

## China's Rise in English School Perspective

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### Abstract

This chapter looks at English School (ES) theory as a way of understanding China and its rise. It focuses both on where ES theory fits well enough with China to provide an interesting perspective, and on where 'Chinese characteristics' put China outside the standard ES framing and raise theoretical challenges to it. The first section briefly reviews the ES literature on China. The second section places China within the normative structure of contemporary global international society by looking at how China relates to the primary institutions that define that society. The third section explores two challenges that 'Chinese characteristics' pose for how the ES thinks about international society: hierarchy and 'face'. The Conclusions assess the strengths and weaknesses of ES theory in relation to understanding the rise of China.

## Introduction

The idea behind this paper is that the English School (ES) provides a distinctive perspective on China's rise, and offers particular insights into the question of whether and how China is a *status quo* or *revisionist* power. The English School's main concern is to differentiate *international society* (a social structure) from *international system* (a material structure), and to focus on the former. Its principal analytical tool is the concept of *primary institutions*, understood as deep, evolved practices shared amongst states (and other political actors) and defining the criteria for both membership of, and legitimate behaviour within, the society of states. Primary institutions include sovereignty, diplomacy, international law, territoriality, nationalism, and several more, and are contrasted with the *secondary institutions* (instrumental, designed regimes and intergovernmental organizations) studied by liberal institutionalists. Primary institutions constitute the normative framing of international society and can be studied either normatively or structurally. States are thus embedded in an international society of their own making, and the degree of order within that society can vary across a spectrum from a thin *pluralist* logic of coexistence (e.g. 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe) to a thick *solidarist* logic based on shared values and institutionalized cooperation (e.g. the European Union). Unlike secondary institutions, which only appeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, primary ones date back to the beginnings of civilization. In this paper I will use primary institutions as the principal lens through which to examine the rise of China.<sup>1</sup>

The ES is thus in once sense a historical approach, interested in comparative and evolutionary international society. But given its unique set of concepts, it is also a theoretical approach.<sup>2</sup> The main claim of the ES to theoretical status is that it sets out a distinctive picture of what the international system/society looks like, and a novel taxonomy of what it is that IR should be taking as its principal objects of study. Because taxonomy identifies what it is that is to be theorised about, it is absolutely foundational to any theoretical enterprise. The English School offers concepts (international society, primary institutions) and debates (pluralism/solidarism) that are not available through materialist, system-based, approaches to IR. The ES does not, for the most part, offer a hypothesis-testing approach. Its method is to apply its distinctive taxonomy to a mainly historical analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the English School and its concepts, see Buzan (2014a). On primary institutions see in addition: Bull (1977); Holsti (2004); Buzan (2004: 161-204); Hurrell (2007); Schouenborg (2011).

<sup>2</sup> The main discussion on the ES as theory is Navari (2009).

Within the ES perspective, China can be addressed both in static terms (locating China within the normative structure of international society at any given time), and dynamic ones, (interactions between China and international society and how they shape each other over time). Within that, it is also about locating China not only within *global international society* (GIS, when that exists) but also international society at the regional level (when that exists). In what follows, I use these approaches to follow two lines of questioning: first, where does the ES fits well enough with China to provide an interesting perspective on its rise; and second, where do ‘Chinese characteristics’ put China outside the standard ES framing and so raise theoretical challenges to it? The first section briefly reviews the ES literature on China over the main periods of Chinese history. The second section places China within the normative structure of contemporary GIS by looking at how China relates to the primary institutions that define that society, and what this tells us about the debate over whether or not China is a status quo or a revisionist power. The third section explores two challenges that ‘Chinese characteristics’ pose both for policy-makers and for how the ES thinks about international society: hierarchy and ‘face’. The Conclusions assess the strengths and weaknesses of ES theory in relation to understanding the rise of China. The paper necessarily covers a lot of ground. It aims to set out an overview of what China looks like in ES perspective, and what challenges China poses for ES taxonomies.

### **China in English School Perspective**

The ES literature on China focuses on four different periods: the ‘Spring and Autumn and Warring States’ (770-221 BC); the classical ‘tribute system’ (221 BC- 1895); the ‘encounter’ with expanding Western GIS (1840-1945); which overlapped with the final decades of the tribute system, and Communist China’s evolving relationship with GIS (1949-present).<sup>3</sup> The Communist period divides into two distinct parts: the Maoist, revolutionary one, when China was largely alienated from, and oppositional to, the US-dominated GIS; and the one since the late 1970s, when China rejoined what was a more globalised, but still US-led, GIS. These different historical timings generate different points of interest for the ES. In the first period, China appears as a distinctive form of international society in itself. In the second, it was the core of a distinctive regional international society. In the third, it appears as an object in the encounter with Western-colonial international society when China was struggling, and mainly failing, to adapt to, and gain status within, a Western-defined modern ‘standard of civilization’. In the last period, China appears as an increasingly powerful outlier in Western-GIS, albeit one that has moved

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<sup>3</sup> For elaboration and sources on the ES literature on China, see the discussion in Buzan (2010: 8-16).

