Chinese Conceptions of Global Order

These remarks were given at a Hudson Institute event on July 14, 2010, for the publication of Dr. Ford’s book, The Mind of Empire: China’s History and Modern Foreign Relations (University Press of Kentucky, 2010).

July 14, 2010
by Christopher Ford

Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks to Ken for his kind introductory remarks, and thanks to all of you for braving the rain today. Notwithstanding the weather, it's terrific to see so many people in attendance.

The potential implications of China's rise are, of course, profound – which is surely why you are here – and this is true not least with respect to what Beijing might choose to do with the power it is gaining, and with respect to what sort of world it might attempt to construct. My book, The Mind of Empire, tries to explore the historical foundations upon which Chinese conceptions of global order are built, starting with the conceptual system pioneered by Confucius himself.

I. Confucian Power and Virtue
Confucianism was basically a philosophy of social ethics, but it nonetheless also spoke to issues of governance. It made important assumptions about the nature of political order, and it had real – if too often overlooked – implications for global politics. The web of social responsibilities that defined proper behavior radiated outward to all aspects of life, and indeed to the ends of the human (i.e., civilized) world without any inherent limiting principle. In this system, the key to successful governance lay in the assumption that the virtuous prince in effect secretes political authority.

Social harmony was felt to spread outward in concentric circles around the ruler precisely because, and to the degree that, he was virtuous: virtue creates and sustains harmonious political order. Significantly, the extent to which this occurs is proportional to the extent of the ruler's virtue, and without limit. The ruler of imperfect virtue will always find his authority imperiled – subject to contestation, and perhaps indeed doomed to dissolution upon the advent of a more virtuous prince. A prince of perfect virtue, however, will inevitably have the entire world subject itself to him in one form or another.

The Confucian philosophy of governance is thus radically monist. It is naturally hierarchical, and the ruler cannot admit the existence of separate, coequal sovereignties without conceding some defect in his own virtue. (If he were truly virtuous, after all, all
other would-be sovereigns would gravitate to his orbit. If they don’t, he must not be.) Just as there can only be one father in the family, so can there be only one true sovereign in the world.

In my view, this schema has had important implications over the years. Throughout China’s long history of struggling against incursions from abroad, a consistent theme of its diplomacy was the importance of maintaining formal inequality with the country's neighbors. Anything other than an at least symbolically hierarchical relationship favoring China was philosophically offensive and ideologically untenable. And so long as no sufficiently muscular or persistent foreign power forced a confrontation specifically on status-hierarchic grounds, the system could maintain its coherence.

II. The Encounter with Plural Sovereignty
Things began to change at the end of the 18th century, however, when the British sought to regularize trade with China and deputized the Earl of Macartney to represent King George before the Imperial Throne in Peking. But neither this mission nor two subsequent attempts had any success. Insisting upon European-style formalities of diplomatic equality merely offended and scandalized their Chinese hosts. The Celestial Empire wanted no relations on those terms, and was somewhat horrified even to be asked.

These encounters laid the groundwork for a remarkably explicit ideological and symbolic sparring match between two competing norms of global order: Western notions of separate, coequal sovereignty rooted in the Westphalian system; and China's Sinocentric tradition. Each demanded of the other things that other could not admit without violating core legitimating principles, and each side sensed full well the implications of every perceived nuance of status and prerogative insisted upon by its adversary.

This ideological struggle bubbled and boiled for years, with the diplomatic history of the period a recurring pattern of European demands for the formal trappings of separate and coequal sovereignty, Chinese resistance, European threats and military maneuverings, and then negotiated half-measures which themselves become the focus of years of diplomatic contestation thereafter. China made such concessions as military duress made unavoidable, but worked tirelessly to attenuate or escape the symbolic concessions most offensive to Sinic universalism.

