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UNDERSTANDING CHINA

“All-Under-Heaven” is Timeless: An Anthropology of Chinese Strategic Behavior

ABSTRACT
This article establishes a helpful guide to evaluate and understand China’s strategic behavior. It asserts that the current Chinese approaches to foreign and strategic engagements can be explained by probing into the ancient pre-Confucian texts, the literary traditions, the Seven Military Classics of Ancient China, the board game wei qi, and the fundamental cultural concepts of wu-wei, tao, and guanxi. These elements manifest the Chinese way of thinking and, thus, provide a sensible guide to assess Chinese foreign and strategic engagements. The proposition has broad ramifications on how the United States (as well as its allies in Asia) perceives and evaluates China, a prerequisite to preserve peace in Asia.

Keywords: Strategic culture, China, United States, foreign policy, Asia.
Since 2013, China has embarked on an unprecedented undertaking of reclaiming land and island-building in the Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, and Scarborough Shoal, in the South China Sea. These events have deepened the existing tension in the South China Sea between Beijing and its southern neighbors such as Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Taiwan. In addition, such moves further antagonized and brought into the mix, the United States, which already had a keen interest in this region and has been challenging Beijing’s claim of sovereignty over the entire South China Sea. How do we interpret China’s island-building activities knowing fully well the competing claims of its neighbors in disputed territories? Could it be that Beijing wants to muscle out other competing claims, even to the extent of refusing to abide by the “international law”? Or could it be that it deliberately wants to destabilize the region? Regardless of the remonstrations by the United States and the claimant countries, one leitmotif is that these activities are perceived as Chinese aggression that makes no fathomable sense to any party involved in the dispute.¹ However, does China perceive it in a similar manner?

One could perhaps make a tentative conjecture that to understand these events, one might look to China’s ancient past. For instance, an ancient Chinese board game, wei qi, commences on an empty board with each player taking turns and placing (white and black) stones on the board. One unique aspect of wei qi is that once a stone is placed it cannot be moved. The game is won by the player who occupies more space/territory on the board than the other player. Considering that an empty board leaves each player to place their stones anywhere on the

board, it reflects China’s *wei qi* stratagem of building islands and reclaiming land in the South China Sea. Once these islands are there or placed (just as stones on a *wei qi* board), they cannot be moved. The stratagem of building islands in the disputed territory is further reflected in the teachings of the ancient strategist Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, who advises to, “… devise unfathomable plans (italics added),”\(^2\) and to occupy an easily accessible territory (a wide open sea, for instance) before one’s opponents\(^3\) to gain advantage and achieve victory over them. From these perspectives, we can make a reasonable inference in understanding the intention behind Beijing’s South China Sea adventure. The above passage on the South China Sea is employed to indicate how such occurrences create room for misperception, a pervasive problem among states in world affairs.\(^4\) It is a problem that is especially endemic to the United States’ perceptions about its rivals.\(^5\)

The question thus is: (to paraphrase Thucydides from his description of the rise of Athens and the threat it posed to Sparta) does the rise of China as a regional power make war inevitable? The answer invariably


\(^3\) Ibid., 10.3.


depends on how the United States and its allies perceive China’s foreign policy and strategic behavior.\textsuperscript{6}

\begin{quote}
A Wei Qi Gameboard. The image, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, is in the public domain.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_%28game%29
\end{quote}

The present article aims to establish a guide to evaluate and understand China’s foreign and strategic behavior.\textsuperscript{7} It postulates that grasping its ancient texts and concepts, manifested in its strategic culture, provides a sensible guide to current (as well as past) Chinese approaches to its foreign policies. The article employs exploratory

\textsuperscript{6} This paper endeavors to provide a plausible answer (out of many plausible answers) to this question.