from participating first as a revolutionary challenger; then being a conservative status quo power, supportive of pluralist institutions but resistant to solidarist ones; and now seeming to be moving towards a more assertive form of reformist revisionism. Since 1840 China has been consistent in wanting to increase its status within GIS, but has been quite changeable about whether it supported or opposed the institutions of that society, whether individually or the whole set.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, China was quickly and harshly pushed from being an empire to being a state, and from constituting the core of an East Asian regional international society to being part of the periphery of a Western-global one (Gong, 1984; Suzuki, 2009a). With its forced induction into the Western states-system, China ceased to be a provider of non-Western models of international society, and became mainly an object in the encounter with Western-colonial international society. During the Maoist period, China was largely alienated from international society, partly by its own revolutionary ideology, and partly by being denied a seat in the UN, and having restricted diplomatic recognition. This began to change with the rapprochement with the US in the 1970s, and a more pragmatic leadership in China after the death of Mao. Zhang sees China from the late 1970s as steadily integrating with GIS, playing the diplomatic apprentice rather than the revolutionary, and mainly engaging economically (Zhang, 1998: 73-91). But China was chasing a moving target, and in danger of becoming alienated again as liberal agendas in the West, such as human rights and 'good governance' created a new 'standard of civilisation', putting pressure on its quite successful adoption of Westphalian standards and institutions (Foot, 2006). Just as in the first round of China's encounter with Western international society, China did not accept the need to Westernise itself completely, but sought to find a stable and workable blend of modernising reforms and 'Chinese characteristics'.

China has made major strides in pursuit of economic integration into the Western-led world economy, most notably its membership of the WTO. It has made some contributions to peacekeeping (Suzuki, 2009b) and non-proliferation, but politically its position has until recently been relatively marginal. Although accorded great power status, as the only ideologically committed non-democracy amongst the leading states it is uncomfortable with many aspects of the US-dominated political order. It has tended to be fairly passive in the UNSC, and concerned mainly to protect its domestic interests. It is defensive about human rights and democracy, and until recently, also about environmental issues. Along with many other East Asian countries, it has strong and frequently repeated views about sovereignty and the right of non-intervention, though there are some signs, including its participation in PKOs, that its hard view is softening as its global position becomes deeper, more

complex, and more nuanced (Huang and Shih, 2014). It has experienced some political and diplomatic setbacks, most obviously in the reactions to the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989, to the question of Tibet generally, and most recently in the July 2016 decision on the South China Sea case by the Permanent Court of Arbitration of the International Court of Justice. There are also some specific areas of international cooperation, such as space science, from which China has been largely excluded. Zhang, X (2011) argues that China has benefited from the existing GIS despite being out of tune with the emergent liberal solidarist turn towards human rights and democracy. Zhang, Y (2015) argues that the key question now is how China and the US renegotiate what constitutes legitimacy for the great power club. The G20 meeting in Hangzhou in 2016 stimulated a discourse in China around 'global governance' which perhaps signaled an interest in becoming a responsible great power.

As I will show in the next section, in many ways China accepts the existing norms and rules of GIS, but in relation to Western standards of human rights and democracy, it is an outlier.

### **China in the Normative Structure of a Decentring Global International Society**

China's relationship with contemporary international society can be quite substantially captured by looking at how it relates to the structure of primary institutions, where there is a pretty clear pattern of which such institutions China accepts and which it doesn't.<sup>4</sup> When China was an object in the encounter with Western-colonial international society its views on primary institutions did not matter much to others. More attention was paid to China's views during its revolutionist, Maoist, phase, but not that much more, because China was both politically extreme and relatively weak. Since the 1990s, however, China's views about the normative structure of GIS have become increasingly important. China has become partly integrated with GIS, and as its material power has pushed it into the top ranks, so the power of the US has gone into relative (but not absolute) decline. The assumption behind the argument in this section is that we are heading into a post-Western world of *deep pluralism* (Buzan and Schouenborg, 2018). This will not be a world of bipolar superpower competition between China and the US, but one of several great and many regional powers, but no superpowers. India is also becoming a great power, and many countries, including Mexico, South Korea, Turkey and Vietnam are becoming regional powers. Because many are rising – what Zakaria (2009) calls 'the rise of the rest' – deep pluralism will be defined not only by the diffusion of wealth and power, but also by a decline in the liberal

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<sup>4</sup> For surveys of these institutions see Buzan (2014a: 134-63); Holsti (2004).

'standard of civilisation' and the diffusion of cultural authority and legitimacy to more civilizations: Hindutva, Islamic values, 'Chinese characteristics', and so forth. While the West (and Japan) will remain strong, it will no longer be dominant in either material or ideational terms. China is, and will remain, in the top ranks of powers, but it will not become a superpower for two reasons. First, because the conditions of deep pluralism will not allow any state to achieve (or in the case of the US maintain) the relative material power necessary to be a superpower. And second, because the ideational primacy enjoyed by the West for two centuries is eroding, and there is no sign of any other universal ideology that might replace it and provide legitimacy for a superpower role.

