance’. Proposed by Chinese intellectuals and policy-makers as a ‘complementary alternative’ to existing (Western) modes of global governance, this pathway is deemed relevant not just to China’s case, but also touted as one that should be adopted by other (developing) states.


86 Interview with Professor Zhang Haibin, School of International Studies, Peking University, Beijing, China December 16, 2009.


88 I am indebted to Professor Shih Chih-yu for this concept.
Understanding Chinese Self-Governance as Global Governance

That states have a dual burden of responsibility (i.e. domestic and international) is a notion which resonates strongly with the post-1980s Chinese experience. There is no denying that China, as a major developing state, invariably finds itself in a unique, albeit fragile, position. Here, national development goals like poverty eradication and pollution reduction continue to pose sizeable challenges to the Chinese leadership, with the potential to undermine not just China’s credibility at home but equally its image abroad as a result of ‘spillover’ effects. Indeed, many of China’s domestic problems, if or when handled ineffectively, often have repercussions that extend beyond its borders, as evident from the transnational effects of Chinese environmental problems. The Yellow Dust (or Asian Dust) phenomenon, for example, poses ongoing challenges to the PRC and its northern neighbours, Japan and Korea, as dust particles blown across the region have given rise to serious health concerns in all three countries.89

In February 2009, responding to international criticism of Chinese behaviour overseas, Xi Jinping raised the following observation: ‘China does not export revolution, for one. China does not export poverty or hunger, for two. And, China does not fool around (bu zhe teng) with you, for three. What else need be added?’90 Apparently, this statement belies China’s introspective sense of responsibility in world affairs—a sentiment that has long coloured Chinese international engagement.91 When asked to elaborate on what responsibility means to China, the majority of policymakers and analysts I interviewed found it necessary to differentiate sharply between the PRC’s internal and external obligations, the latter frequently seen to take precedence over the former. This mindset mirrors that of China’s political elites who are likewise wary of ‘overburdening’ China with international commitments at the risk of neglecting duties within its own borders. Still reluctant to assume global leadership outright, Beijing continues to prioritize national growth and development, at the same time claiming that fulfilment of these objectives would constitute a significant contribution to the world at large.

The reasoning behind this is a deceptively simple one: given China’s position as the world’s most populous country, ensuring the well-being and security of the Chinese people, together with the country’s social and political stability already amounts to an act of global governance. As one

89 Occurring annually and originating largely in northern China, this is a problem that has worsened over time, aggravated by China’s chronic desertification and industrial pollution.
Chinese scholar explains, ‘This is not merely a domestic affair, but also one of international significance. It is the greatest contribution that China makes to humankind by working out solutions to internal problems such as development and stability’. As such, while assertions of self-governance may seemingly signal a return to discourses on states’ rights, they reach beyond conventional statist interpretations of responsibility. The argument here is not that a state’s responsibilities are confined solely to itself and its people; rather, that the state—especially one still developing—needs first to be ‘inwardly’ responsible before it can reasonably purport to carry out its obligations to external others. Put differently, if a state cannot even safeguard the welfare of its own people or ensure its own security, how can it contribute to the welfare and security of others?

Crucially, elements of ‘self-governance thought’ are reflected in the guiding principles espoused by China’s past and present leaders. Hu Jintao’s concept of ‘Harmonious World’ (hexie shijie) is one such example. Hu first advanced the concept at the 60th session of the UN’s High-level Plenary Meeting in September 2005, subsequently reaffirming it in the report of the 17th Party Congress. Constructing a harmonious world has since defined China’s past decade under the Hu leadership, marking the emergence of a more proactive foreign policy, with emphasis placed upon forging a ‘new international political and economic order’, as well as the return of Confucian thought to Chinese political discourse. Coterminal with the government’s ‘peaceful development’ rhetoric, this is an idea clearly inspired by classical Chinese thinking on preserving the ‘Great Harmony’ (datong) and ‘peace under Heaven’ (Tianxia ping’an). Part of its significance, as such, lies in how it captures the essence of the traditional Chinese vision of global governance: one grounded in a pluralistic, albeit hierarchical, understanding of world order that sees China’s development as directly ‘serving peace, stability and common prosperity in the world’.

Supposedly extricated from Realpolitik thinking, prerequisites for the construction of a harmonious world include the creation of a democratic, multipolar (duoji) order through multilateralism and ‘inclusive’ governance, so as to uncover common ground amid difference.

