



# A Relational Analysis of Exceptionalism: Connecting Liberalism with Confucian Multilateralism and Emotion

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## Abstract

The literature on exceptionalism is preoccupied with its distinctive national sources and resultantly differing styles. Exceptionalism has thus become almost synonymous with culture and identity, rather than international relations (IRs). The paper instead argues that exceptionalism reveals a relational identity that both informs and is informed by a multilateral relation prior to the emergence of exceptionalism. It also argues that all relational systems seek expansion and coexistence. Based upon a comparative study of Confucian and liberal multilateral relationalities, a similar cycle of engagement, conversion, disengagement, and learning is applicable to both. Two exceptionalisms in multilateral relationality differ, however. American exceptionalism embraces a transcendent identity with which to contrast with the rest, who share the same identity and are expected to follow the same rules. Chinese exceptionalism contrarily envisions a superior, benevolent identity to ensure harmony and peace among all, who share no collective identity. The paper traces how Confucianism diverges from liberalism with regard to what accounts for multilateralism—inclusiveness versus rule-based governance, and benevolent exceptions versus universal rights—and the resulting orientations during encounters with strangers. The last section before the conclusion corresponds to the growing attention in IRs theorising to the factor of emotion. Such rational–emotional connectivity—between exceptionalism and emotion—can further attest to the promise of the relational agenda in explaining pluriversal IRs.

## Introduction

During 1984, the senior writer's first year as a graduate student at the University of Denver, a drill company invited him to a consultation meeting to ask his advice on the most appropriate expression of condolences to the CEO of its Chinese partner for the recent passing of his mother. Normally a casual dresser, the writer bought a one-dollar orange suit from

This article is part of a special symposium “Dialogue with the Chinese School of IR Theory,” published across two issues of the *Chinese Journal of International Politics* and guest edited by Peng Lu, Xiao Ren, Toni Erskine, and Stefano Guzzini.

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a local thrift store to wear to this meeting in hopes it might inspire professional respect for him. Under normal circumstances he would have declined the company's request. However, believing he was the firm's sole hope of avoiding improper conduct, he complied. By the same token, the proposal was, for the company, an unprecedented engagement, but it nevertheless readily paid him, in line with the market rate, a \$75 consultation fee. An overseas student was thus able to enter into a professional role in an unfamiliar market, and in doing so enable a liberal-society-oriented company to fulfil a social role in a collectivist culture—both acts thus exemplifying exceptions from their respective perspectives.

An exception, i.e., *the negative of normalcy, consensus, or routine*, is a matter of degree, and a widespread daily phenomenon. To strategise for adaptation to unfamiliar relational systems, people improvise exceptions for each other.<sup>1</sup> But on the other hand, exceptionalism, often a conceived rationality to refuse or withdraw adaptation, is linked to the conscious claim to a distinctive self-identity vis-à-vis a prior system, as regards collective identity, rules, and norms.<sup>2</sup> Exceptionalism would hence presumably contradict or be detrimental to multilateralism,<sup>3</sup> thus contrarily calling for self-restraint as opposed to a distinctive identity. We will argue, however, that exceptionalism is, all things considered, a relational practice—a phase of a cycle, and a prelude to un/learning—as another phase of that cycle that is functional to the improvisation of mutual exceptions.

Our discussion contributes to the literature in two aspects. The literature perspective of exceptionalism is preoccupied with how actors claim their own exceptions from multilateral processes, often allegedly as a way to defend multilateralism. This literature omits a parallel practice in the Confucian condition that seeks to maintain multilateral processes by acknowledging the need for others each to be qualified for certain exceptions. Both multilateralisms rely on the politics of exception—asserting self-exception, i.e., we are not together, versus conceding other-exception, i.e., we are together—to engage strangers or betrayers. Here, the factor of emotion, which is the second aspect that the literature likewise omits, looms relevant, because denying and facilitating togetherness invoke different emotional processes—denying is unilateral while facilitating is bilateral—the former emotion confirming the exceptionalist's identity, and the latter making mutual roles, by virtue of reciprocating coexistence through making exceptions for strangers.

Encounters with strangers can nevertheless prepare nations to un/learn in order for divergent multilateral relations simultaneously to improvise expansion and coexistence. In this regard, the study of Confucian relational culture, which familiarises the improvisation of exception but shuns exceptionalism, contributes to an inclusive understanding of exceptionalism by situating it within pluriversal relationalities. However, Chinese exceptionalism is, the literature alleges, informed by Chinese internal/national sources, especially Confucianism, and insufficiently by international relation (IR) theory, to the extent that Confucian exceptionalism is not a recognised style of multilateralism in the liberal tradition. Only when acting against liberal and realist internationalism does the literature's version of exceptionalism become appreciable.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, we will compare Confucian and liberal multilateralisms to interrogate how and why exceptionalism is intrinsically a

<sup>1</sup> Heather Exner-Pirot and Robert W. Murray, "Regional Order in the Arctic: Negotiated Exceptionalism," *Politik*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2017), pp. 47–64; Leif Hoffmann, "Becoming Exceptional? American and European Exceptionalism and their Critics: A Review," *L'Europe en Formation*, No. 359 (2011), pp. 83–106.

<sup>2</sup> Fred Block, *The Social Question in the Twenty-First Century: A Global View* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Strating, "Enabling Authoritarianism in the Indo-Pacific: Australian Exemptionalism," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (2020), pp. 301–21; Christian Kaunert, Sarah Léonard, and Alex Mackenzie, "They Need Us More than We Need Them": British Exceptionalism, Brexit, and Justice and Home Affairs," *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2020), pp. 573–88; Emilia Nolan and Maverick Kennedy, "Explaining the American Exceptionalism," *Inosr Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2017), pp. 1–8.

<sup>4</sup> Aliénor Ballangé, "The Exemplarity of Europe: European Identity beyond Exceptionalism and Universalism," *Raisons Politiques*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (2020), pp. 43–57.

relational/emotional rather than an individualist/rational practice, embedded in liberalism and realism.

We define multilateralism as *several nations practising mutually agreeable patterns of togetherness*. Accordingly, we will show that Confucianism embraces an insider's exceptionalism, and liberalism that of an outsider. Despite their differences, both inevitably seek to expand until ways to coexist with strangers belonging to different relations reconstitute the identities of all sides. Exceptionalism, as a cause of anxiety for multilateral members in regard to relational fragmentation,<sup>5</sup> is rarely perpetual, because exceptionalism would mean nothing without ultimately belonging to its multilateral circle. Contrarily, the vicissitude of exceptionalism affirms its prior relation, composed of liberalism and realism. In an evolving pluriverse, including the revival of Confucianism, non-liberal multilateralism gives rise to anxiety about a stranger's exceptionalism, thereby making emotion an intrinsic dimension of exceptionalism.

This paper is a conceptual essay. It begins with a discussion on why a relational analysis is required in order to advance the literature, preoccupied as it is with national comparisons of exceptionalism.<sup>6</sup> Confucianism, as a misunderstood exceptionalist resource, provides a major relational canon whereby to remedy the problematic conception of exceptionalism primarily as an identity practice. The following discussion introduces how Confucianism understands exceptions and exceptionalism, and compares it with liberalism. Confucian exceptionalism invokes the benevolent role of a metaphorical heaven for everyone else—by definition also within the relational circle—to emulate, while liberalism invokes God's transcendent role from without, since others inside are entitled to equality. The paper traces how Confucianism diverges from liberalism as regards what accounts for multilateralism—inclusiveness versus rule-based governance, and benevolent exceptions versus universal rights—and the resulting orientations during encounters with strangers. The section preceding the conclusion corresponds to the growing attention in IRs theorising to the factor of emotion. Such rational–emotional connectivity—between exceptionalism and emotion—can attest further to the promise of the relational agenda in explaining pluriversal IRs.

## Exceptionalism as a Relational Claim

Exceptionalism in IRs may signify a wide range of things. A common thread in the literature is the emphasis on internal/national difference that justifies certain exemptionalist prerogatives.<sup>7</sup> Exemptionalism asserts that the exceptionalist can exempt from rules, duties, humanities, consistency, and others. Thus, exemptionalism presumes certain prior engagements with an entire system or an assemblage of actors,<sup>8</sup> to which the claim to exception is addressed. In other words, exemptionalism is made plausible by virtue of a prior relation, to whose fate exceptionalism ties its claimer. Without the relational analysis, a claim to exceptionalism would appear as no more than a binary discourse, invoked to romanticise a political project of an allegedly autonomous actor.<sup>9</sup> Against the relational background,

<sup>5</sup> Kate Sullivan de Estrada, "IR's Recourse to Area Studies: Siloisation Anxiety and the Disruptive Promise of Exceptionalism," *St Antony's International Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2020), pp. 207–14.

<sup>6</sup> Nicola Nymalm and Johannes Plagemann, "Comparative Exceptionalism: Universality and Particularity in Foreign Policy Discourses," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2019), pp. 12–37.

<sup>7</sup> Matt Killingsworth, "America's Exceptionalist Tradition: From the Law of Nations to the International Criminal Court," *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2019), pp. 285–304.