In what follows I will present necessarily brief assessments of China's perspective on four groups of primary institutions: those that have become obsolete during the last two centuries; the classical, mainly pluralist, 'Westphalian' institutions; new institutions that have come into play during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; and institutions that are, depending on one's point of view, either emerging or contested. By 'China's perspective', I mean mainly the official view of the party/state. It is certainly true that within China there is a wide spectrum of views, and many internal debates, on how the country should assess the international system/society, what position it should take within it, and what its foreign policy should be. Shambaugh (2013: 13-44) for example, charts a spectrum of positions within China's foreign policy debates ranging from nativists and realists at one end of the spectrum to selective multilateralists and globalists at the other. He and many others think that the centre of gravity of China's debates lies towards the nativist/realist end of the spectrum, but policy can change if one school or another happens to catch the leadership's ear. Although Chinese politics are famously opaque, the current policy in Beijing of clamping down on critical voices suggests that there is now less room for this kind of influence than in the past.

Over the nearly seven decades since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power, the details of China's foreign policy have been consistently inconsistent, blowing hot and cold not only on relations with the US, Russia, Japan, India and most of China's smaller neighbours, but also on issues ranging from the global market economy, through nuclear proliferation, to environmental stewardship (see: Garver, 2016). China's foreign policy, like that of most states, has been mostly self-interested, but since China has changed so much internally over the past seven decades what those interests are has also changed. Whether this zig-zag habit also applies to China and the deeper level of the primary institutions of international society is one of the questions I hope to answer.

### Obsolete Institutions

China is strongly supportive of the delegitimation and obsolescence of three institutions that played a strong role in international society before 1945: dynasticism, imperialism/colonialism, and human inequality. The party/state, and much of the Chinese population, have nothing but contempt for the weak and decadent Qing dynasty that failed both to modernise China and defend it against foreign powers. The CCP is therefore happy with the way in which nationalism largely displaced dynasticism as the main source of political legitimacy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Mayall, 1990; Hughes, 2006). The CCP makes great play of the ‘century of humiliation’ inflicted on China by imperialist powers, and likes to exaggerate its own role in the struggle of the Chinese people against foreign aggressors. Its rhetoric has been strong on anti-imperialism. It also cultivates memory of the racist attitudes of the West and the Japanese towards China, and the physical suffering and debasement of the Chinese people resulting from being treated as unequal by foreign powers. It is therefore entirely happy with the collapse of these two institutions after 1945. These are stable positions and likely to remain so. Only if China revived its traditional hierarchical thinking and aimed for some form of overt primacy or suzerainty in East Asia might its anti-imperialism come into question. And only if the CCP followed North Korea down the path of dynastic communism would it have to reconsider its rejection of dynasticism.

### Classical ‘Westphalian’ Institutions

China is also broadly happy with the classical, pluralist, ‘Westphalian’ set of institutions that came out of early-modern European international society: sovereignty and non-intervention, territoriality, balance of power, great power management, war, international law, and diplomacy. This set derives from Bull’s (1977: 53-71) conception of society, coming out of a kind of sociological functionalism in which all human societies must be founded on rules of coexistence about security against violence, observance of agreements, and property rights.

China takes a famously strong view on the rights of sovereignty and non-intervention, claiming not only a robust form of both for itself, but also that it observes the same principles in its relations with others. The CCP uses these institutions generally to defend Chinese cultural distinctiveness, and specifically to defend its own claim to eternal and exclusive rule against any external pressures for democratisation and human rights. China takes a highly conservative, pluralist view of sovereignty and non-intervention: that these principles are designed to enable nations to protect themselves, and cultivate their cultural and political distinctiveness within the boundaries of the state. In line with that, and despite having earlier settled some of its border disputes

with fraternal neighbours, China now also takes a strong view on territoriality. Part of the CCP's self-defined remit is to reunite the country, and this is interpreted not only as being about Taiwan, but also about a host of contested islands, rocks and reefs in the East and South China Seas (Hayton, 2014), and about some contested land borders, most notably with India (Garver, 2016: 146-62, 435-44, 734-57). China's behaviour in this regard conforms with Mayall's (1990: 57-63; 2000: 84. See also Chen, 2015 locs. 917-1022) observation that nationalism causes states to sacralise territory, and make even small and materially inconsequential territorial disputes into core issues of national pride and security.

China seems also to be a firm supporter of the balance of power. Its longstanding rhetoric about anti-hegemonism, and for a more multipolar world, are not just anti-American, but leave balance of power as its default position. Its more recent call for a 'new form of great power relations' also suggests balance of power, though pointing as well to the closely related institution of great power management (GPM). On GPM, however, China's position is more ambiguous. It certainly does not want hegemonic GPM by a US unipole, but whether it wants a collective form of GPM, or just the right of a great power to take primacy in its own region, is less clear. Like India, China accompanies its claim to great power status with a demand that it also retain its status as a developing country. This combination is then used to argue that it should not be burdened by GPM responsibilities, because its own development, incorporating a significant percentage of humankind, is as much of a contribution as it can manage. Despite its substantial contributions to peacekeeping operations, China's behaviour as a great power is mainly self-interested, and not much committed to international norms (Kissinger 2011; Shambaugh, 2013: 7, 152-5). Its commitment to non-intervention is a useful prop for this hands-off policy. China seldom makes explicit its desire for regional primacy, but its recent bullying behaviour towards its East Asian neighbours, and some of its rhetoric can be interpreted in that way. The notorious remark by its foreign minister Yang Jiechi at an ASEAN meeting in 2010 that: 'China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact' seemed to let the mask slip (Scobell and Harold, 2013: 121).