\textsuperscript{7} I would like to give my sincere acknowledgement to the editor for his insightful comments and edits without which this article would have certainly lost its cogency and appeal.
methods that are valuable where the research aims not to proffer a conclusive answer but to improve understanding of a topic by identifying the unclear or misleading conclusions, and by generating preliminary conjectures from a wide array of possible alternatives.\textsuperscript{8} Such an approach is essential to highlight because we are, in small ways, responding to appeals made by Acharya and Buzan calling for more inclusive global international relations theories that are less Euro- and Western-centric.\textsuperscript{9} Such appeals have gained a more pronounced place in the discipline in recent years, most notably with the rise of China because the three core or mainstream theories (Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism) have a “... very limited applicability in Asia,”\textsuperscript{10} that in turn, “... inadequately capture regional dynamics.”\textsuperscript{11} The resultant “disjunction” or “lack of fit”\textsuperscript{12} between the core theories and the experiences of the local, non-western world can deeply distort our evaluation of this part of the world that is


\textsuperscript{10} Acharya and Buzan, “On the Possibility of a Non-Western International Relations Theory,” 222.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 223.

\textsuperscript{12} Acharya and Buzan, \textit{The Making of Global International Relations}, 286; Acharya and Buzan, “On the Possibility of a Non-Western International Relations Theory,” 222.
increasingly becoming a vital object of examination in world affairs with equally grave consequences.

The aforementioned method utilizes Chinese historical and political philosophy as research tools to explore and discover different concepts and approaches that will proffer alternative modes to understand Chinese foreign and strategic behavior. Indeed, as Acharya and Buzan state, “Current work on Chinese history and political philosophy offers perhaps the most promising prospect for such discovery.”

One can perhaps reasonably assert that an insular view of other states’ behavior is not an exception but a rule for Washington. History provides ample evidence to support such claims. For instance, one of the factors that ultimately precipitated the Cuban Missile Crisis was Washington’s misperception of Moscow’s intentions, which were a derivative based on the former’s ideological and historical experiences. Indeed, the present Ukraine crisis is an illustration of such insular views that disregard Russia’s historic need to maintain a buffer (zone or states) between itself and the West.

Moscow is unwilling to see Kyiv, which is not only an immediate neighbor but the “cradle of the Russian nation,” join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), seen as Washington encroaching on its doorstep. Ukraine’s own efforts to join the NATO, moreover, not only increase Russia’s insecurity but also seriously undermine Kyiv’s own security as it pushes (and has indeed pushed) Moscow to use means deemed necessary to maintain that buffer—Ukraine and Georgia being the redline. From such lens, one can hardly be astounded when the

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Russian military entered Ukrainian territory on February 24, 2022, and launched a multi-prong, in Putin’s own words, “special military operation.” The next day (on February 25, 2022), when the United Nations Security Council met to adopt a draft resolution on Ukraine, China abstained from voting on the said resolution. Beijing neither supports Moscow or Kyiv (as it has relations with both—the keyword here is “relations”), nor denounces Moscow’s actions.

One can label China’s attitude to the Ukraine crisis as indifference toward democracy, sovereignty, international law, and implicit support for Russia. However, that would be to miss the crucial point of reference. To comprehend such policy behavior, we need to grasp the source from which Beijing continues to draw lessons for their present and future foreign policy and strategic engagements. This is the need of the hour as it has broad policy ramifications concerning peace and security in Asia and the world.

Looking into the Past to Understand the Present
Given the United States’ pervasive insular grasp on China’s strategic policies and behavior, Graham Allison’s thesis of the Thucydides’ Trap, for example, seems applicable. Yet, such views are highly plausible if great powers, especially the United States, continue to misread China’s strategic policy behavior. Indeed, such are the ramifications of an imprudent understanding of Chinese strategic culture. A part of the answer to assuage such insular observations lies in grasping and

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15 One can argue that there is also the specter of both Russia and China playing a balancing game, by teaming up against the United States. This issue will be addressed in the next section when we discuss the board game of wei qi.

16 I thank Steve Lambakis, Andrew M. Dorman, and Ronald Kerbs for their feedback in polishing the present proposition.

17 See, Allison, Destined for War.
appreciating the weight of China’s ancient traditions and wisdom from which it continues to draw into the present. As Henry Kissinger observes, “No other country can claim . . . such an intimate link to its ancient past and classical principles of strategy and statesmanship.”

Any attempts to explain how China perceives its place in the twenty-first century world order and how it thinks about diplomacy, peace, and conflict must begin with a deeper appreciation of its vast historical and cultural experiences that color its strategic culture.