<sup>8</sup> Angela Zhang, *Chinese Antitrust Exceptionalism: How the Rise of China Challenges Global Regulation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Asselin Charles, "Haitian Exceptionalism and Caribbean Consciousness," *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2002), pp. 115–30.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Economy, "China's Inconvenient Truth: Official Triumphalism Conceals Societal Fragmentation," *Foreign Affairs*, 28 May 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-05-28/chinas-inconvenient-truth>; William Callahan, "Sino-speak: Chinese Exceptionalism and the Politics of History," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 71, No. 1

an exceptionalist is deliberately self-centred, either by asserting their freedom to exit the relation or by assuming a consensus within the relational circle on their exclusionary status.

To ensure a focused discussion, exceptionalism in this paper means *unilaterally claiming a distinction in order to justify the claimant's prerogative to renovate the relational conditions*. Therefore, it is a claim to a prerogative, and its purpose is to revise, defend, restore, or enforce the consensual norms and rules that corruption, invasion, refusal, or defection have endangered. For example, a version of American exceptionalism might be the duty to maintain liberal institutions through an interventionary, long-armed jurisdiction.<sup>10</sup> For another example, a version of Chinese exceptionalism might be to maintain the imperial family's benevolent leadership of the Sinosphere.<sup>11</sup> As a long-armed jurisdiction contradicts the consensual principle of sovereignty, America simultaneously claims an outsider's position. In comparison, providing benevolent leadership reifies a built-in relational role for the emperor's exceptional status. Therefore, a version of principled realism,<sup>12</sup> which enforces liberal rules of IRs through sanctions incompatible with these rules, is to claim exceptionalism in an outsider's capacity. In contrast, a version of moral realism,<sup>13</sup> which relies on benevolent leadership through granting exemptions and privileges to win the trust of the subordinate, is to exert exceptionalism in an insider's capacity.

In addition, according to this definition of exceptionalism, "distinction" usually signifies *a certain quality of being divine or selected, informed by an exclusionary consciousness* (of the inevitability of assuming or conceding a duty). Examples include an imagined mandate of God, a mission of civilisational awakening, a one-of-a-kind, geo-cultural identity, an innate capacity for leadership, an unparalleled history, or an alert to racial extinction.<sup>14</sup> Also according to this definition, relational conditions refer to the qualities of consensual rules and norms, and are: (1) constitutive of the identities of its members; (2) conducive to their solidarity; (3) alert to the impacts of non-members; and yet, simultaneously; (4) adjustable and sustainable. As such, exceptionalism advances two implications: an exceptionalist claim casts all relational alters to the collective identity, to which the exceptionalist similarly belongs; and an exceptionalist claim alludes to the coexistence and paralleling of different relationalities that recall either the alienness of strangers or the distinctiveness of the exceptionalist him/herself.

The resulting platforms of the exclusionary prerogative are aimed either at correcting, enhancing, or uniting strangers and failing members towards renovating the relevant relations, if this appears possible; or temporarily decoupling from them in a contrarian hope for opportunities to renovate the relations, if this appears dubious at the present time.<sup>15</sup>

(2012), pp. 33–55; Yuan-kang Wang, "The Myth of Chinese Exceptionalism: A Historical Perspective on China's Rise," in Vinod K. Aggarwal and Sara A. Newland, eds., *Responding to China's Rise: US and EU Strategies* (Berlin: Springer, 2015), pp. 51–74.

<sup>10</sup> Simona R. Soare, "Biden's Security Policy: Democratic Security or Democratic Exceptionalism?" *Intereconomics*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2021), pp. 14–20; Sally Weintrobe, *Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis: Neoliberal Exceptionalism and the Culture of Uncare* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021).

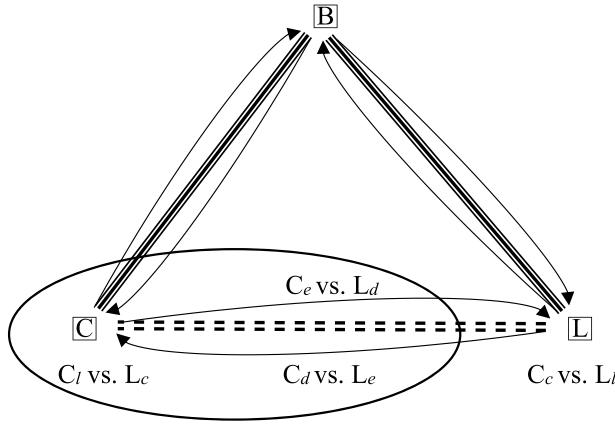
<sup>11</sup> Jabin T. Jacob and Bhim B Subba, "Towards Exceptionalism: The Communist Party of China and Its Uses of History," *China Report*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (2022), pp. 7–27; Courtney Fung, *China and Intervention at the UN Security Council: Reconciling Status* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Zhang Feng, "The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2011), pp. 305–28; Benjamin Ho, "Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism: China's Rise, Its Goodness, and Greatness," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2014), pp. 164–76.

<sup>12</sup> Iulian Chifu and Theodore Frunzet, "Trump Doctrine: The 'Principled Realism'," *Strategic Impact*, Vol. 68, No. 3–4 (2018), pp. 7–17.

<sup>13</sup> Yan Xuetong, "Political Leadership and Power Redistribution," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2016), pp. 1–26.

<sup>14</sup> Dennis R. Hoover, ed., *Religion and American Exceptionalism* (London: Routledge, 2018); Andreas Bøje Forsby, "The Non-Western Challenger: The Rise of a Sino-Centric China," *DIIS Report*, No. 16 (2011); William Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> John Ruggie, "American Exceptionalism, Exemptionalism and Global Governance," in Michael Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 304–38.



**Fig. 1.** The Relational Logic of Exceptionalism

: Mutually constituted relations between the relational self and the other  
: Ongoing expansion and coexistence between strangers  
: Relational practices  
: Field of exceptionalism between Confucianism and liberalism  
 B: Bridge actors  
 C: Confucian actors  
 L: Liberal actors  
 $c_l$ : Engagement: targeting the relational identity of the stranger or relational other  
 $c_c$ : Conversion: targeting the relational practices of the other or stranger  
 $d_c$ : Decoupling: targeting the relational practices of the self  
 $e_c$ : Learning: targeting the relational identity of the self

Logically, when two relational strangers meet (the bottom circle of Figure 1, between C and L), they can adapt by targeting either “the stranger” or “the self” in the hope that someone will change for the sake of mutual accommodation and, when enforcing the expected changes, changing either their “existential identities” or their “practices.” Combining two dimensions, four possibilities emerge here:

- 1) Correct the “strangers” relational “practices” through exemplification, role-making and taking, a long-armed jurisdiction, punitive sanctions, and so on, that echo the superiority consciousness of the self’s exceptionalism.
- 2) Convert the “strangers” relational “identity” through intervention, execution, revolution, conquest, subversion, or brainwashing, and possibly be forced to make an exception to the self’s own relational norms by accepting arbitrary violence.
- 3) Decouple the “self’s” relational “practices” from the stranger/defector through quarantine, isolation, containment, disengagement, and so on.
- 4) Learn and revise the “self’s” relational “identity” away from exceptionalism through un/learning, making exceptions, moving beyond missionary as well as superiority consciousness, and achieving expansion towards and coexistence with the stranger.

### Relational Expansion as a Necessity

The literature on comparative exceptionalism understandably attends to the internal/national sources of allegedly exceptionalist nations, and compares their claimed differences.<sup>16</sup> Implicit in such a conceptualisation, exceptionalism primarily reflects one’s own

<sup>16</sup> S. Jonathon O’Donnell, “Unipolar Dispensations: Exceptionalism, Empire, and the End of One America,” *Political Theology*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2019), pp. 66–84; Jeffrey Sachs, *A New Foreign Policy: Beyond American Exceptionalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Sven H. Steinmo, “American Exceptionalism Reconsidered: Culture or Institutions?” in Lawrence C. Dodd and Calvin Jillson, eds., *The Dynamics of American Politics: Approaches and Interpretations* (New York: Routledge), pp. 106–31.

internal/national conditions that incentivise exemption from the multilateral norms and rules. Even so, exceptionalism affirms multilateralism, because a legitimate claim of exemption must be an exception rather than a constant. For example, although Washington has yet to approve the Law of the Sea, it continues to enforce it upon the other national actors. In this particular case, exceptionalism not only affirms its multilateral identity but also insinuates the presence of a stranger or a defector under the Law of the Sea that should be corrected. These strangers either embrace their own versions of exceptionalism/exemptionism or belong to a different multilateral order. To that extent, exceptionalism that aims to enforce its multilateral order reflects an impulse to expand at the cost of the other multilateral order, which must be corrected.

We argue that the converting kind of exceptionalism is inevitably self-defeating. On the one hand, if, for an IR agenda, one thread of multilateralism could manage without another, then a balance-of-power analysis would ultimately suffice; relations would merely tag on to the power matrix between autonomous selves, and autonomous selves would not trust any multilateralism. However, engagement is far more typical than rivalry in IRs, even for exceptionalists. Engagement becomes particularly apparent for migrant or border populations that are not readily noticeable amid IR theorising. On the other hand, the expansion that aims simply to substitute one multilateral order for another would defy the imagined naturalness of all relational identities,<sup>17</sup> e.g., anarchy, the concept of Heaven, human rights, and so on, as if conquest and suppression constituted the sole path to expansion of the order.