Unlike during the Mao period, China now broadly adheres to the practices and conventions of both diplomacy and international law. Like many other states it often disputes the particular content and interpretation of international law. Its sovereigntist and anti-colonial rhetoric also likes to point out that China and many other non-Western peoples had no voice in the making of much international law. Yet neither reason amounts to a rejection of the principle that there should be international law, and that states should observe it. Post-Mao China has become comfortable with not only bilateral but also multilateral



diplomacy. It also seems happy with the idea of multilateral institutions, though like others it is unhappy with its status and influence in those set up by the Western powers. China's position on the institution of war seems fairly traditional and pluralist. It certainly, and robustly, supports its right to self-defence. It explicitly claims the right to war to prevent the secession of Taiwan, and more implicitly takes the same view of its other territorial disputes related to territorial 'reunification'. China broadly goes along with the US's post-2001 extension of the right to war in relation to dealing with terrorism.

Whether this seemingly firm set of positions is stable depends partly on how it interacts with the revival of Confucian thinking about hierarchy, on which more in the section below on 'Chinese characteristics'.

### Newer Institutions

China is also broadly comfortable with the four new primary institutions that have emerged and consolidated during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century: nationalism, development, the market, and human equality. Since the ideological turnaround in the late 1970s, the CCP has cultivated nationalism as a replacement for the class-struggle line of Mao's era. The Party has re-cast itself as the defender of the nation, and carefully cultivated 'patriotic education' to bolster its legitimacy (Gries, 2004; Hughes, 2006; Wang, 2008, 2012: 95-118; Schell and Delury, 2013: 307). It has some internal tension between a narrow, ethnic 'Han' interpretation of nationalism and a more inclusive, civic, 'Chinese' one that incorporates Tibetans, Uighers, Mongolians, Manchus and other non-Han minorities (Duara, 1995: locs. 444-656, 866-1092), but is firmly committed to the institution in general. It is also firmly wedded to the principle of human equality (anti-racism) as the converse of its strong rejection of racism and human inequality discussed above.

The CCP is a strong proponent of development and modernization. This was true even in the Maoist period, when the Party warred against tradition and tried to leapfrog the country into modernity, though in that phase its policies for doing so were often counterproductive (Gray, 2002; Dikötter, 2011). It also represents continuity with the KMT government from the 1920s to the 1940s, which was also strongly committed to development, though unable to accomplish much because of both civil war and Japanese invasion. Since Deng's 'reform and opening up', development has occupied a central place in the Party's platform. A more market-orientated economics replaced the failed Marxist economic model, and delivering prosperity to the people became, along with nationalism, the main prop for the CCP's legitimacy. This combination has proved to be a successful formula, captured in the slogan:

'No CCP, no new China'. As noted above, China still claims to be a developing country, and takes the goals of development very seriously.

The CCP's attitude towards the market is somewhat more opaque. Given that it still thinks of itself as communist, it seems implausible that many, if any, of the CCP's leaders actually believe in the market as a preferred way of organizing the economy. Since Deng, the dominant factions within the CCP have certainly made an instrumental calculation that the market is the best way for China (and themselves) to pursue wealth and power. But this calculated approach does not make them converts to liberal economic ideology in the way one would find in Britain and the US, and is therefore perhaps best seen as conditional. Even a calculated acceptance of the market has, however, required China to entangle itself in the web of intergovernmental organisations that are intrinsic to the operation of a global market economy. The commitment to the market has drawn China into the more solidarist aspects of contemporary GIS, and this creates tensions with its strong views on sovereignty, non-intervention and territoriality discussed above. China's hesitation over allowing its currency to float is but one example of these tensions. Despite the pressures of the global economic crisis from 2008, China has remained committed to developing its own version of authoritarian capitalism (McNally, 2012; Buzan and Lawson, 2014). It remains, however, a very interesting question what the CCP would do if pursuit of the market seemed to be threatening its grip on power.

Despite that uncertainty, China's commitment to all four of these newer institutions looks firm. The commitment to nationalism, human equality and development is deeply embedded in both the party and the country. The commitment to the market may be more superficial and contested, but will probably be durable because the Party's legitimacy rests on its ability to generate wealth and power, and there is as yet no plausible alternative to capitalism for doing this.