Based on this, a crucial aspect of the discourse surrounding the construction of a harmonious world centres on the very notion that every state should strive towards building its own ‘harmonious society’ by enhancing the material prosperity and spiritual well-being of its people.95 A harmonious world hence becomes an extension of the harmonious society. This point was notably stressed by Hu, who posited that ‘developed countries should shoulder greater responsibility for a universal, coordinated and balanced development in the world...developing countries should make a fuller use of their own advantages to develop themselves, expand South-South cooperation and promote across-the-board progress in their own society’.96

One is again reminded of the enduring notion of allocating responsibility commensurate with power. The statement, moreover, captures the internal/external duality inherent in Chinese conceptions of responsibility wherein the realization of common values is achieved alongside domestic development aimed at bringing about a ‘prosperous and powerful’ country (fu guo qiang bing)—a theme which has, of course, persisted in Chinese political thought. It also corresponds to Jiang Zemin’s preceding concepts of (socialist) ‘spiritual civilisation’ (jingshen wenming) and ‘political civilisation’ (zhengzhi wenming), where achieving ‘all-round progress’ (quanmian jinbu) and adhering to the so-called ‘Three Represents’ (sange daibiao) were identified as of paramount importance to responsible governance, as well as to President Xi Jinping’s more recent articulation of the ‘Chinese dream’ (Zhongguo meng).

Since his ascension to the Chinese presidency, Xi Jinping’s policy focus has so far been on advancing the so-called Chinese dream, of which a key concern is the ‘great rejuvenation (weida fuxing) of the Chinese nation’.97 Although the exact connotations of this idea remain mired in debate, its relationship to the ‘American Dream’ being particularly contentious, it bears striking semblance to historical Chinese narratives prevalent during the post-1911 period on self-strengthening and accomplishing the country’s ‘great power dream’. But while Xi’s proposed guiding principle appears to be primarily informed by an inward-looking conception of state responsibility—much more so than Hu’s ‘harmonious world’ concept—given its attention to such issues as political reform and improving the rule of law, it nevertheless retains global relevance, as pursuit of the Chinese dream is treated as an aspiration equally relevant to other countries, and one which

96 Hu Jintao, ‘Build Towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity’.
stands to benefit the world at large. As one People’s Daily editorial puts it, the ‘dream of the Chinese people’ involves a responsibility to ‘human civilisation’. In like fashion, the recent Boao Forum for Asia was framed in the Chinese media as representing how ‘Chinese dream, Asia’s dream and world’s dream have increasing blended together’, just as President Xi emphasized in his keynote address that ‘in pursuing their own development, countries should promote the common development of all’.

In this regard, Xi Jinping’s emerging policy orientation amounts to one variation on the ‘self-governance’ thesis, as the development of Chinese power continues to be presented as necessary for the country as well as a major contribution to the maintenance of world order. Echoing the ethics of ‘responsible sovereignty’, wherein states are required to ‘pay heed both to the domestic demands of their citizens and to their international responsibilities to citizens of the world beyond their borders’ because ‘domestic and foreign policy are linked’, understandings of self-governance as embodied in the guiding principles of past and present Chinese governments can be considered as a valid mode of global governance insofar as it responds to domestic challenges that also speak to broader global concerns and the fulfilment of common obligations. As evident from the case of climate change, by working to reduce its carbon emissions and mitigate the adverse effects of climatic change at home, China is effectively contributing to concerted efforts at the international level as well. Ensuring ‘good practices’ within one’s own borders can, moreover, serve to preclude justifications for external interference in one’s domestic affairs, thus helping prevent ‘abuse’ of global governance discourses.

Interestingly, complementing discourses on building a harmonious world, Chinese scholars—most notably Zhao Tingyang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences—have forwarded the idea of the ‘Tianxia system’.

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In line with its historical usages, tianxia is seen to represent both the ‘world’ as a whole and ‘the greatest and highest’ form of order. Going a step further than official discourses, however, Zhao envisages the (re)inauguration of the Tianxia system as having at its core an ‘all-inclusive humanity’. Reminiscent of the classic Confucian notion that ‘within the four seas, all men are brothers’ (si hai zhi nei, jie xiong di ye), this concept of tianxia denotes how China’s responsibility naturally extends to the global realm, such that Chinese problems become world problems and vice versa. In Zhao’s words, by employing tianxia as a prism for making sense of the world, ‘we will be able to take responsibility for the world as our own responsibility’. 