A relational analysis would attend to how exceptionalist practices seek instead to strategise in some minimal or nominal way the acceptance of norms by strangers belonging to differing multilateral relationalities. To that extent, it is coexistence, rather than substitution, that inspires “nationalised” exceptionalism to revise the existing parameters and accommodate the encountered strangers, or the comparative “extra-local.”<sup>18</sup> All, including exceptionalists and strangers, are bound to be related. Exceptionalism thus offers the four aforementioned routes to remaining related.

Accordingly, all relational systems expand, with or without power, and that exceptionalism is an ironic practice that foregrounds the simultaneous processes of expansion and coexistence. Consider a relational system whose *members collectively reify certain consensual points of resemblance to constitute their acquaintance and solidarity, qua togetherness*.<sup>19</sup> A relational system requires multilateralism to coordinate its members’ togetherness. Consensual resemblance—embedded in shared ecology, genes, insecurity (imaginative as well as experiential), and living conventions, among others—being immediate and bestowed at birth, relationality is foundational to humanity, albeit taking into account the variances across groups of the selected points of resemblance that must be emphasised in order to enmesh each of them in certain characteristic identities. As being related pertains to ontological security, the danger of aborting multilateralism is most threatening. On the one hand, the multilateral order rejected or guarded against by strangers will appear to lack legitimacy, and ultimately allude to dispensability. On the other, a multilateral order that is professedly fungible will appear definitively threatening to strangers, and

<sup>17</sup> Anu Bradford and Eric A. Posner, “Universal Exceptionalism in International Law,” *Harvard International Law Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (2011), pp. 1–54.

<sup>18</sup> Sullivan de Estrada, “IR’s Recourse to Area Studies”; Robert R. Geyer, “Globalization, Europeanization, Complexity, and the Future of Scandinavian Exceptionalism,” *Governance*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2003), pp. 559–76.

<sup>19</sup> Miles M. Evers, “Just the Facts: Why Norms Remain Relevant in an Age of Practice,” *International Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2020), pp. 220–30; Simon Frankel Pratt, “From Norms to Normative Configurations: A Pragmatist and Relational Approach to Theorizing Normativity in IR,” *International Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2019), pp. 59–82.

likewise consider them threatening. This necessarily makes expansion and coexistence the twin missions if a relational system is to survive.<sup>20</sup>

To begin with, a relation cannot be limited within its own circles for fear this may harm its romanticised naturalness, e.g., the rights of nature, heavenly kinship, God's blessing, and the continental divide, and the associated vested relationality. Although the exceptionalist consciousness can evoke a missionary purpose at times,<sup>21</sup> for those (as included in the site B of Figure 1) lacking an imagined coherent relation, such as bilingual children, migrants, and colonies, their purpose may be merely to reconcile such differences through patience, which renders them a peculiar sort of civilisational bridge or "trialectical," or "non-aligned" platform.<sup>22</sup> This can be achieved in many different, creative ways, as subaltern, postcolonial, and feminist studies have repeatedly demonstrated.<sup>23</sup> Exceptionalism can embrace a hierarchical sensibility, however, that turns the self into a sort of "civiliser state."<sup>24</sup> Unilateral expansion to civilise or colonise strangers into a particular relation may easily appear self-centric through the latter's eyes, and hence backfire, despite often having been born of a good or spontaneous intent.<sup>25</sup>

In practice, even a civiliser state cannot help but un/learn. Un/learning moves theorisation beyond a specific, *qua* liberal, type of IRs.<sup>26</sup> Un/learning takes place when exceptionalist actors relinquish civilising, intervention, or isolation, and begin critically to reflect on the very existence of their own relational selves. As such, according to their own terms, they are not bounded by their present relationality, nor simply subjugated by the encountered relation. Eventually, all would have to adopt a pluriversal practice that is less identical to one another and yet simultaneously not so estranging<sup>27</sup> either. Attesting to a kind of "fuzziness,"<sup>28</sup> all cycle between various degrees of un/learning and exceptionalism.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas P. Narins and John Agnew, "Missing from the Map: Chinese Exceptionalism, Sovereignty Regimes and the Belt Road Initiative," *Geopolitics*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2020), pp. 809–37; Chih Yuan Woon, "China's Contingencies: Critical Geopolitics, Chinese Exceptionalism and the Uses of History," *Geopolitics*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2018), pp. 67–95.

<sup>21</sup> Hugh De Santis, *The Right to Rule: American Exceptionalism and the Coming Multipolar World Order* (Lanham: Lexington, 2021); Abram C. van Engen, *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); David P. Fields, *Foreign Friends, Syngman Rhee, American Exceptionalism, and the Division of Korea* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Lily H. M. Ling, "Three-ness: Healing World Politics with Epistemic Compassion," *Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2019), pp. 35–49; Chacko Priya, "A New 'Special Relationship'?: Power Transitions, Ontological Security, and India-US Relations," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2014), pp. 329–46.

<sup>23</sup> Chih-yu Shih, *Eros of International Relations: Self-feminization and the Claiming of Postcolonial Chineseness* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2022); Chih-yu Shih, "Knowledge as Civilizational Role Play: China Watching by its Southern Neighbours," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 12 (2019), pp. 2170–89; Chih-yu Shih and Chiung-chiu Huang, "Bridging Civilizations through Nothingness: Manchuria as Nishida Kitaro's 'Place'," *Comparative Civilizations Review*, Vol. 65, No. 65 (2011), pp. 4–17.

<sup>24</sup> Veena Ramachandran, "Harmonization to Exceptionalism: The Trajectory of Post-Civil War Sino-Sri Lankan Relations," *World Affairs*, Vol. 186, No. 2 (2023), pp. 384–413; Peter Van Ness, "Collapse of Moral Authority and the End of the Civilizer State: Comparing Two Cases—Mao's China and George W. Bush's United States," *EAI Fellows Program Working Paper Series*, No. 37 (2012); Kevo K. Oskanian, "A Very Ambiguous Empire: Russia's Hybrid Exceptionalism," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (2018), pp. 26–52.

<sup>25</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is Chinese Exceptionalism Undermining China's Foreign Policy Interests?" in Jennifer Rudolph, ed., *The China Questions: Critical Insights into a Rising Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 90–8; William V. Spanos, *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Specter of Vietnam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); David Hastings Dunn, "Isolationism Revisited: Seven Persistent Myths in the Contemporary American Foreign Policy Debate," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2005), pp. 237–61.

<sup>26</sup> Xiaoting Li, "Saving National IR from Exceptionalism: The Dialogic Spirit and Self-Reflection in Chinese IR Theory," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2021), pp. 1399–423; Amitav Acharya, "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2014), pp. 647–59; Peter Katzenstein, ed., *Sinicization and the Rise of China: Civilizational Processes beyond East and West* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Amaya Querejazu, "Cosmopraxis: Relational Method for a Pluriversal IR," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (2022), pp. 875–90; Milja Kurki, "Relational Revolution and Relationality in IR: New Conversations," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (2022), pp. 821–36.

<sup>28</sup> Narins and Agnew, "Missing from the Map," pp. 809–37.

Accordingly, un/learning refers to the process of *realising that one's self-understanding is incomplete in breadth, inconsistent in time, and insufficient in depth.*

Liberal and Confucian exceptionalisms differ in their cosmological assumptions upon which the two multilateral cultures respectively evolve. In a nutshell, liberal multilateralism originated in everyone's similar rights of nature. Contriving universal rules for those like ones thus offers a plausible, appropriate style of governance.<sup>29</sup> Encountering strangers requires the use of an extra-relational intervention in order to convert them, because they know of no humanhood that is informed by such rights.<sup>30</sup> American exceptionalism hence heeds the call for such interventionary leadership. In contrast to America's externally transcendent status, under Confucianism everyone, regardless of their differences, is an insider. Universal rules are not plausible unless all share the same identity. Confucian relationality conceals differences through mutual benevolence, exemplified through the metaphorical concept of heaven. Those failing to show benevolence, therefore, would threaten everyone else's relationality, so rendering them all strangers. What constitutes Confucian power, therefore, is that which is relational and supposedly spontaneous, by virtue of everyone's voluntarily joining forces with the metaphorical father.<sup>31</sup> Chinese exceptionalism lies in the self-image of China as the world's most benevolent site. As such, transcendence is self-sacrifice; i.e., selflessness, under Confucianism, as opposed to self-fulfilment under liberalism. Exceptionalism that galvanises the distinctive self is anathema to Confucians. Rather, a true exceptionalist can do without self-regard.

## The Absence of the Exceptionalism Discourse in Chinese Multilateralism

The literature on American exceptionalism, intrinsically religious as it is, studies why and how American liberalism became rooted in the USA's internal conditions,<sup>32</sup> accounting for an original state that sets the USA apart as the destiny of human history.<sup>33</sup> The American elite generally understands, even if it disagrees with, the exceptionalist claim and the mission it inspires.<sup>34</sup> Despite the rule-based governmentality informed by liberalism, liberal measures do not inhibit exceptionalist America from either enforcing the rules or ensuring its superiority.<sup>35</sup> Exceptionalist America and those rule-following others are like nations—former settler/coloniser states. The triumph of America, therefore, is ultimately their own. The super power of which America is possessed obviates peer competition<sup>36</sup> and solidifies

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Lucian Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

<sup>32</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America, An Interpretation of American Political thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1955); Monica Prasad, *The Land of Too Much* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: Vintage, 1945).