### Emerging/Contested Institutions

It is mainly in the area of emerging or contested primary institutions – democracy, human rights, and environmental stewardship – that the CCP is in basic opposition, if not to the principles themselves, then certainly to the dominant Western interpretations of them. But because these institutions are not consensual across GIS, China is not alone in its opposition to them. The clearest way to see this is that these three institutions are being promoted mainly from the liberal West. They are promoted as universal values, and many of their supporters believe them to be emerging institutions of GIS. But their opponents reject this view, seeing them as unwanted projections of

Western values, and therefore not as ‘emergent’, but just as contested, finding support in some sections of GIS but not in others. This framing is most clearly applicable to democracy and human rights. While the CCP accepts economic liberalism as necessary to its survival, it cannot do the same with the political and social elements of liberalism: the former threatens its monopoly on political power, the latter threatens China’s traditional cultural preference for the group over the individual. Western conceptions of democracy and human rights are an existential issue for the CCP (and also for other authoritarian governments), and China’s strong line on sovereignty, non-intervention and territoriality are precisely designed as defences against them. If there is one thing that can be said with certainty about the CCP it is that its first priority is the preservation of its own power. There could be no clearer evidence for this than that the constitutional task of the PLA is to defend the Party, not the country (Harris, 2014: loc. 850).

Environmental stewardship is somewhat different. Although it may initially have been promoted from the West as a universal value, it is not part of liberal ideology, and is increasingly being seen as a shared-fate problem facing all of humankind. It is a relatively new idea, yet has already become an institution of GIS rather than a value held by one ideological camp, and seems to be holding firm despite the defection of the Trump administration (Falkner and Buzan, 2017). China was initially opposed to international measures to address climate change, taking the view common amongst developing countries that it was the Western countries that had created this problem, and so it was their responsibility to pay for cleaning it up. But as environmental issues, particularly air and water pollution, and water shortages, have risen up the agenda of China’s domestic politics, and China has become the biggest carbon emitter, the CCP seems to be moving towards a more accepting attitude towards environmental stewardship. Although it still applies the principles of strong sovereignty, non-intervention and territoriality to environmental issues, its performance at the Paris climate change conference in 2015 was altogether more constructive than at an earlier conference in Copenhagen in 2009 (Falkner, 2016).

This survey of how China relates to the primary institutions of contemporary GIS throws interesting light on the argument about whether it is a status quo or a revisionist power. In ES perspective, two different factors are in play in this distinction: first, whether a country is happy with its status or rank in international society, and second, whether it accepts or contests the institutions that compose international society. *Status quo* powers are generally happy with both the rules and the status distribution of the prevailing international society. Revisionist powers come in three gradients. They can be *revolutionary revisionist*, wanting to change both the rules and the status

hierarchy, and prepared to resort to fair means or foul. Or they can be *reformist revisionist*, pursuing changes in the rules, but doing so mainly within the existing diplomatic framework of international society. Or they can be *orthodox revisionist*, generally happy with the rules, but wanting changes in the distribution of status (Buzan, 2007 [1991]: 237-46). China under Mao was a revolutionary revisionist power, but since Deng has adopted a much more moderate line.

At the global level, some observers, both Chinese and American, have claimed that China is a status quo power (Johnston, 2003; Qin, 2003; Feng, 2008; Pan, 2008). The case for this, as is evident from the survey above, is that China actually does support nearly all of the accepted institutions of GIS, and does so in a conservative way. Its main resistance is to human rights and democracy, which it sees as being mainly Western values. China is uncomfortable with the predominantly Western world society/global civil society, with which it does not deal well, and which as Clark (2007) argues is a key driver of the normative deepening of international society: democracy, human rights, environment (see also Buzan, 2018). From the CCP's perspective, it is the liberal West that is aggressively revisionist, seeking to impose its liberal values on the rest of the world. The flaw in the status quo designation is that while China broadly accepts the institutional structure of GIS, it certainly wants to increase its status, which makes post-Deng China at least orthodox revisionist. A case could be made that under Xi Jinping, China is moving towards reformist revisionism, wanting at least to make changes to practices within great power management and the market (Yan, 2014).

How China fits into an East Asian regional international society is difficult to judge. A recent study of this concludes that it is impossible to identify such a society with any clarity because the main feature of the discourse about it is a deep dispute between proponents of a narrower, more Asianist, view on the one hand, and a wider, more West-friendly view on the other (Buzan and Zhang, 2014). China champions the narrow view as part of its defence against democracy and human rights.

This analysis might seem to be forcing China into a Western-defined set of categories, and up to a point that is true. But I do not think that even from a Chinese perspective there would be much ground for challenging the assessment that under the KMT China was broadly orthodox revisionist, under Mao firmly revolutionary revisionist, under Deng somewhere between status quo and orthodox revisionist, and under Xi moving towards reformist revisionist. Until China provides its own vision of GIS, which it has so far conspicuously failed to do (Kerr, 2015), there is no other standard by which to assess it. One can, however, identify some 'Chinese characteristics' that might

play both into defining such a vision and shaping the nature of China's revisionism within GIS.

### **'Chinese Characteristics' as Challenges for English School Theory**

This section explores two challenges that 'Chinese characteristics' pose for how the ES thinks about international society: hierarchy and 'face'. As Tudor (2012: 42-52) notes, all of the societies in Northeast Asia have broadly Confucian roots that still play strongly in their contemporary values and behaviours, not least in their disposition towards hierarchical social relations and their concerns about 'face'. Neither hierarchy nor 'face' has been taken into account in ES theories. There is some allowance for hierarchy in ES theory, but none for 'face'. Deep 'Chinese characteristics' are re-emerging in China's behaviour. As China grows stronger, these will matter more and more to its foreign policy, especially in the region, if China seeks primacy there, but also globally, because China cannot de-link Asia from the concerns of other great powers (Buzan, 2017).