Aside from containing elements of self-governance thought, the idea of tianxia is wedded to a preoccupation with governance through a re-ordering of the world—an overarching concern throughout the history of China’s foreign engagement. Taken together, these concepts forwarded by China’s political elites and pundits outline a ‘Chinese take’ on global governance that largely deviates from existing (Western) approaches. Indeed, revisiting the varied conceptions of responsible statecraft embedded in Chinese political thought, one is invariably struck by the confluence of the domestic and international realms, where the boundaries separating the two are, at once, blurred and reinforced. The notion that internal stability amounts to external stability not only parallels long-standing Chinese concerns over the maintenance of social and political ‘harmony’, but also mirrors traditional attitudes wherein the public sphere is viewed as an extension of the private one, and where disorder at home is consequently equated with disorder under heaven.

That said, while visions of global governance ‘through Chinese eyes’ may appear to challenge the status quo, their underlying rationale tends to be less ‘revisionist’ than conventionally believed. Even when advocating ‘reform’ of the current system, this does not necessarily suggest a Chinese attempt to overturn it. As previously noted, order and stability are precisely the values that Chinese models of responsible governance seek to uphold. As parallels between Chinese thinking on self-governance and the concept of responsible governance

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sovereignty demonstrate, despite the way in which Chinese perspectives on global governance and its responsibilities are frequently depicted as being in direct opposition to ‘Western-dominated’ modes of governance, it may well be that they have more in common with prevailing international norms and values than is often recognized in existing accounts.

**Conclusion: The Responsibility of Chinese Power**

Former Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress Qiao Shi exclaimed back in 1993 that ‘we ourselves are a world and not a small one’. This statement rings truer today than ever. A shift in China’s global mentality is now underway: from a traditional aversion to taking the lead to one that sees the PRC beginning to embrace its role as a global power and shoulder the duties and obligations that come with this status.

But while China’s understanding of its duties and obligations continues to be tempered with the state’s capacity to meet its commitments, Beijing has never fundamentally challenged or dismissed the idea of responsibility itself—that is, the notion that a state is obligated to respond constructively to issues of collective concern in a way befitting its power status. Instead, contention has mainly centred on China’s different role conceptions and the contending obligations that flow from its identity as both a rising power and developing country. Here, responsibility-sharing based upon consensus at the international level resonates strongly with China, as it entails that collective responsibilities are ‘democratically’ appropriated and acted upon by members of the international community in proportion to their respective national capabilities.

It is in this regard that drawing upon the rich legacy of Chinese political thought on the ‘responsibility of power’ can yield nuanced insights into how China perceives its place in the world. As illustrated in this article, responsibility considerations have long featured in Chinese ways of governing and thinking about the world, with the notion that power exacts responsibility, more specifically, constituting a recurring theme in Chinese political philosophy since imperial times. In what can be described as a mutually constitutive process, how China understands and acts on its responsibilities will often impinge on the management of world affairs, while conceptions of its roles in global governance stand to have impact on the definition of its duties and obligations domestically and internationally.

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For this reason, although recent discussions on the relationship between responsibility and political power in Chinese foreign policy may appear ‘new’ and derived externally from international pressure, they are better viewed as part of long-standing debates that span centuries of Chinese history. Given the concept’s prismatic and contextually-contingent nature that lends it to multiple interpretations, it is important that one appreciates the deep roots of Chinese thinking on responsibility, not least because of Beijing’s tendency to use history as a source of policy ideas. Looking into the past, the Chinese case also provides glimpses into why responsibility matters: in Imperial China, managing state affairs responsibly was a prerequisite for the Mandate of Heaven (i.e. the right to rule across the empire), whereas in Maoist China, responsibility defined in terms of revolutionary justice validated China’s position as vanguard of the Third World. In the present-day, recognition as a responsible power can serve a legitimizing function, enabling state actions and securing long-term interests through the maintenance of order and a stable international environment within which China can rise. Table 1 provides an overview of how Chinese conceptions of responsibility have evolved over time, in accordance with shifts in Chinese visions of world order and practices of governance.