<sup>33</sup> Timothy Roberts and Lindsay DiCuirci, eds., *American Exceptionalism: Millennial Aspirations and Providentialism* (London: Routledge, 2013); Arthur Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

<sup>34</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Evan S. Medeiros and Ashley J. Tellis, "Regime Change Is Not an Option in China: Focus on Beijing's Behavior, Not Its Leadership," *Foreign Affairs*, 8 July 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-07-08/regime-change-not-option-china>; Jason Gilmore, "Translating American Exceptionalism: Comparing Presidential Discourse about the United States at Home and Abroad," *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2014), pp. 2416–37; Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> See Joshua Rosenfeld, "Are China and the U.S. Long-term Enemies?" *Asia Society*, 14 October 2015, <https://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/debate-are-us-and-china-long-term-enemies>; Anonymous, "The Longer Telegram: Toward a New American China Strategy," *Atlantic Council Strategic Papers*, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Longer-Telegram-Toward-A-New-American-China-Strategy.pdf>.

its exceptional status through enforcing rule-based governance. In short, this transcendent quality invokes, metaphorically, God's role.<sup>37</sup>

According to the literature, contemporary Chinese exceptionalism has also been associated with the concept of China as a nation state,<sup>38</sup> i.e., the People's Republic of China (PRC). The points most frequently stressed include civilisational longevity, national humiliation, and Socialism with Chinese characteristics, alongside the more recent, faddish China model. Combined, they have rendered China an exceptionalist nation, as regards its history as well as mission in the world.<sup>39</sup> With the exception of the Cultural Revolution, however, which represents a lacuna in the literature on exceptionalism and a divergence from the above-mentioned aspects of Chinese exceptionalism, such points may, in any event, have seemed insignificant, if not entirely irrelevant to the PRC's diplomatic platforms. In rhetoric, exceptionalism of this internal sort consistently gives way to the claim to normalcy in regard to the PRC's role in the world. This requires self-conscious avoidance of any Chinese exceptionalist identity.<sup>40</sup>

China's normal statehood, which is best signified by the world's—especially former coloniser states'—acceptance of China's equality and integrity, connotes a willingness to comply with the consensual rules of the time, and implicitly, therefore, a multilateral commitment.<sup>41</sup> Ironically, if the core of the PRC's multilateral commitment has been the rest of the world's acceptance of it as a normal country, its leaders must now attend to the unique needs of many other countries, as well as its own,<sup>42</sup> each according to their own conditions, that make them exceptions to Western rules and norms; e.g., Pyongyang and Islamabad, accused of nuclearisation; Naypyidaw and Juba, accused of ethnic cleansing; and Ankara, Bucharest, and Caracas, accused of illiberalism. This irony leads to an ostensibly self-contradictory style of multilateralism that simultaneously observes the consensual rules whereby to attain points of resemblance with former coloniser states, and to shield unwilling, unready countries from certain of these rules.<sup>43</sup>

To reconcile these self-contradictory commitments and achieve each dyad's acceptance and intimacy, a materialist emphasis on tangible contributions is considered essential.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Prasad, *The Land of Too Much*; Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History*.

<sup>38</sup> Cai Congyan, *The Rise of China and International Law: Taking Chinese Exceptionalism Seriously* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Johnston, "Is Chinese Exceptionalism Undermining China's Foreign Policy Interests?"; Benjamin Ho, "Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism"; Benjamin Ho, *China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism: International Order and Global Leadership* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

<sup>39</sup> Ktarína Sárvári, "Modern Constructions of China's Exceptional Relations," *Köz-gazdaság*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2019), pp. 282–92.

<sup>40</sup> Bing Bing Jia, "Reflections on Chinese Scholarship and Perspectives Regarding International Law—The Rise of China and International Law: Taking Chinese Exceptionalism Seriously," *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 116, No. 3 (2022), pp. 653–63.

<sup>41</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2019), pp. 9–60; Astrid H. M. Nordin and Graham M. Smith, "Reintroducing Friendship to International Relations: Relational Ontologies from China to the West," *International Relations of Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2018), pp. 369–96; Chih-yu Shih, "Assigning Role Characteristics to China: The Role State versus the Ego State," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2012), pp. 71–91; Allen Carlson, *Unifying China, Integrating with the World: Securing Chinese Sovereignty in the Reform Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> Christian Müller, "Between Adoption and Resistance: China's Efforts of 'Understanding the West', the Challenges of Transforming Monarchical Legitimacy and the Rise of Oriental Exceptionalism, 1860–1910," in H. K. Chan, F. K. S. Chan, and D. O'Brien, eds., *International Flows in the Belt and Road Initiative Context* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 219–52.

<sup>43</sup> Matthieu Burnay, *Chinese Perspective on the International Rule of Law: Law and Politics in the One-Party State* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2018); Chih-yu Shih and Chiung-chiu Huang, "Preaching Self-Responsibility: The Chinese Style of Global Governance," *The Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 22, No. 79 (2013), pp. 351–65.

<sup>44</sup> Jorg Kustermans, "Gift-giving as a Source of International Authority," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2019), pp. 395–426; Dominik Nijezewski and Bartosz Kowalski, *China's Selective Identities: State, Ideology and Culture* (Berlin: Springer, 2018); Lina Benabdallah, "Power or Influence? Making Sense of China's Evolving Party-to-party Diplomacy in Africa," *African Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 3–4 (2020), pp. 95–119.

A materialistic contribution can neutralise the rhetoric of value, discretely meet the needs of different others, and adapt to the changing context that arises on each occasion.<sup>45</sup> Note that materialism coincides with the common propensity of Marxism and Confucianism to care about the living conditions of the lower classes.<sup>46</sup> The Confucian justification for an exception to peace and harmony rests unfailingly on materialistic concepts, such as famine and unequal distribution.<sup>47</sup> The main aim of exceptional measures under Confucianism is to foreground the spontaneous support of the populace for the removal of oppressors, rather than to establish or enforce consensual rules.

As a result, the focus of Chinese multilateralism is not on discovering how we are all minimally like human beings, but rather on providing benevolence that makes an impression on how we accept each other,<sup>48</sup> despite our obvious differences. Such acceptance, or belonging sensibilities, amount to: (1) China's equal membership of international organisations; (2) advocacy for peace, harmony, and development;<sup>49</sup> and (3) role play in context.<sup>50</sup> All pertain to mutual acceptance, reified through the paying of fees, qualifying of sanctions against violators, boycotting of unilateralism, mediating of local conflicts, abstention rather than taking sides, connecting the so-called failing states, and arranging zero-interest loans, for a few examples. Such acceptance resonates with the spirits of two Chinese domestic institutionalisms.<sup>51</sup> One is that of Chinese political consultation and its mobilisation institutions, whereby as wide a spectrum of sectors and strata as possible is invited to articulate for themselves.<sup>52</sup> In the case of multilateralism, this particular spirit denotes inclusivity. The other spirit is that of decentralised implementation,<sup>53</sup> whereby local actors determine for themselves how to execute a policy orientation. Such multilateralism embraces the ideal of no war, no intervention, and no poverty.

Without referring to any of those above-mentioned internal sources of exceptionalism, PRC President Xi Jinping believes that nations can be pulled together through adversity in a shared development-oriented humanity.<sup>54</sup> Foreign Minister Wang Yi accordingly elaborates on Chinese multilateralism:

<sup>45</sup> Marina Rudyak and Lauren Johnston, "China's 'Innovative and Pragmatic' Foreign Aid: How China's Aid Program Is Shaped by and Shaping Globalization," *Policy Forum*, 5 September 2017, <https://www.policyforum.net/chinas-innovative-pragmatic-foreign-aid/>; Allan Chan, L. Trey Denton, and Alex S. L. Tsang, "The Art of Gift Giving in China," *Business Horizons*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (2003), pp. 47–52.

<sup>46</sup> Jana S. Rošker, "Modernization of Chinese Philosophical Methodology," *Asian Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2. (2021), pp. 121–41; Rachel Fedock, Michael Kuhler, and Raja Rosenhagen, eds., *Love, Justice, and Autonomy: Philosophical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>47</sup> Mencius specifically likened famine to leaders "leading on beasts to devour men." See Chapter Teng Wen Gong II, *Mencius*.

<sup>48</sup> Tavis D. Jules, Richard Arnold, and Abigail Smith, "Caribbean Exceptionalism and the Rise of Sino-CARICOM Relations in the Post-bureaucratic Era," *The Round Table*, Vol. 112, No. 1 (2023), pp. 57–72.

<sup>49</sup> Astrid H. M. Nordin, *China's International Relations and Harmonious world: Time, Space and Multiplicity in World Politics* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016); Callahan, "Sino-speak," pp. 33–55.

<sup>50</sup> Chih-yu Shih, "Role and Relation in Confucian IR: Relating to Strangers in the State of Nature," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (2021), pp. 910–29; Shih, "Assigning Role Characteristics to China."