Different historical and cultural experiences tend to not only produce different attitudes about how the world works, but they also fundamentally assume that states must incorporate the knowledge, from their own historical context, thereby producing their own flavor of political culture, which in turn colors the former. Accordingly, formulation of China’s perceptions can be located in its literary traditions such as the Romance of the Three Kingdoms; in texts on statecraft and military stratagem such as the Seven Military Classics of Ancient China; in its notions of wu-wei, tao, and guanxi; and in strategy games such as wei qi. Here we find the source of the Chinese way of

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18 Henry Kissinger, On China (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 2. One of the defining features of old civilizations, such as India or China, is that they usually do not have to look to foreign cultures for knowledge or philosophy to deal with their own political, socio-economic, or military problems. Just like the Chinese, the Indians, for instance, have their own philosophical culture that provides them, even to this day, with the means to deal with political or military challenges that necessarily arise. One of the best examples we find of this is New Delhi’s continuous use of the Arthashastra by the ancient Indian philosopher and strategist, Kautilya, also known as Chanakya.

thinking that consequently affects their way of acting out or engaging with the world—visible in their political statecraft and strategic culture. As Wang notably comments, “If history is any guide, studying Chinese strategic behaviors in the past will likely shed light on its future behavior.”

Drawing upon such a rich array of ancient traditions and wisdom, China has found the means to remedy political, socio-economic, and cultural problems. Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong, drawing on millennium-old experience to assess its 1962 border dispute with India which handed the latter its defeat, is an acute illustration of this observation. One can also allude to Mao’s military marshals at the height of the Sino-Soviet War in 1969, invoking strategies from the fourteenth-century epic Luo Guanzhong novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, to take measures against the Soviets’ attack. Facing a large-scale Soviet mobilization, Mao ordered his marshals to draw plans to counter a looming assault. The marshals recommended an end to China’s isolation and to revive its stalled talks with the United States. They reached this conclusion by invoking the stratagem of Zhuge Liang, one of the main characters in the historical novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Mao’s marshal Ye Jianying recommended an unorthodox strategic move drawing from

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China’s period of the Three Kingdoms following the collapse of the Han Dynasty. He cited Zhuge Liang’s strategic principle as a framework for China to engage with the United States. Taking a brave intellectual leap, Mao’s marshals advised a daring move recommencing China’s ambassadorial dialogue with the United States. It not only buffered China from the Soviets but also ignited one of the most monumental events in international affairs: the economic reforms and opening of China that transformed the twenty-first century world order.

It is unthinkable today that any leaders occupying the highest political or military helm would conduct affairs of immense national significance by alluding to strategic concepts from millennia-old episodes. Yet, China continues to extract answers to its contemporary questions from its rich historical insights reflected in the accumulated wisdom of its civilization. If past behavior is anything to go by, it is highly plausible that contemporary Chinese political and military leaders will continuously draw lessons from the past to handle current political and socio-economic dilemmas.

Sources of Strategic Engagements
We can also observe this continuation in a popular strategic game wei qi. There are undeniable allusions to wei qi in the military classics of ancient China such as Lu Shang’s Six Secret Teachings, The Methods of Sima, Sun Tzu’s the Art of War, Wuzi, Wei Liaozi, Three Strategies of Huang Shigong, and the fictional dialogue Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong.

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Wei qi is an ancient Chinese strategic game of encirclement dating back to more than two millennia. The object of the game is to simultaneously encircle more territory than the opponent and to avoid being encircled. Unlike the classic western game of chess where the play takes place under conditions of complete information, wei qi takes place under conditions of uncertainty but infinite possibilities, where it is up to the respective players’ temperament—patience, element of surprise, non-action, balanced long-sightedness, broad strategy, subtlety, constant adjustments to new situations, multi-dimensional focus, seeking relative advantage, and waiting for the right circumstances (shi)—that decides the outcome of the game. These dispositions are diametric to the constitutions needed to be skilful in the game of chess, where what is sought after is domination, bold and speedy annihilation of the opponent, short-term strategy, immediate reciprocity, and one-dimensional focus on total and decisive victory.

