

One question raised by *The World According to China* is the extent to which Xi Jinping has pushed this assertive challenge to global governance norms, underpinned by the assumptions of America in decline and a rising China with legitimate claims to alter the US-led global order. For the near and medium-term, Xi's ambitions will be China's ambitions. But as Economy demonstrates in this highly readable account, China's actions in global forums (more than its words) can reveal continuities and shifts as it either ramps up or reins in efforts to "reorder the world order."

MARK W. FRAZIER

frazierm@newschool.edu

China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism

BENJAMIN HO

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021

264 pp. €106.00

ISBN 978-94-6372-514-9 doi:10.1017/S030574102200039X

Observers of China's party-state will have noticed the increasing references to discourses of exceptionalism under Xi Jinping: China's institutional superiority versus the West; China's peaceful DNA; China's whole-process democracy as a new form of political civilization. While all nations are exceptional, Xi's effort to shore up the Party's ideological resilience emphasizes that China is more exceptional than most.

In *China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism*, Benjamin Ho conducts a timely and in-depth study of the role of exceptionalism – being good and different from the West – in forming the worldview of Chinese political elite. Ho argues that only by incorporating China's desire for exceptionalism can we truly understand China's behaviour on the global stage. Using discourse analysis and expert interviews, each chapter unpacks how exceptionalism manifests itself in various aspects of China's worldview and political practice.

Chapter two deals with three prominent "Chinese" international relations (IR) theories: Yan Xuetong's moral realism, Qin Yaqing and Feng Zhang's constructivist relationality, and Zhao Tingyang's *tianxia*. What cuts through these various attempts at indigenizing IR theory is the effort to present China's approach to global politics as both unique and superior to Western thinking. However, compartmentalizing national forms of thinking is undercut by what the Polish-born sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls "liquid modernity," a condition of impermanence and fluidity of identity in the modern world. As Ho argues in chapter three, the distinction between Chinese/non-Chinese, local/foreign, is difficult to discern in a liquid world where ideas and bodies cross borders more easily than ever before. Forging a coherent and unified national identity has come under stress. But this hasn't stopped the Party from trying. With an eye towards ensuring the stability of the Party, Chinese propagandists have focused on Chinese-ness, using nationalism to foster cohesiveness and projecting an image of the goodness of the Chinese state while vilifying the West in order to generate suspicion among its own citizens. Ho uses a range of data to highlight his argument. Deconstructing the 2008 Beijing Olympics theme song "Beijing Welcomes You," with non-PRC born celebrities such as JJ Lin, Wang Lee Hom and Stephanie Sun, Ho argues "China's cultural hegemony means that there is no difference between mainland Chinese citizens and foreign-born Chinese" (p. 76). For the Party, to be Chinese is to be supportive of the PRC.

Chapter four looks at the construction of China's national image and how it is used in China's international relations. Ho conducts a close textual analysis of Xi's *Governance of China*, focusing on three prominent themes of China's international image promotion – the China Dream of a flourishing civilization, the image of a progressive and peaceful China, and China as a moral exemplar for international community. Chapter five is a case study on the Belt and Road Initiative, and Ho usefully highlights how analysts proclaim confident assertions of “transcending” the current Western international order while positioning China as offering an “alternative” source of global governance (p. 127).

Southeast Asianists will be interested in chapters six and seven, which turn outward to examine how three states – Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore – view China's claim to exceptionalism. Ho draws on rich interviews with scholars and senior policy makers to show that China's discourses of exceptionalism have failed to take root among its smaller neighbours: “[v]irtually none of the Vietnamese interviewees I spoke with expressed the belief that China's rise would be inherently peaceful” (p. 154). Interestingly, Ho highlights the co-constitutive effects of national images and everyday practice. One Vietnamese interviewee cited “socialization issues” between China and Vietnam, because Chinese tourists are not “civilized” (p. 158). Overall, China has largely failed in convincing other states that it is good and different from other great powers. Should we be surprised? And does it matter?

As Ho argues in the conclusion, Chinese exceptionalism is fundamentally self-serving rather than other-centred. It is a political worldview that prioritizes keeping the Communist Party in power at all costs. For all its faults, perhaps Western exceptionalism gives the world something to aspire to. Democracy, human rights and freedom are values that, however imperfect in practice, can offer inspiration (p. 214). They are universalizable. Ironically, in the quest to develop a Chinese School of IR, theorists like Yan Xuetong have advocated universalizable values drawn from China's own historical and philosophical traditions that can compete with Western exceptionalism (p. 42). And yet, by grounding China's worldview in maximizing the Party's grip on power and favouring particularism over universalism, Beijing has undermined its moral authority and limited its own stated desire for “soft power.” As Ho writes, China's pursuit of global greatness “rests on highly fragile foundations” (p. 215).

To what extent do ordinary Chinese citizens accept the political worldview of Chinese exceptionalism crafted by Party elites? Given that this book is focused on national identity discourses, Ho admits that this question is outside the scope of this study, although he hints that wider resonance with the public is limited by the unattractiveness of official Marxist ideology (p. 87). Given the importance of exceptionalism to everyday political life, it would be stimulating to understand how these official discourses have percolated down (or not) to ordinary citizens. This is an important avenue for future research, and Benjamin Ho has set the intellectual foundations for such work going forward.

Overall, *China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism* succeeds in directing our attention to the role that exceptionalism plays in China's global affairs and will appeal to a wide range of readers. China scholars will appreciate this authoritative study on Chinese exceptionalism in the age of Xi Jinping, a phenomenon which will likely be ever more present in the years ahead. IR theorists, particularly constructivists, will welcome the nuanced way that ideas and worldviews are included as explanatory variables in China's diplomacy.

STEPHEN SMITH
sns.smith@utoronto.ca