<sup>51</sup> Matthieu Burnay, *Chinese Perspectives on the International Rule of Law*.

<sup>52</sup> Anna L. Ahlers, "Political Inclusion in Contemporary China," *Journal of Chinese Governance*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2019), pp. 201–6.

<sup>53</sup> Raoul Bunschoek and Chih-yu Shih, "'Community of Common Destiny' as Post-Western Regionalism: Rethinking China's Belt and Road Initiative from a Confucian Perspective," *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 18, No. 70 (2021), pp. 85–101; Yuen Yuen Ang, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap* (Ithaca: New York, Cornell University Press, 2016); Tianbiao Zhu, "Compressed Development, Flexible Practices, and Multiple Traditions in China's Rise," in Peter Katzenstein, ed., *Simicization and the Rise of China: Civilizational Processes beyond East and West* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 99–119.

<sup>54</sup> Xi Jinping, "Pulling Together Through Adversity and Toward a Shared Future for All," a keynote speech given at the Boao Forum 2021, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202104/20/WS607e62d4a31024ad0ba6b6a7.html>.

[G]enuine multilateralism should be based on adherence to the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter and the basic norms governing international relations. We should adhere to respect for national sovereignty as well as equality of all countries, big or small; adhere to the diversity of the world, and respect for legitimate development rights of all countries and development paths of their own choice; adhere to consultation and negotiation in international affairs, and democracy in international relations ... [W]orld peace, stability and development could be maintained only by upholding genuine multilateralism.<sup>55</sup>

## Exception and Exemptionalism in Confucianism

These concerns regarding inclusiveness, decentralisation, peace, harmony, development, and role-play were compliant with and embedded in the Confucian world order long before the emergence of the nation state.<sup>56</sup> This Confucian theme refers specifically to the mandate of heaven (MoH). Seemingly incongruent with the MoH, however, Confucius advised that a public career should be rejected when the polity is too morally corrupt to be governable.<sup>57</sup> Such self-quarantine from public affairs entails abandoning benevolence towards others. Most significant is Confucius' judgment that the oppressor's "tyranny is fiercer than tigers" and, for Xunzi, that the oppressor should summarily be overthrown.<sup>58</sup> Mencius went further in holding that slaying is the proper way to deal with an oppressor.<sup>59</sup> To that extent, when it is clearly not being followed, the MoH acts as a licence to choose between Confucius' isolation and Mencius' slaying.<sup>60</sup>

Killing and conquest were culpable topics under Confucianism. Confucius was reluctant to welcome even "just" killing, which might sound more acceptable, but to him hardly seemed better practice.<sup>61</sup> For Confucius, the best situation would be to end corrupt governance and revive good governance through exemplification, which is definitively better than killing.<sup>62</sup> Even so, he refrained from advising his students to shun princes who had killed unethically, as long as their subsequent reign displayed benevolence towards their people.<sup>63</sup> Historical records show that Confucius once executed an eloquent peer of his—Shaozheng Mao—while in service to the Duke of Lu. This engendered debate over the ensuing millennia about Confucius' prudence. Whichever view is taken, the justification for killing actually points to the Confucian alienation from such exceptionalism. After all, killing would institutionalise negativity as an aspect of normalcy, which, in Mencius' words, embraces the lesson that "he who takes no pleasure in killing men can be accepted anywhere."<sup>64</sup> For Confucianism, these above-mentioned incidents by no means signify exceptionalism, although they certainly act as examples of exception when the occasion calls for them.

<sup>55</sup> Wang Yi, "Four Adherences' and 'Three Oppositions' are Needed for Genuine Multilateralism," 13 January 2021, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/gjhdq\\_665435/2675\\_665437/2716\\_663436/2718\\_663440/202101/20210114\\_514186.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2716_663436/2718_663440/202101/20210114_514186.html).

<sup>56</sup> Lena Benabdallah, "Spanning Thousands of Miles and Years: Political Nostalgia and China's Revival of the Silk Road," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (2021), pp. 294–305.

<sup>57</sup> See *The Analects*, Chapter Tai Bo.

<sup>58</sup> Chapter Tan Gong II, *The Book of Rites*. Xunzi referred to overthrowing in a metaphor of water overthrowing the boat in *Xunzi*, Chapter Duke Ai.

<sup>59</sup> Sungmoon Kim, "Mencius on International relations and the Morality of War: From the Perspective of Confucian Moralpolitik," *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2010), pp. 33–56.

<sup>60</sup> According to Mencius, executing Zhou, the last king of the Shang Dynasty, was about the "slaying of a despot, never any regicide." See *Mencius*, Chapter King Hui of Liang II.

<sup>61</sup> Killing the last emperor of Shang Dynasty, Zhou, was "perfectly beautiful but not perfectly good." See *The Analects*, Chapter Ba Yi.

<sup>62</sup> Confucius: "Why do you rely on killing to govern? Striving for what is good, you make the people good." See *The Analects*, Chapter Yan Yuan.

<sup>63</sup> "... being benevolent, as such, being sufficiently benevolent, as such." See *The Analects*, Chapter Xian Wen.

<sup>64</sup> *Mencius*, Chapter Duke Hui of Liang I.

In order to expound further on Confucianism's tacit exceptionalism, it is useful to infer a conceptual distinction between exceptionalism and exception. The notion of exception refers to a practice that would not be followed other than on an unusual occasion, and which, therefore, is followed not to attain the actor's personal goal but to demonstrate *benevolence toward someone else*. In comparison, exceptionalism is pursued to *attain the actor's personal goal*. In this regard, Confucianism is not disposed to embrace exceptionalism.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, however, Confucianism is willing to recommend exceptions for the sake of relating to a stranger, or reproducing and restoring a relationship.<sup>66</sup> To the extent that making exceptions for others is inconvenient, it is hence an act of self-sacrifice/benevolence. In short, instead of appreciating the agency of the self to fulfil the like identity of the members of the group, Confucianism pits the self against that group. In actuality, Confucian exceptionalism preaches self-disciplining for anyone disposed to assume the MoH, signified by the spontaneous joining of forces with others. The selected sacrifice, by making discrete exceptions for all, each according to their need, hence maintains peace and harmony through promoting continuous relational renovation.<sup>67</sup>

In the same vein, civilising, another platform of modern exceptionalism, is also of little interest to Confucianism. Confucius was conscious of the difference between the civilised ways of his life and those of an alien—which included “untied hair” and “left-tied clothes,”<sup>68</sup> yet the sage was unenthusiastic about actively converting the alien, because that was their own choice. Confucius was also confident that the remote, alien land would accept him, as long as he acted sincerely and faithfully.<sup>69</sup> Civilising was not a significant issue, rather the fact that he himself was sufficiently virtuous to deserve respect. Therefore, in line with the Confucian sensibilities regarding peace and harmony, civilising referred mainly to the performance of rituals to honour filial piety and its application to princes.<sup>70</sup> Such a focus on formality likewise alludes to a disinterest in others' way of life.

As such, the control of curiosity as to how strangers behave is a derived intellectual proclivity under Confucianism. After all, educating people to care about others' acceptance by behaving benevolently towards them is the key to maintaining peace and harmony. Knowledge *vis-à-vis* a stranger is considered proper only if learning can provide a clue as to what role and benevolence to improvise for that stranger.<sup>71</sup> This epistemological disinterest, in general, contrasts sharply with the liberal intellectual traditions, wherein curiosity is a vehicle for reproducing the consensual likeness (of God) and designing comparative studies aimed at converting aliens. The contrast also explains Confucianism's lack of interventionary ethics. In fact, identity sensibilities, which reveal the differences between people, would destabilise the Confucian ethical order, embedded as it is in the metaphorical (heavenly) fatherhood.<sup>72</sup> For liberal multilateralism, however, it is essential that an educated judgement be made regarding the extent to which a stranger is disposed towards rule-based governance, qualified for solidarity, and excused from intervention.

<sup>65</sup> Adam William Chalmers and Susanna Theresia Mocker, “The End of Exceptionalism? Explaining Chinese National Oil Companies' Overseas Investment,” *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2017), pp. 119–43.

<sup>66</sup> Narins and Agnew, “Missing from the Map,” pp. 809–37.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *The Analects*, Chapter Xian Wen.

<sup>69</sup> *The Analects*, Chapter Wei Ling Gong. Both Chapter Zi Han and Chapter Zi Lu mention living with the alien.

<sup>70</sup> Confucius carried out a detailed enquiry in the temple of heavenly worship, wherein he would sacrifice precious sheep to honour the system of propriety. *The Analects*, Chapter Ba Yi.

<sup>71</sup> Therefore, according to Zi Xia, one who has received no schooling is nonetheless a learned person if faithful to his/her parents, the prince, and his/her friends. See Zi Xia's remarks in Chapter Xueer of the *Analects*. However, Confucius himself denies any knowledge regarding the ritual of heavenly worship, which ought to be exclusively that pertaining to the prince. See Confucius' remark in Chapter Ba Yi of *The Analects*. Jana S. Rošker, “Traditional Chinese Epistemology: The Structural Compatibility of Mind and External World,” *Zhengda zhongwen xuebao (Bulletin of the Department of Chinese Literature National Chengchi University)*, No. 17 (2012), pp. 1–16.