I think it is one of the sad ironies of this period that the foreigners’ progress in eliciting symbolic concessions from China to modern notions of coequal sovereignty and diplomatic reciprocity created an appetite for so much more that these very principles were themselves soon undermined. China was not permitted to stop at mere
formal equality with these brash barbarians: she was compelled to accept what was increasingly clearly a position of outright inferiority. Perversely, this inequality was itself, in a sense, less of a challenge to traditional Chinese notions of legitimacy than was the idea of equality itself. After all, it was long understood in China that a dynasty could lose its all-sustaining virtue, forfeiting the Mandate of Heaven and thus inevitably collapsing. The succession of legitimacy to foreign overlords, even if only temporarily, was something China had experienced before.

What would have been truly revolutionary for the Chinese system was a consistent insistence upon norms of genuine sovereign coequality, which had no antecedent in China's millennia of obsessive historical self-regard. But the Western world passed up this opportunity by letting its appetite run away with its principles. As a result, China arguably did not have to come fully to grips with norms of modern international equality, for it was before long plunged into inferiority vis-à-vis the West – most famously with the numerous "unequal treaties" forced upon Peking by European military power. The ironic outcome of the 19th-Century ideological battle, therefore, may have been merely to reinforce age-old Chinese lessons about the universally hierarchical nature of power.

III. Mao and Revolutionary Virtue
One might have thought that China's Communist revolution would have upended the traditional order in such a way that ancient conceptions no longer mattered. But I think these Confucian-derived notions persisted during the Communist period. Through Maoist eyes, the ideological purification and moral reconstruction of Chinese society was the necessary starting point for engagement with the outside world: a revolutionary transformation of the international order would follow naturally from this internal success. As in Confucianism, therefore, establishing perfect virtue at home would have a ripple effect in reordering the world around China, establishing a harmonious (socialist) order everywhere. Such a psychology may also have made virtually inevitable the eventual collapse of Mao's relations with the Soviet Union, as China became progressively uncomfortable with Soviet leadership of the Communist Bloc and keen to assert Mao's primacy as the exemplar of socialist rectitude. For his rule to be both legitimate and secure in traditional Chinese terms, the Great Helmsman could be nothing else.

IV. The Modern Era
And it didn't end there. An understanding of Confucian-derived notions of global order also provides an illuminating window into Chinese approaches to the world in the post-Mao era. One probably sees reflections of these themes, for instance, in how China has insisted upon the purity of its own intentions, even where they are patently self-aggrandizing, in the Communist Party's reluctance to admit errors, and in its
extraordinary sensitivity to criticism. This is perhaps the modern instantiation of Mandate-of-Heaven thinking, and the natural result of Confucianism's virtue-keyed conception of political order. To raise questions in such matters is to impugne the fundamental legitimacy of Party rule. As of old, it would seem, political authority is a derivative function of one's presumed *moral* authority.

An emphasis upon China's supposed virtuousness, of course, is also *tactically* useful, and here the demands of Confucianist virtue and *realpolitik* statecraft coincide. A key element of China's strategy since the end of the Cold War has been a campaign to allay any fears that might arise about China's intentions as its power grows, and thereby to prevent counter-mobilization. The point has been to bring about a world supportive of China's orderly modernization at home and its ascent to great power status abroad. Beijing has engaged in an ongoing, concerted effort to portray China's ascent as being both inevitable *and* non-threatening.

Whether this last bit is actually true, of course, will depend on what China chooses to *do* with its newfound power. How will a "risen" China actually behave? One might try to seek clues to this in how China has come to conceive the modern world. With the economically, physically, and ideologically destabilizing arrival of Western power, China needed a frame of reference through which to understand its environment. To this end, China did what it has always done: it turned to its own history for conceptual models.