Chinese thinking on responsibility has evidently been characterized by both continuity and discontinuity. Yet despite changes over time in the Chinese approach to responsible governance, wherein the contemporary period is marked by greater Chinese participation in international affairs and the use of a more explicit language of global responsibility, important elements of continuity can still be discerned. Firstly, underlying each period’s differing conceptualizations of responsibility is the sense that China has obligations that extend beyond its ‘immediate self’ which require Chinese involvement in governing and (re)ordering the world. Secondly, the continued filtering of the PRC’s domestic responsibilities into its international engagement harks back to the traditional Chinese mindset wherein relations of obligation within the internal and external spheres were often conflated. Thirdly, the commensurability of responsibility with power, as derived from such principles as positioning and rectifying names, has consistently served as the normative basis upon which China justifies its domestic and responsibilities as a major power. These conceptual continuities are all likely to persist in China’s future foreign-policy trajectory.

Assertions of responsibility must, nevertheless, be substantiated by actual practice. This, of course, underscores the perennial problem of determining the ingenuousness of states’ responsibility claims: to what extent do such assurances and commitments conceal mixed motives? As suggested by one Chinese scholar, the dictum ‘Confucian without, but Legalist within’ arguably remains applicable to Chinese foreign policy today. The purpose of this article, however, is not to argue that China’s ‘responsible’ foreign policy
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<th>Nature of Responsibilities</th>
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<td><strong>Imperial China</strong></td>
<td><strong>Responsible statecraft:</strong> Practising benevolent government through exercise of moral and legal authority in line with Heaven’s Mandate, and observing social norms and values.</td>
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<td>Inward responsibility: Preserving social and political order within the Chinese empire.</td>
<td><strong>Self-strengthening and rejoining international society</strong> (post-1911 China): Fusing Western learning with Chinese values, and increasing engagement with international society (e.g. participating in the Great War) to restore ‘lost’ grandeur and sovereign autonomy.</td>
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<td>Outward responsibility: Upholding the ‘Great Harmony’ (i.e. the cosmic order) under Heaven to ensure world peace.</td>
<td><strong>Revolutionary leadership</strong> (Communist China): Supporting class-based struggles at home, ‘exporting’ revolution abroad (especially to the developing world), overthrowing imperialism, and opposing big-power hegemonism.</td>
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<td><strong>Post-1911/Communist China</strong></td>
<td><strong>Constructive participation in global governance and self-governance:</strong> Tackling domestic challenges and pursuing national development goals, while concomitantly constructing a ‘harmonious world’ through international cooperation and multilateralism to address challenges to collective security.</td>
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<td>State responsibility: Expelling remnants of foreign influence (as well as feudal control, for the Communists), strengthening the country, and reclaiming China’s rightful place within the comity of nations.</td>
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<td>International responsibility: Adhering to international norms and expectations by participating in international institutions. During the Maoist period, inaugurating a ‘just’ world order and upholding proletarian internationalism.</td>
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<td><strong>Contemporary China (post-1978)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Domestic responsibility:</strong> Safeguarding internal stability, and enhancing national development and economic growth to achieve the ‘Chinese dream’.</td>
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does not suffer from a number of imperfections and paradoxes; for it does. Tensions undeniably surface between Chinese and Western conceptions of responsibility and corresponding approaches to global governance, as well as between domestic and international understandings. Gaps undoubtedly remain between China’s commitments and their implementation.

Certainly, rigid attachment to the inviolability of state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference, though feeding into statist conceptions of responsibility, can pose an impediment to the country’s deepened enmeshment in an evolving world society, as well as to the socio-political development of Chinese society itself. Unresolved problems in Tibet and Xinjiang, together with human rights controversies evident in the aftermath of Liu Xiaobo’s receipt of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize and artist-cum-dissident Ai Weiwei’s detention in 2011 for example, have cast a doubtful shadow over the international community’s successes in bringing the People’s Republic into its normative folds. At the same time, China’s reticence about accepting ideas dubbed as ‘Western’ further complicates matters, as seen from continuing scepticism over the very idea of global governance.

Given the current climate of ideas, however, for China to derogate its responsibilities is neither a politically or ethically viable option. It is increasingly the case that the country’s international reputation and, by extension, political suasion are inextricably linked to fulfilment of its normative commitments. In this sense, donning the mantle of responsibility can very well generate long-term benefits for the People’s Republic, while irresponsible behaviour can conversely impede its peaceful re-emergence as a global power by eliciting mistrust and opposition from other actors. Lessons can undoubtedly be distilled from China’s political and intellectual legacies, which, as explained here, potently remind us of the importance of responsibility considerations to regime legitimation and international recognition. The challenge for China, so it seems, is not so much that of making sense of responsibility as a completely ‘foreign’ concept; rather, it is a matter of reconciling Chinese understandings of this important idea with prevailing international expectations.