<sup>72</sup> Confucius felt “less worried if people's (self-)identities were not known to others than if they did not know each other.” He felt concerned that “people are incapable of being benevolent.” *The Analects*, Chapters Xue Er and Xian Wen.

According to Confucianism, heavenly reason imbues everyone; thus everyone is bound to be related.<sup>73</sup> A social psychology hypothesis based on Confucianism might be: *not being related causes anxiety*.<sup>74</sup> Normatively, the MoH obliges all to negotiate mutually compatible roles for each other. Empirically, it envisages the inevitability of mutual role-making. The heavenly way produces many thousand varieties of living things (*wanwu*) that cannot share any point of resemblance on a grand scale.<sup>75</sup> Confucius was disposed to employ the kinship metaphor to generate rituals and roles for these things.<sup>76</sup> Thus, leaders are parents and people are children—both of whom should accept each other without interrogating their vast differences. Parents' acts of material or reproductive benevolence towards children are essential to making parental roles credible, thus highlighting the romanticised naturalness of hierarchical yet selfless relationships. Presuming everyone's need for security is met, all will accept these ritualised kinship roles. Rituals not only periodically remind individuals of their roles but also oblige the display of benevolence in accordance with such roles.<sup>77</sup>

Both the slaying of and isolation from the oppressor point consistently to the exceptional renunciation of peace and harmony. The controversy lies, first: in who can claim possession of the MoH; and second, in the irony of engaging in killing in order to prevent killing. Confucianism generally posits that, ultimately, only those displaying the greatest benevolence may enjoy sufficient support from the people to attain the MoH,<sup>78</sup> and are hence justified by the result. Accordingly, Confucian power involves moral power, which a leader does not automatically possess.<sup>79</sup> It is rather the recipients of benevolence that are ultimately the owners of the moral power whereby to determine whom to follow.<sup>80</sup> In short, in possessing a limited war capacity, the possessor of the MoH must have earlier anticipated the support they needed to eliminate the oppressor. This cosmology is still embraced by the Communist Party of China (CPC) today.<sup>81</sup> Being ever better related testifies to possessing the MoH, and hence exceptionalist quality to lead.

In comparison, liberal exceptionalism concerns self-defence on the part of an autonomous state. For an exceptionalist nation, i.e., a hegemonic nation, possessing sufficient power is considered the ultimate guarantee of universal, rule-based governance. Although the USA follows consensual rules, in its capacity as guardian of the rules it

<sup>73</sup> Tingyang Zhao, "All-under-heaven and Methodological Relationalism," in Fred Dallmayr, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), pp. 46–66; Daniel Bell, "Preface," in Daniel Bell, ed., *Confucian Political Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. ix–xiv; Daniel Bell, "The Making and Unmaking of Boundaries: A Contemporary Confucian Perspective," in A. Buchanan and M. Moore, eds., *States, Nations and Borders: The Ethics of Making Boundaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 57–85; Shih, "Role and Relation in Confucian IR."

<sup>74</sup> William Callahan, "Dreaming as a Critical Discourse of National Belonging: China Dream, American Dream and World Dream," *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2017), pp. 248–70.

<sup>75</sup> Tingyang Zhao, *Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Lily H. M. Ling, *The Dao of World Politics: Towards a Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>76</sup> "Between the ten thousand different and scattering things, the rituals operate," *The Book of Rites*, Chapter Yue Ji; "Rituals set the ten thousand things in peace," *The Book of Rites*, Chapter Jiao Te Shen.

<sup>77</sup> Qiyog Guo and Tao Cui, "The Values of Confucian Benevolence and the Universality of the Confucian Way of Extending Love," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2012), pp. 20–54.

<sup>78</sup> Lena Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>79</sup> Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*.

<sup>80</sup> Bruce Dickson, *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*.

<sup>81</sup> Ian Johnson, "A Most Adaptable Party," *The New York Review*, 1 July 2021, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2021/07/01/chinese-communist-party-most-adaptable/>.

simultaneously transcends them.<sup>82</sup> Liberal governmentality, thus, alienates Confucian multilateralism, wherein everyone caters for every other actor differently according to their capacity and need. Combining gift-giving, benevolence, and rituals of selflessness obliges all others to reciprocate by accepting the differences between China and them. This keeps the rules to a minimum, perhaps reduced solely to the principle of no killing, and also rejects intervention. From the perspective of rule-based governance, therefore, Confucian multilateralism can be regarded as revisionism.<sup>83</sup>

China can experiment with the different styles of coexistence emanating from Confucian and liberal relationalities.<sup>84</sup> In contrast, learning about the normalcy of an encountered stranger could pose a challenge for American exceptionalism, unless its adherents first unlearned the concomitant belief that rule-based governance embedded in rights sensibilities fits all.<sup>85</sup> Once the CPC is able to perform well in the market and enhance its capacity for providing benevolence to others, while simultaneously neutralising the consensual norms between liberal countries, the perception of existential threat is doomed periodically to emerge,<sup>86</sup> despite the CPC's celebration of the market's inclusion in a socialist system.

Therefore, a peculiar kind of benevolence arises to suit the occasion; i.e., learning and performing a liberal norm that appears to be of utmost importance to the liberal stranger at the time.<sup>87</sup> This can occur at the societal level, too, through mingling, which allows populaces to adapt in accordance with the context rather than being compelled to adhere consistently to one particular norm. Through this varied mixture, liberals and liberalism are no longer complete strangers to Confucian societies.<sup>88</sup> Exceptions have accordingly been made to cater for the feelings of the liberal nations in different contexts, but these do not last forever. A field of interaction emerges between Confucian and liberal relationalities (Figure 1). The field hosts the dialectics of decoupling and engagement of both liberal and Confucian states. In addition, it involves the interventionary agenda of the liberal state and the un/learning of the Confucian state to enhance inclusiveness. Amidst the tendency of both to expand, they are destined to undergo fuzzy cycles of coexistence, confrontation, and alienation.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>82</sup> The White House, "The New Atlantic Charter," 10 June 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/10/the-new-atlantic-charter/>.

<sup>83</sup> Lucian Jora, "China's Exceptionalism in IR and some Paradigms of 'The New World Order,'" *Romanian Review of Political Sciences & International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2022), pp. 113–21.

<sup>84</sup> Tingyang Zhao, "Ontology of Coexistence: Relations and Hearts," *Philosophical Researches*, No. 8 (2009), pp. 22–30; Tingyang Zhao, "An Interpretation of Harmony in Terms of Confucian Improvement," *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2009), pp. 113–26; Lily H. M. Ling, "Borders of Our Minds: Territories, Boundaries, and Power in the Confucian Tradition," in A. Buchanan and M. Moore, eds., *States, Nations and Borders: The Ethics of Making Boundaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 86–100.

<sup>85</sup> Kim Tallbear and Angela Willey, "Critical Relationality: Queer, Indigenous, and Multispecies Belonging beyond Settler Sex and Nature," *Imaginations*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2019), pp. 10–5; Anthony Burke et al., "Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR," *Millennium*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2016), pp. 495–523.

<sup>86</sup> For a recent example, see the "Strategic Competition Act of 2021" at <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/DAV21598%20-%20Strategic%20Competition%20Act%20of%202021.pdf>.

<sup>87</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *China and the International Order* (Santa Monica: Rand, 2018).

<sup>88</sup> Jinba Tenzin, "Rethinking the Rise of China: A Postcolonial Critique of China and a Chinese Critique of the Postcolonial," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2022), pp. 83–106; Xuetong Yan, "Chinese Values vs. Liberalism: What Ideology Will Shape the International Normative Order?" *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2018), pp. 1–22.

<sup>89</sup> Petros C. Mavroidis and André Sapir, *China and the WTO: Why Multilateralism Still Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Yeling Tan, "How the WTO Changed China: The Mixed Legacy of Economic Engagement," *Foreign Affairs*, 16 February 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-02-16/how-wto-changed-china>; Narins and Agnew, "Missing from the Map."

## Exceptionalism and the Emotion/Anger

### The Personal and the State Person's Anger

The second aspect of our critique of the literature is its inattention to exceptionalism as an emotion, specifically, anger. The presence or absence of anger, as well as whether or not such anger attests to a distinctive identity or role relationship, is a predictor of the strength and policy orientation of exceptionalism. Given that exceptionalism contrarily reflects the existence of a multilateral relation, the emotion prompting, as well as sustaining it, must therefore also be relational.

As Andrew Ross puts it, “Affect is not a property of an individual but a capacity of a body that brings it into some specific social relation, such as a nation or political movement.”<sup>90</sup> Yet, the question of why and how actors affect international political outcomes through the expression of anger has attracted scant research attention. This is probably because the definitions of anger vary widely within the study of politics and IRs,<sup>91</sup> and analytical references to it hardly attend to the relational nature of anger. The consequence pertains to the confusion about the anger of a person and the anger of a state.