#### *Hierarchy*

The classical Chinese order operated within a hierarchical belief system (*Tianxia*) which extended Confucian relational logic to 'all under heaven'. As Chen (2015: loc. 842) notes, sovereignty was forced on China under highly adverse circumstances during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, displacing its traditional *Tianxia* way of thinking. The hypocrisy of this has not been forgotten, and *Tianxia* thinking has remained alive in the background. Under *Tianxia*, some state (generally China, though others such as Vietnam and Japan also made bids) was the suzerain and the core of high civilisation. Power considerations were of course relevant to establishing and maintaining hierarchical relations, but they were not its main foundation (Zhang, Y. 2001; Suzuki, 2009a: 34-55; Zhang and Buzan, 2012; Zhang, F, 2009, 2014). An example of this is Korea looking down on the Qing as barbarians, and preferring to hold to Ming practices as culturally superior, even while having to deal with Qing power (Swope, 2009: 41-2). After 1911, the Chinese imperial system was abandoned. Under US primacy after 1945, neither China nor Japan has possessed either the cultural basis or the relative power to reassert 'Middle Kingdom' status claims. By contrast, the European system was more based on the principle of sovereign equality (*anarchy*) even though there was continuous contestation for hegemony within Europe. Within China an effort is emerging to promote some of the principles from this Confucian order as a more collectivist, harmonious alternative to the conflictual individualism of most Western IR thinking (Song, 2001: 70; Yan, 2001: 37-8; Yan, 2008; Zhao, 2006; Li, 2008). Harris (2014: locs. 362-74, 1289) puts a lot of emphasis on the importance of

hierarchy in China's worldview: 'China sees the world in a different way than countries in the West, for various reasons, but mostly because of the Confucian belief in hierarchy'.

The basic Confucian model is rooted in a hierarchical family structure similar to that in many traditional agrarian civilizations in which fathers, brothers, sons, wives etc. stand in status relations of dominant/inferior to each other, and these relationships are mediated by the degree of intimacy/distance (Hwang, 2011: 109-10, 199). As Fei (1992) notes: 'the distinction between the senior and the junior is the most fundamental principle in the Chinese kinship system'. Traditional Chinese 'foreign policy' (not a wholly appropriate term for the tribute system) during the Ming dynasty was about a benevolent and morally superior emperor expecting loyal subordination from others, and reserving the right to punish them if they disturbed China's peace or good order (Zhang, F, 2015: 202-5). There is support in the literature for the view that this still applies in modern foreign policy terms, with Confucian cultures being more inclined to hierarchy and bandwagoning than to sovereign equality and balance of power (Fairbank, 1968; Huntington, 1996; Kang, 2003, 2003-4, 2005; Kissinger, 2011: 1-3; Harris, 2014: locs. 362-74. For a critique, see Acharya, 2003-4).

China's rise now puts the question of hierarchy back onto the agenda of international society, especially for Northeast Asia, where China is contesting US hegemony. The question is what sort of order China wants in its home region if it is successful in pushing the US back? In turn, this raises larger questions for GIS about how to handle a possible return of great power spheres of influence, and how to make such behaviour fit with the institution of sovereign equality. Since 1978 and Deng's reforms, China has had no strong claim to either political or cultural centrality or superiority, so any claim for hierarchy or regional primacy will be based mainly on its relative power and wealth. Although China might aspire to be a model of authoritarian developmental capitalism, it still has a long way to go in establishing a secure and stable form of political economy (Pieke, 2016). The evidence suggesting that a version of traditional Chinese/Confucian hierarchy is operating in Chinese foreign policy thinking, ranges from the current neo-Confucian talk from the Chinese party/state about harmonious society, both domestically and internationally, to the use of *Tianxia* as a structuring concept for international relations. Such thinking certainly fits both with China's keenness to deny equal status to Japan, its undiplomatic assertions in Southeast Asia about big versus small countries, noted above, and its hegemonic behaviour towards Southeast Asia (the 9-dash line). In Confucian thinking, social harmony necessarily rests on the precondition of stable hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> But almost nothing is said about the hierarchy side of this equation in China's contemporary foreign policy rhetoric.

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<sup>5</sup> It can also be more than that (Pan, 2011).

As Callahan (2009) notes, this linkage gives a worryingly imperial/hierarchical implication to China's discourse about harmony, and seems to put it in the same camp as Russia: great powers that still seem to be thinking like empires.