Looking into wei qi, we see how games preferred in different societies provide helpful perspectives into the ways of thinking and their bearing on the behavior of different people. Just as American policymakers strategize by employing chess or American football tactics, likewise the Chinese political and military leaders plan and strategize employing wei qi concepts. They see their relations with other states in these terms. It is not far-fetched to infer from China’s

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25 DiCicco–Bloom and Gibson, “More than a Game: Sociological Theory from the Theories of Games.”
**wei qi** perspective that Beijing interprets the United States’ relationships with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and other states in Southeast Asia as an attempted encirclement. The United States may, or may not, view it in such a manner, but China does. These Asian countries, on the **wei qi** board, are viewed as connecting stones essential in encircling China. Thus, for instance, one can infer Beijing’s entry into the Korean War was decided on this idea of connecting stones.²⁶ From the United States’ chess perspective, during the Korean War, China could not reasonably intervene given its lack of military capabilities, untrained military personnel, and poor economic conditions.

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But it was taken aback when China intervened despite its relative weakness. For similar reasons, when Vietnam signed a defense treaty with the Soviet Union, China went to war in 1979 with its southern neighbor despite its relative weakness, as Beijing saw the treaty as an attempted encirclement by Hanoi and Moscow.\(^\text{27}\)

More recently, in 2019, China implementing Sun Tzu’s *wei qi* stratagem to attain relative advantage—through surprise, longsighted strategy, and constant adjustments to changing circumstances—directly attacked India’s strategies. They did so by constructing a village (approximately 4.5 kilometers within what India claims is its territory) in the disputed northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. As one of the stratagems in *wei qi* is surprising opponents by subtly moving one’s stone into the opponent’s sphere of influence to “test each other’s water,” China placed its stone in India’s territory. From India’s perspective this seemed highly implausible given the precarious situation following the Doklam stand-off in 2017 and the clash between the two states at Galwan valley in June 2020.\(^\text{28}\) However, from China’s *wei qi* perspective, it was a balanced long-sighted strategy to gain a relative advantage by placing its stone in India’s claimed sphere of influence. At first instance, this move may seem inconsequential; after all, it is just one stone or a village of about 100 homes. Yet, in *wei qi*, small inconsequential moves later prove to be incomparably significant in deciding the tide of competition.\(^\text{29}\)

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 145.

A *wei qi* game commences on an empty board with each player taking turns and placing stones on the board. Considering that an empty board leaves each player to place their stones anywhere on the board, it reflects China's *wei qi* stratagem of building islands and reclaiming land in the South China Sea. These islands are, from *wei qi* perspective, the connecting stones, or the “Great Wall of Sand,”\(^{30}\) to secure territory. From the perspective of the United States, the United Nations, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), these behaviors are a blatant disregard for international law and freedom of navigation. However, for China, its actions in the South China Sea are comparable to what any *wei qi* player will do to secure more territory given the freedom to place one’s stone anywhere on the *wei qi* board. China’s actions in the South China Sea become more comprehensible in this light. Interestingly, from a *wei qi* perspective, the most probable outcome in the South China Sea dispute would likely be a stalemate among the contenting states. Driven by its *wei qi* outlook, it is plausible that China may already have forecast such an outcome.


\(^{30}\) Dubbed by Admiral Harry Harris, the former Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.
An interesting facet of this game is that it warrants the simultaneous occurrence of multiple battles throughout the board, as opposed to chess, where there is only a single battle of total victory over an opponent. This reflects how China engages and competes with others over multiple areas of interest: trade, security, environment, arms sales, nuclear proliferation, governance, liberty, human rights, etc. In these competitions over a wide range of issues, it is highly improbable that China or other states will always win all their engagements. For example, on the one hand China had failed against a weaker Vietnam in the border war of 1979, but it succeeded against a collectively weak ASEAN in building islands in the South China Sea.

Unlike the game of chess, where each player is one-dimensionally focused for a decisive and absolute victory in a single battle, skilled *wei qi* players know that one cannot always win, nor can one expect total mastery over multiple events, as that would mean going against *wu-wei* and the ideal of *tao*. Rather *wei qi* highlights relatively small wins and advantages: ‘you win some and lose some,’ which is manifested in China’s engagement with the United States, for example. Both these powers cooperate and are at odds over a range of issues: questions concerning Taiwan, North Korea, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, human rights, governance, religious freedom, nuclear proliferation, environment, trade, South China Sea, and many others. From the U.S. perspective, unless China acquiesces to all these issues, there can hardly be any room for amicable engagement—that is, it assumes that there can be