Instead of Xi Jinping’s “personal” anger,<sup>92</sup> for example, “wolf diplomacy” has become a popular yet negative portrayal of an allegedly exceptionalist China as a whole.<sup>93</sup> In other words, state persons,<sup>94</sup> as opposed to angry leaders, are not perceived as angry just because their leaders act angrily. In contrast to “China’s anger” in collective terms, thus to represent the entire nation as angry,<sup>95</sup> leaders of the Anglosphere rarely emerge in collectivity. One mainly hears more about US leaders’ personal anger than about nations’ collective anger. Personal anger that comes with an exceptionalist claim, as if something seriously wrong is in need of correction, justifies unilateral action. Through the lenses of individualist and liberal traditions, the masses, under authoritarian circumstances, would appear incapable of expressing anger without mobilisation.<sup>96</sup> To that extent, exceptionalism informed by the state person’s anger is not justified in the eyes of the practitioners of liberal exceptionalism.

In the Anglosphere, leaders do not need to represent physically their citizens’ collective emotions, nor to investigate whether or not the citizens are indeed angry, because leaders are like individuals by virtue of their allegedly universal humanity. All individuals are hence presumably capable of empathising with their leaders’ anger. Anger is not destructive for a leader in the individualist culture, because it displays humanity, passion, and even

<sup>90</sup> Andrew Ross, “Coming in from the Cold: Constructivism and Emotions,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2006), p. 213.

<sup>91</sup> This is true in a general sense. Jonathan Turner, “The Sociology of Emotions: Basic Theoretical Arguments,” *Emotion Review*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (2009), pp. 340–54. Specifically on anger, see Thomas Dixon, “What Is the History of Anger a History of?,” *Emotions: History, Culture, Society*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2020), pp. 1–34; or Charles D. Spielberger and Eric C. Reheiser, “The Nature and Measurement of Anger,” in Michael Potegal, Gerhard Stemmler, and Charles Spielberger, eds., *International Handbook of Anger: Constituent and Concomitant Biological, Psychological, and Social Processes* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2010), pp. 403–12.

<sup>92</sup> Jessica Chen Weiss, “How Hawkish Is the Chinese Public? Another Look at ‘Rising Nationalism’ and Chinese Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 119 (2019), pp. 679–95.

<sup>93</sup> Peter Gries and Richard Turcsányi, “Chinese Pride and European Prejudice: How Growing Resentment of China Cools Feelings toward Chinese in Europe,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 61, No. 5 (2021), pp. 742–66.

<sup>94</sup> Alexander Wendt, “The State as Person in International Theory,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2004), pp. 289–316.

<sup>95</sup> “Angry China,” *The Economist*, 3 May 2008, <https://www.economist.com/weeklyedition/2008-05-03>; also see Oxford Analytica, “Taipei Will Bear the Brunt of Beijing’s Anger,” *Expert Briefings*, 11 January 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1108/OXAN-ES217216>.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, Andrew Chubb, “Assessing Public Opinion’s Influence on Foreign Policy: The Case of China’s Assertive Maritime Behavior,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2019), pp. 159–79; Regina Heller, “More Rigor to Emotions: A Comparative, Qualitative Content Analysis of Anger in Russian Foreign Policy,” in Maéva Clément and Eric Sangar, eds., *Researching Emotions in International Relations* (London: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 75–99.

integrity.<sup>97</sup> Even so, both personal and collective anger can likewise shift towards strategic anger.

In the Confucian tradition, passion in leaders is unappreciated, because they are supposed to be selfless. But a universal style of anger likewise exists. As Heaven is conceived of as the *genesis of everything known* that determines the ultimate connection among it, everyone is cosmologically bound to be related.<sup>98</sup> Any rejection of attempts to improve, establish, and reproduce the proper relationships, usually through conceding exceptions, instantly violates that relationality, and denies the other party's role, thus incurring anger and fear. Therefore, relational anger in general at the rejection of gift-giving, concessions, a ritualised hierarchy, royal marriage, and more, improvised for the making of mutual roles, has a universal underpinning, because all presumably understand the seriousness of rejecting mutual belonging. In short, when crafting exceptions for someone, their expected appreciation is a signal to others who on future occasions will likewise receive specially crafted exceptional treatments whereby to assess the exceptional leader's credibility.

Under Confucianism's other-exception agenda, to be noted is that anger empowers small nations. Given its contextualised, flexible nature, role-making manifests a Confucian community of bilateral relationships.<sup>99</sup> Given its multiplicity, being embedded in reciprocated exceptions, such bilateralism is conducive to pluriversalism rather than universalism. As both parties can enact the role of anger in the face of a perceived betrayal, anger is always potentially contagious.<sup>100</sup> Anger is hence the universal soft power, because anger can either deny or insist on the worth of the other, alongside the observing third party. Thus even the most powerful cannot always prevail because their role relations are vulnerable to denial.

### Exceptionalism Embedded in Relational Anger

The exceptionalist emotion can spread among those other national actors that share a sense of togetherness in desiring the expansion of an order, and among the domestic audience that shares the claim of distinctiveness, but not among strangers. This relational necessity is in addition to the major concern regarding the literature on emotion, primarily that of the identity function of a national actor.<sup>101</sup> For the purpose of differentiating, but connecting, liberal and Confucian exceptionalism, we will focus on relational anger in the practice of exceptionalism. We adopt a simple definition, while recognising that there exists no universally accepted set of terms for describing any type of emotion:<sup>102</sup> Anger is *an oppositional disposition to fix a relationship*.<sup>103</sup> As such, anger is a response to the abortion of entitlement to status, treatment, or ownership that presumably accompanies a perceived multilateral

<sup>97</sup> Lena Masch, *Politicians' Expression of Anger and Leadership Evaluations: Empirical Evidence from Germany* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2020).

<sup>98</sup> Ming Dong Gu, "The Theory of the Dao and Taiji: A Chinese Model of the Mind," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2009), pp. 157–75; Jiansheng Hu, *Big Tradition and Chinese Mythological Studies* (Singapore: Springer, 2020).

<sup>99</sup> On the bilateral necessity of the relationship culture, see Jan B. Heide, "Interorganizational Governance in Marketing Channels," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (1994), pp. 71–85.

<sup>100</sup> Min Wang, Yulan Han, and Yiyi Su, "Social Contagion or Strategic Choice? The Interpersonal Effects of Emotions during Chinese Negotiations," *Chinese Management Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2017), pp. 463–78.

<sup>101</sup> For example, Jo-Ansie van Syk, "Anger in International Relations," *Politeia*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2021), pp. 1–21; Heller, "More Rigor to Emotions"; Janice Bially Mattern, "On Being Convinced: An Emotional Epistemology of International Relations," *International Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2014), pp. 589–94; Jonathan Mercer, "Feeling Like a State: Social Emotion and Identity," *International Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2014), pp. 515–35.

<sup>102</sup> Katie Barclay, "State of the Field: The History of Emotions," *History*, Vol. 106, No. 371 (2021), pp. 456–66.

<sup>103</sup> For a general discussion of dispositional negativity, see Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

order. It is not, in other words, a disposition that favours those individuals gifted with strength or attractiveness,<sup>104</sup> but rather, an aspect of a kind of emotional community.<sup>105</sup> Although anger and exceptionalism do not compel each other, they certainly reinforce each other.

Unlike the conventional psychological definition of anger, ours does not treat it as an inevitably inner state of mind felt by an *individual* actor.<sup>106</sup> This analytical distinction is crucial. Social scientists cannot assume any claimed exceptionalists' internal state of mind in advance, because they may cultivate anger before they actually feel it. This is particularly true when actors are plurally connected for functional or historical reasons. Consequently, even if an exceptionalist intentionally expresses anger towards an alleged stranger in a given relational setting, social scientists that look to the conventional definition to conceptualise anger would mistakenly assume that the strategic expression of anger was sincere *qua* internally determined. At the same time, natural science is cognisant of "acted anger."<sup>107</sup> The analytical omission of the relational component from the conventional understanding of anger can hence create systematic errors in interpretations of exceptionalism.

The individualist definition of anger makes it difficult for social scientists to analyse the politics of anger in IRs, wherein most individual or corporate actors (i.e., the state person) necessarily express anger towards one another *strategically*, irrespective of whether or not it is sincere. As Alexander Wendt wrote, "in both academic and lay discourse we often refer casually to states 'as if' they have emotions and are therefore conscious. States are routinely characterised as angry, greedy, guilty, humiliated and so on."<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, attributing an emotional reaction—anger—to a state, as Janice Stein warns over a decade later, would be a complex argument because "it attributes to the collective what is an embodied individual experience."<sup>109</sup>

By defining anger relationally, we overcome the analytical difficulty in the emotional aspect of treating the exceptionalist state as a person. Therefore, it is not about whether or not exceptionalist leaders are sincerely angry, but rather about how leaders socialise their nation into a (self-)role conception to meet and influence the expectations of international alters and domestic audiences. Their judgement on the anger level of the domestic audience is likewise pertinent to their taking of such anger.

Relational anger is a kind of anger that exceptionalist leaders can multiply through ethical argumentation in public. We echo the recent research that extends emotion from the psychological to the sociological agendas.<sup>110</sup> We agree with Robert Solomon, who claims

<sup>104</sup> Aaron Sell, John Tooby, and Leda Cosmides, "Formidability and the Logic of Human Anger," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 106, No. 35 (2009), pp. 15073–8.