The return of Confucian thinking alongside China's rising power raises a lot of interesting questions not only about China, but about the whole East Asian region. Paradoxically, China is at the same time, as noted above, a leading defender of a traditionally Westphalian view of strong sovereign equality and non-intervention. This view is shared equally strongly by most of its neighbours and for the same reason: a deep postcolonial reaction against the impositions and indignities of Western imperialism, and a consequent commitment to sovereign equality and non-intervention as the keys to defending their newly won independence. How these seemingly contradictory positions fit together has not been much discussed, and needs to be addressed not just by academics as a key legacy of China's history, but also by the politicians who promote such contradictory views without understanding the tension and distrust that creates. Waltz (1979) was not wrong in his argument that hierarchy is a fundamentally different principle of social order from anarchy/sovereign equality. From the English School, Watson's (1992) spectrum of international political orders running from anarchy at one end, through hegemony, suzerainty and dominion, to empire at the other end also offers useful structural insights. Among other things, hierarchical structures, with their focus on relative status, generate quite different logics of securitization from anarchical ones, with their focus on the absolute status of sovereign equality. In principle, a disposition towards hierarchy is fundamentally antagonistic to a regime of sovereign equality, and even to a regime that allows some 'legalised hegemony' for great powers within an overall structure of sovereign equality (Simpson, 2004). It seems probable that, if it exists, a Chinese disposition towards hierarchy would be differentiated, operating more strongly in the Confucian sphere within East Asia, where a phrase like 'return to normality' would mean some form of suzerainty with China at the centre; and less strongly between China and the West, where expectations of cultural reciprocity would not be in play. This kind of suzerain/hierarchical mind-set is fundamentally at odds with the basic construction of GIS. It is small wonder then, that with these contradictory principles in play, China's foreign policy looks confusing – and often threatening – to outsiders. This cultural analysis suggests that any likely form of government in China would think in the same hierarchical way about 'the return to normality'.

The interplay of these two logics raises various possibilities in reaction to rising Chinese power and attempts to assert regional primacy. If Confucian logic dominates in East Asia, then a rising and hierarchical China might expect

Japan and Southeast Asia to submit to its primacy. But if Westphalian logic dominates, then Chinese assertions of primacy will be taken as illegitimate, and responded to in anti-imperialist mode with fierce resistance and balancing. Those logics will of course be mediated by the power structure, so that even Westphalian logic might be over-ridden if China's relative power became so overwhelming that bandwagoning remained the only sensible option. Judging by the reactions to China's increased assertiveness since 2008, Westphalian logic has taken deep roots in Japan and Southeast Asia. Unlike the US, China is not surrounded by weak powers. Many of its neighbours are, or could quickly become, militarily formidable. As I have argued elsewhere (Buzan, 2014b) China will disadvantage itself, and help the US quite considerably, if it tries to achieve regional primacy by intimidating its neighbours.

### *'Face'*

'Face' is a cultural feature common to Confucian societies, and shapes social interactions in ways quite different from those within Western culture (Moore, 2014). 'Face' is a complex concept, relating partly to material accomplishments and positional status, and partly to one's moral standing in one's community (Hu, 1944; Hwang, 2011: 266-81). Ho (1976: 883) defines 'face' as:

the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct; the face extended to a person by others is a function of the degree of congruence between judgments of his total condition in life, including his actions as well as those of people closely associated with him, and the social expectations that others have placed upon him. In terms of two interacting parties, face is the reciprocated compliance, respect and/or deference that each party expects from, and extends to, the other party.

It is probably a universal cultural phenomenon, but plays differently in different societies. In the contemporary West it is mainly about material accomplishments and positional status. But before modernity it was more about moral standing, closely related to honour. As Ho (1976: 877) points out, honour was a type of 'face', and a standard of behaviour, largely confined to elites, while 'face' in the Chinese context applies to everyone. In the West, honour has been eroded both by individualism and by the replacement of dynastic forms of society, in which it was a major institution, by modern, contractual ones, which have pushed it to the margins. Individualism can be seen as contradictory to 'face' on the grounds that 'face' is always given by others and so depends deeply on a relational social context and the individual's position in a group. But Ho (1976: 867, 877-83) argues that this



separation is not as extreme as might at first appear, and that 'face' is a universal feature of society, even in individualist societies.

It is an interesting question whether face is somehow a distinctive Northeast Asian practice, different in content from what happens elsewhere, or is more or less the same practice as elsewhere, but having a much higher prominence and intensity in Northeast Asian societies than those elsewhere. Hu (1944) argues for the much higher importance of moral standing in the community in China. Her analysis puts a great deal of emphasis on the relational linkage between 'face' on the one hand, and trust, and the importance of society structured around collectivism and key referent groups (e.g. family, school, local community). As she notes, 'Much of the activity of Chinese life is operated on the basis of trust' (Hu, 1944: 50). Ho (1976: 883, 867, 873) also notes a 'Chinese orientation, which places the accent on the reciprocity of obligations, dependence and esteem protection', that 'losing face is a serious matter which will, in varying degrees, affect one's ability to function effectively in society', and that 'face can be more important than life itself'. These themes resonate very strongly with Qin's (2011) analysis, which also emphasises trust, reciprocity and collectivist, hierarchical societies. 'Face' and Asian relationalism seem to be closely linked, either as different ways of talking about the same thing, or with 'face' as a particular feature of relationalism in Confucian societies.