From the mid-19th Century to the present day, the Warring States Period of China's ancient pre-unification history provided both a model for admitting the possibility of sovereign state-to-state relationships and a series of classically-hallowed approaches to coping with them. The problem, however, is that while the Warring States period does offer the paradigmatic specifically *Chinese* illustration of inter-state order, its key lesson – one that has been reinforced over the millennia by the Middle Kingdom's cycles of unification and fragmentation – is that inter-state order is both undesirable and temporary. Chinese history provides no precedent for the stable, long-term coexistence of coequal sovereigns. The modern world may be understandable through the prism of the Warring States, but only as a way station along a road to hierarchy.

V. *Where Next?*
For now, it seems clearly still to be in China's interest generally to adhere to – and indeed to insist upon – Westphalian norms of separate and coequal sovereignty, and especially their corollaries of sovereign rights and non-interference. This helps provide Beijing the breathing room it needs in order to grow into a first-rank power without provoking counter-moves.
The key question for the future, however, is what will happen as China's power grows, and especially if it assumes the top-tier position that it considers to be its birthright – a position which its notions of virtue-derived political authority may encourage it to believe that China must attain if its system of rule is to be considered legitimate. Will China by then genuinely have internalized Westphalian norms? Or will China – when its growing power gives it, one might say, more options – be more inclined to nudge the global system toward a monist model more consistent with its ancient traditions and expectations? All we can do now is speculate.

It may, of course, be that China actually has internalized Westphalian norms, and that it has replaced its vertical ideal of order with one that operates more in the horizontal dimension. Not all observers, however – and not all of China's neighbors – are likely to be so sanguine.

The most alarmist alternative interpretation might be to suggest that these ancient conceptions mean that a "risen" China will embark upon some aggressive campaign of global imperialism. I don't think that's very likely, though of course no one can do more than guess. Historically speaking, China's efforts to impose Sinocentric order by force have manifested themselves in regional, rather than global, activism. That doesn't rule out attempts at direct global dominion, of course, and the alarmist might respond that China has always felt it imperative to dominate the known world. If its horizons have expanded, might not its ambitions?

This is conceivably, I suppose, but I still think it unlikely. To be sure, even a "merely" regional irredentism keyed to the territorial high water mark of the Qing Dynasty – exacerbated by the current Chinese regime's tendency to invoke nationalism for political legitimacy – would certainly be problematic and dangerous in its own right. Nevertheless, such geographic and civilizational rootedness may also somewhat mitigate China's global aspirations.

Historically, moreover, exertions of Chinese power vis-à-vis non-Chinese peoples on its periphery and farther afield have often been satisfied with mere homage. Symbolic indicia of moral hierarchy frequently suffice to satisfy Sinic conceptions of virtue-derived global order. Beyond the old Qing frontier, at least, actual control might not be necessary. Nevertheless, what would be felt necessary remains something of an open question. I would be very surprised if a "risen" China were to insist upon formal "tributary" relationships with anyone, but this does not mean that some modernized (and more informal) analogue to "tribute" diplomacy could not be developed.
Indeed, one could imagine a system of order which is a genuinely *inter-state* system – in the sense that Westphalian values prevail at the level of formal diplomatic and jurisprudential propriety – and yet in which a powerful China seeks the status of *primus inter pares* and expects awestruck and submissive foreigners to exercise their sovereign rights by *choosing* freely to defer to her in a variety of ways. Indeed, China even has a historical model for something like this in its own Springs and Autumns Period. In that era, emergent proto-states functioned for all practical purposes as independent entities, but the Zhou Dynasty still exerted over them a nominal sovereignty supported by status-hierarchical rituals and tributary political symbolism.

But again, this is just speculation about the kind of world that a surviving Sinocentric moralism might conceivably feel inclined to seek. To know the real answer, the world will simply have to wait to see how China lives out its experience of modernity. As Charles will no doubt discuss, China faces many alternatives as it imagines itself and projects this identity into the future.

Will a "risen" China adhere to Westphalian norms, or will it be inclined to pursue an order-system with which its traditions would make it more comfortable? The answer, I suspect, will be central to 21st-Century geopolitics.

Thanks for coming, and I look forward to our discussion.