<sup>105</sup> Özlem Terzi, "Norms of Belonging: Emotion Discourse as Factor in Determining Future 'Europeans'," *Global Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2021), pp. 139–55; Diana Carolina Pelaez Rodriguez, "Emotional Communities: An Understanding of Collective Situated Knowledge and Action," *Emotions: History, Culture, Society*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2021), pp. 303–30; Diane M. Mackie, Angela T. Maitner, and Eliot R. Smith, "Intergroup Emotions Theory," in Todd D. Nelson, ed., *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination* (New York and London: Psychology Press, 2016), pp. 149–74.

<sup>106</sup> Individuals do not necessarily feel their anger. See, for example, Jean L. Briggs, *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>107</sup> For earlier, but not too early, examples, see Stephen Côté, Ivona Hideg and Gerben Alexander Van Kleef, "The Consequences of Faking Anger in Negotiations," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (2013), pp. 453–63; Shirli Kopelman, Ashleigh Shelby Rosette, and Leigh Thompson, "The Three Faces of Eve: Strategic Displays of Positive, Negative and Neutral Emotions in Negotiations," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (2006), pp. 81–101.

<sup>108</sup> Wendt, "The State as Person in International Theory," pp. 289–316.

<sup>109</sup> Janice Gross Stein, "Psychological Explanations of International Decision Making and Collective Behavior," in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons, eds., *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2013), pp. 195–219.

<sup>110</sup> Brian Parkinson, Agneta H. Fischer, and Antony S. R. Manstead, *Emotions in Social Relations: Cultural, Group, and Interpersonal Processes* (London: Routledge, 2005).

that anger is “a way of being-in-the-world, a relationship between oneself and one’s situation.”<sup>111</sup> Following our definition, anger is the emotion of lost entitlement. The entitlement to exemption (from rules, duties, humanities, consistency, etc.), which an exceptionalist state claims, affirms the multilateral order among its subscribers, although the exceptionalist state temporarily supersedes the order. Their anger towards the stranger or the betrayer frames “the conflict as a wrongdoing requiring rectification, for which the target bears responsibility.”<sup>112</sup> When the exceptionalist state appeals to anger, the assumption is usually that the angered nations, themselves already failing the relationship, should understand or begin to learn from it.

Anger represents an indirect, convenient statement of the exceptionalist state’s justification to rectify and take corrective/converting actions. It prompts those that share multilateral relationships for the purpose of rectification or compensation. Therefore, in the relational state of anger, some normative order between the subject and object of that anger must be perceived as given or preachable, yet violated.<sup>113</sup> Relational anger makes a difference to IRs and foreign policy analysis; it is a harbinger of the ensuing policy consequences. Through anger, a correcting or converting agenda can be anticipated, depending on the anger’s strength. Without it, an accommodative agenda of unlearning or decoupling should be forthcoming. An agenda for correction and accommodation may create a loop as anger comes and goes.

Finally, a few inferences are helpful here, given the definition of relational anger. First, the domestic audience’s psychological state of anger may be either sincere or insincere.<sup>114</sup> The causes of anger may be either the practices of consensual norms, values, and rules that the target states abort or the target states as a whole.<sup>115</sup> The causes suggest, on the one hand, the direction of the solution; but on the other, the degree of sincerity in the leaders’ and audience’s anger implies its strength and duration. Together, they imply consequences among the audience, and the stakeholders in particular,<sup>116</sup> who either learn to appreciate, adjust, avoid, or mimic certain behaviour if they care about repairing the relationship or simply observe with concern.

In a nutshell, anger justifies an exceptionalist claim or practice by highlighting the relationship at stake. In the case of liberal multilateralism, anger socialises the angered nation into the multilateral order from which the exceptionalist nation ironically exempts itself, for the sake of socialising the stranger. In the case of Confucian multilateralism, anger reminds the angered nation to reciprocate the reification of a bilateral relationship by allowing exceptions and socialising those in the audience to do the same. Anger can be conducive to un/learning if it reminds the exceptionalist state of the limit of unilateral enforcement and inducement. It can also be detrimental to un/learning if it shifts the responsibility for

<sup>111</sup> Robert C. Solomon, “Getting Angry: The Jamesian Theory of Emotion in Anthropology,” in R. A. Shweder and R. A. LeVine, eds., *Culture Theory: Essay on Mind, Self, Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 238–54.

<sup>112</sup> Todd H. Hall, “We Will not Swallow This Bitter Fruit: Theorizing a Diplomacy of Anger,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2011), pp. 521–55; for a case study, see Benjamin Young, “Before ‘Fire and Fury’: The Role of Anger and Fear in U.S.-North Korea Relations, 1968-1994,” *Faculty Research & Publications*, No. 22 (2020), <https://scholar.dsu.edu/anspapers/22>.

<sup>113</sup> Agnes Callard, “The Reason to Be Angry Forever,” in Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan, eds., *The Moral Psychology of Anger* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), pp. 123–38.

<sup>114</sup> Todd H. Hall and Karen Yarhi-Milo, “The Personal Touch: Leaders’ Impressions, Costly Signaling, and Assessments of Sincerity in International Affairs,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (2012), pp. 560–73; Jay Wallace, “Trust, Anger, Resentment, Forgiveness: On Blame and Its Reasons,” *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2019), pp. 537–52.

<sup>115</sup> Jonathan J. Pierce, “Emotions and the Policy Process: Enthusiasm, Anger, and Fear,” *Policy & Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (2021), pp. 595–614.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

conflict mainly on to the angered nation. As anger cannot last forever, exceptionalism that is embedded in the emotion of anger is destined to be cyclical and adaptive.

## Conclusion

Multilateralism is concerned with coordinated coexistence. It is a practice that inevitably expands with every encounter with strangers to prevent their disruption of order. Confucian multilateralism dispenses with the crafting of any consensual rules, instead arranging exceptional treatments to meet, symbolically or substantively, the other party's material needs. Confucianism approves a kind of exceptionalism that is reciprocal and bilateral, albeit in multiplicity. Confucian exceptionalism, moreover, reveals how an exceptionalist claim to exempt a state from liberal multilateralism is ultimately liberal, and hence ultimately relational. It is through this lens that the study of Chinese exceptionalism contributes to our understanding of American exceptionalism.

The literature heeds an equivalence, sometimes disapprovingly, between difference, speciality, and uniqueness on the one hand; and exceptionalism on the other, insofar as the latter mainly connotes the local agency, nuance sensibilities, and genealogy of a site. Such equivalence, however, alludes to exceptionalism as identity rather than relation. Although this clarifies why exceptionalism is claimed through the eyes of exceptionalist leaders, it reproduces the self–other binary, to the neglect of the encompassing relations. A relational analysis points to an exceptionalism that is always cyclical, adaptive through learning and unlearning, contingent upon its prior multilateral engagement, and minded to become or remain related.

In Chinese foreign policy, as well as practical living, exceptions to rules and norms are abundant, but hardly amount to the American, more familiar kind of exceptionalism.<sup>117</sup> This is linked to the Confucian style of multilateralism originating in the cosmological MoH, which considers everything to be heaven-bred and mutually constituted. Mutual acceptance being imperative in order to survive, differences must be avoided at all costs. Accordingly, universal rules, which assume a minimal collective identity and suspect absolute differences, too, should be avoided. Chinese exceptionalism answers the MoH's requirement to assume the duty of displaying benevolence to each according to their need if they are to attain belonging. All, however, are capable of displaying benevolence, and also of making reciprocal exceptions for strangers, in order to establish mutual acceptance. In the same vein, all, from the head of state to an overseas student, are willing to assume the name and role of China. Confucian exceptionalism may be undertaken by anyone demonstrating a distinctive capacity to display the broadest and greatest benevolence, and so attract the spontaneous joining of their forces by others.

Having no alternative but to remain within, China must learn the preferences of all, but refrain from exploring these too deeply lest curiosity overly sensitise such differences. Exception, rather than exceptionalism, occurs at the moment when China sounds the call for unity in action, including slaying the oppressor. Otherwise, food and sacrifices, i.e., offerings to Gods, tended to be the most common forms of benevolence, in ancient times, designed to express good will and symbolise reciprocal role-taking for each specific other. Confucianism cherishes the learning of ritual performance, in the same way as a Denver drill company learn rituals in China—and makes exceptions in order to practice greater inclusiveness and exemplify benevolence. To this extent, Confucian—unuttered—exceptionalism never assumes transcendence or even difference. The contemporary predicament of Confucian exceptionalism, as regards relating to strangers, is twofold. It consists in: being either

<sup>117</sup> Robert G. Patman and Laura Southgate, "Globalization, the Obama Administration and the Refashioning of US Exceptionalism," *International Politics*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2016), pp. 220–38; Dick Cheney and Liz Cheney, *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

a rule-breaker or the protector of a rule-breaker regarding a prior relation, as defined by substantive consensual rules, e.g., liberal governmentality;<sup>118</sup> or in being ignorant of how all others are different according to their own terms and, from the latter's perspective, how Confucianism may be different according to Confucianism's own terms.<sup>119</sup>

*Conflict of interest statement.* None declared.

<sup>118</sup> Anne F. Thurston, ed., *Engaging China: Fifty Years of Sino-American Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

<sup>119</sup> Johnston, "Is Chinese Exceptionalism Undermining China's Foreign Policy Interests?"

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The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2024, 17(3), 242–261, DOI:  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poae013>, Article

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