

What Might a Chinese World Order Look Like?

Using the ancient concept of Li to understand a Chinese order.

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What kind of world order will China be committed to building? This is a topic of global concern, and one which Chinese scholars need to ponder and answer. We suggest that China may be committed to building a Chinese order governed by the ancient concept of *li* (礼). The main characteristics of this order are: it regards *li* as the key means to conducting relationships; it is based on a concentric zone structure; and it is open.



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What is “*li*”? Whilst we will adopt “propriety” as the English translation, *li* is also often translated as “ritual” or “rites.” The word has a broad meaning in Chinese, and can refer to, among other things, proper words or behavior, codes of conduct, ceremonies, gifts, surnames, etc. *Li*, in the sense of the first two meanings, is one of the Five Constant Virtues (五常 *wu chang*: 仁 *ren*, benevolence; 义 *yi*, righteousness; 礼 *li*, propriety; 智 *zhi*, wisdom; and 信 *xin*, fidelity).

A Brief History of Li

Since the Han Dynasty, Confucianism has become the primary backbone of Chinese culture and has great influence on both the country’s politics and peoples’ lives. Propriety is the key tenet of Confucianism, as it is intrinsically related to each of the other Five Constant Virtues. One must have propriety to realize benevolence and righteousness, while wisdom and fidelity are requirements to achieving propriety.

Further, ancient China tradition holds that families and countries are based on the same structure, which is underpinned by *li*. Hence the saying: “man without propriety shall not stand, matters without propriety shall not succeed, and countries without propriety shall not last.” In other words, whether in personal affairs or interstate relations, propriety should always be the foundation, whereas rudeness (the lack of *li*) can only lead to disaster.

For more than 1,000 years of history, East Asia had an international state system centred on China, namely the Hua-Yi Order (华夷秩序), which refers to China (Hua) and others or, less charitably, “barbarians” (Yi). Under this system, China adopted a policy of “give more but take less” (*bo lai hou wang*, 薄来厚往). This policy conformed to the Chinese conception of propriety, and it helped maintain the stability of the East Asian region, and thereby the Hua-Yi Order itself.

When driving forward the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China may not copy that ancient policy; however, it is also not placing business interests first. To support the development of China-friendly countries is obviously an important factor, hence the emphases on the correct view of righteousness; the principles of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness, and so on; and the implementations of bilateral government cooperation and investment in infrastructure projects seen as less desirable from a business perspective. In a future Chinese order governed by propriety, however, China as a leading country is less likely to stress relative gains, for that is neither a general practice of major powers toward small states, nor is it a traditional Chinese approach.

Li and the Concentric Zone Structure

The Hua-Yi Order was built on a concentric zone structure that expanded from the Emperor's palace outward. The relationships of the members within the system were both hierarchical and distinguished by their closeness to the center. To understand the Hua-Yi Order, envision a series of concentric circles, with the Emperor's palace at the heart. Every additional 500 Chinese miles (250 kilometers) in the radius delimits a circle (服 fu); the Chinese considered the Hua-Yi Order to consist of Five Circles (五服 wu fu). The first three circles were considered Hua, which meant the civilized land. The latter two circles were called Yi, which refers to the uncivilized land.

Both interpersonal and interstate relationships could be divided into Five Circles. Traditional Chinese culture believes that the inequality between individuals is normal. What really matters is not how to achieve equality, but how to connect individuals with propriety so as to facilitate an orderly society.

Christianity, on the other hand, has the concept of everyone being equal before God. This basic philosophy evolved into modern concepts like equality before the law, equality between men and women, equality between major and small countries, etc. in Christian-majority countries. However, these concepts have changed from local philosophies to the concepts and practices recognized by most people and countries in the world. Therefore, it is impossible for the Chinese order governed by propriety to rebuild its hierarchy in the modern world.

Still, different degrees of relationship depending on closeness (whether in geography or affinity) to the center cannot be overlooked nor eliminated. Even in today's international system, the United States has its own particularly close partners: Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand.

It can be expected that in the Chinese order governed by propriety, China will also classify member countries according to closeness. However, the countries with relatively better relations with China may not necessarily come from the Confucian cultural circle.

The Openness of the System

In the historical Hua-Yi Order, no countries were excluded from joining the system. For places that were considered less civilized lands, that would entail paying tribute or conferring titles (recognizing the prominence of China). These actions were ideally voluntary (although dependencies had less autonomy). This characteristic was mainly due to the concept of "inclusiveness" in Chinese traditional culture and a belief in "harmony in diversity." Chinese tradition stressed that "if people far away are not obedient, then improve civility and morality to smooth their way" – in other words, a diplomatic approach based on propriety and benevolence was the best choice.

This tradition diverges from the nation-state system created and led by Western countries, which emphasizes alliances and antagonists, and is accustomed to using institutional constraints to assimilate allies.

Since the 1980s, China has promoted independent and peaceful diplomacy, and during the 1990s, this gradually became "partner diplomacy." After implementing the Belt and Road Initiative, China continues to strengthen partnerships. This is a manifestation of traditional culture and will also be reflected in the Chinese order governed by propriety.

Considering that this order can, by its self-definition, only be established in a peaceful manner, it will be extremely difficult to replace the existing international system. On the other hand, openness also makes the Chinese order governed by propriety compatible with the current international system. The number of countries joining the Chinese order governed by propriety will be dynamic – not too many, nor too few. Members might be spread over all continents, but the majority will be China's neighboring countries.

In short, the Chinese order governed by propriety is not a power-based order, like the one the Western world has engaged in for hundreds of years, nor is it the sort of rule-based order that many countries have repeatedly promoted to China. It is a bilaterally-oriented new international order founded on Chinese tradition and reformed through modernity. And, importantly, it is compatible with the current international system.

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