There are many authors who take 'face' very seriously as a core feature of Northeast Asia's international relations, both historical and contemporary (Paine, 2003: 257, 306, 349-51; Gries, 2004: loc. 223-255; Shirk, 2007; Wang, 2012: 7-9, 163-202; Shambaugh, 2013: 55-9; Moore, 2014). If hierarchy and 'face' are as deeply embedded in Chinese thinking as this discussion suggests, then as China rises they pose big challenges not just to ES theory, but also to the practices that compose GIS. Both characteristics are very clearly in play in the disputes in the East China Sea where Japan and China quite literally 'face off' against each other, and in the South China Sea, where China's 'face' and the US's 'credibility' are engaged in a dangerous dance. The ES has not thought about 'face'. Yet 'face' might count as a primary institution of international society in East Asia. And in a world in which China is one of the most powerful states, 'face' will almost certainly be an important aspect of diplomacy more generally.

Chinese characteristics and ES concepts thus play into each other in ways that raise interesting and important questions for both Chinese policy and ES scholars. The ES has thought about hierarchy, but only at the margins of its mainly anarchic conception of GIS. In practical terms, how is GIS to respond when one (China) or more (Russia) of the great powers within it is thinking like

an empire? Do hierarchical thinking and 'face' concerns in China make it much more difficult for the US adjust to its own weakening position, in which it has both less material power and less moral authority? Is GIS less sensitive to 'face' issues than it needs to be? Can China resist both the general temptation of hubris as its power rises, and its own specific cultural one of reverting to a hierarchical 'Middle Kingdom' view of the world with itself at the centre, and concerns about 'face' dominating its relationships? If it cannot resist, how should its neighbours and other great powers respond? As China becomes powerful, its cultural characteristics will create pressure on some of the key institutions of GIS. How well China and the rest of GIS understand these pressures, and how well they negotiate them, will have a major impact on world order in the coming decades. This is one compelling reason why China needs to set out a clearer view of what kind of international societies, both regional and global, it wants to promote. Simple opposition to US hegemony will not suffice.

## Conclusions

The above discussion shows that the ES fits well enough with China to provide a distinctive and useful perspective on its rise. Yet it also shows that there are areas where 'Chinese characteristics' raise theoretical challenges to the standard ES theoretical framing. The strengths and weaknesses of ES theory in understanding the rise of China can be summarised as follows.

### *Strengths*

- The ES's historical perspective provides insights into the China that is now rising. Not only the philosophy of the pre-Qin period, and the hierarchy of the tribute system period, but also the alienation and revanchism from the 'century of humiliation', play importantly into contemporary Chinese foreign policy thinking and behaviour.
- The ES's analytical tool of primary institutions is useful in three ways:
  - First, it gives a clear and nuanced empirical insight into the question of whether rising China is a *status quo* or *revisionist* power.
  - Second, it highlights the tensions between China's hierarchical disposition on the one hand, and its apparent firm commitment to sovereignty, non-intervention, the balance of power, and great power management, on the other. Among other things, this gives leverage on explaining the apparent contradictions in Chinese foreign policy; and on pointing out the significant differences in securitization logics under sovereignty/anarchy and hierarchy.

- Third, it identifies ‘face’ as an important part of the normative structure of international society within NEA, and between it and the rest of the world.
- The historical and structural approach of the ES raises questions about the appropriateness of concepts such as *suzerainty* when applied to the Chinese tribute system, which had a quite different and more cultural foundation than the European models of hierarchy. This could become important in trying to design concepts to capture the nature of the ‘new China’ in contemporary GIS.

### *Weaknesses*

- The ES has perhaps overstated the alienation of China from contemporary GIS. This was truer during Mao’s time, but since the late 1970s, China is not so much an outlier in GIS, as part of a group divided from the West on liberal social and political values. As the influence of the West diminishes, China’s fairly mainstream position within GIS will become more obvious.
- The rising power of China strengthens the case for looking more at hierarchical international societies, both regional and global. The ES has not yet developed its own understanding of hierarchical international societies well enough to be able to deal with a rising great power of a hierarchical disposition. But the ES does have resources to deal with this, which makes this challenge also an opportunity for developing ES theory away from its Westphalian assumptions. The standard ES line is that the concept of international society is only relevant for the anarchic side of the spectrum because hierarchy removes the multi-actor condition required for a society of states. There is now more questioning of this assumption, and a rising interest in hegemony (Watson, 1992: 299-309, 319-25; 1997; Gong, 1984: 7-21; Clark, 1989, 2011a & b; Hurrell, 2007: esp. 13, 35-6, 63-5, 71, 111-14; Dunne, 2003; Goh, 2008). Both Watson’s spectrum and the analysis of classical empires by Buzan and Little (2000: 176-88) suggest that there is room for international society well up towards the hierarchical end of Watson’s spectrum in which hegemony itself could be a primary institution (Clark, 2011a). In most classical empires, the component units could have a considerable degree of autonomy, and this made room for diplomacy, war, balance of power and other institutions that are hallmarks of international society. Seen in dynamic perspective, classical empires often look like centralising phases of an international society that will at other times take a more decentralised form.
- The ES perhaps does not take seriously enough the issue of what holds societies together raised by Wendt (1999). Now that China is by some measures the second, or even first, biggest economy, whether its

commitment to the institution of the market is supported by belief or only by calculation begins to matter a lot to the stability of this institution.

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