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31 *Wu-wei*, at the risk of oversimplifying, means “effortless action or no action or non-action.” Meaning “doing without doing, or action without action.” This concept is fundamental to the concept of *tao*, where *tao*, once again at the risk of oversimplifying, simply means an “effortless action effortlessly (without any effort or action) going along with the natural flow (shun) or the way (tao) of things according to propensity (shi) of a given situation.”
solutions to all these problems. Whereas from China’s *wei qi* perspective, they both can agree on many issues like the environment and trade, and make strides to cooperate where their interests align, yet shelve those where they disagree until a future time. In other words, there cannot be solutions to every problem, since to assume as such is to invite disharmony. From its perspective, contention over unsettled issues should not define the relationship between the two states, illustrating the principle of relative advantage, win-win relations, and long-term view on thorny matters. Otherwise, it would be a loss for both sides.

Certainly, it was such an attitude that enabled the establishment of relations between China and the United States in 1972. The same spirit enabled the two states to cooperate on numerous occasions (for instance, China joining the World Trade Organisation despite Washington’s initial concerns over Beijing’s human rights record), and on equally significant issues concerning trade, environment, security, and terrorism, without letting questions of Taiwan, human rights, religious freedom, Tibet, and so forth, jeopardize their respective interests. The same can be said of its engagement with India. Both Beijing and New Delhi may disagree on border issues, but this did not stop them from seeking avenues where both can cooperate. China actively sought India as a partner to boost economic ties, which from a *wei qi* perspective is a win-win for both countries.32

A glaring example is Chinese President Xi Jinping’s first official visit to India in September 2014, the first Chinese presidential arrival in

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32 This is not to suggest that India has not sought to normalize its relations with China. But discernment needs to be made between actively seeking and holding talks, on the one hand, and trying to understand the other side, on the other. The latter ensures an opportunity for a lasting, and perhaps a normalized, relationship.
twenty-five years. Xi’s visit culminated with agreements worth billions of dollars signed between the two sides with China pledging to help develop India’s railway system, set up industrial parks, and give market access to India’s pharmaceutical and farm products. At the time of Xi’s visit, the Chinese and Indian troops were at a standoff at the disputed Sino-Indian borders region of Ladakh. It was an unmistakable cue (from Beijing's wei qi perspective of multiple battles on the board) signaling that the border and economic concerns were separate and that lack of development on border issues should not hinder cooperation in other areas. Beijing generally tends to shelve unresolved disputes and instead work on areas where cooperation can be reached with the hope that acceptable solutions can be found in the future.

Such policies emerge from the cultural concept of guanxi which is deeply embedded in the Chinese way of thinking. From India’s chess

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35 *Guanxi*, a fundamental concept in Chinese society, means that a person becomes identifiable or legible through his/her various social and cultural networks. So essential is this notion that even the Chinese word for a person, ‘ren,’ takes into consideration the person as well as the intimate contextual societal and cultural environment that makes his or her existence meaningful. The analogy of the connecting stones on the wei qi board faithfully illustrates this formulation reflected in the concept of guanxi or a network of ‘relational’ social relationship, obligation, and reciprocity. In such lights, we can appreciate how the individual stones become intelligible for their role, purpose, and function in relations (not exclusion) or guanxi to other stones (such as ‘connecting stones’ to encircle opponents, territory, etc.). See, Jack Barbalet, “Guanxi, Tie Strength, and Network Attributes,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 59, no. 8 (2015): 1038–1050; Yanjie Bian, and Lei Zhang, “Guanxi Culture and Guanxi Social Capital,” *Journal of Humanities* 1 (2013): 107–113; Jar-Der Luo, “Guanxi Revisited: An exploratory study of familiar ties in a Chinese workplace,” *Management and Organization Review* 7, no. 2 (2011): 329–351;
perspective, however, such a move was disconcerting because how could the two sides cooperate economically while the border issues remained unresolved or frozen in time.

Similarly, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be seen as Beijing’s way of connecting stones on a *wei qi* board, with multiple engagements through its various belt and road corridors connecting Asia with Africa, Europe, and South America. As any skilled *wei qi* player will recognize, one cannot win all these engagements, that there are bound to be setbacks, and that China’s margins for profits from the BRI may be at best marginal and relative to its main rivals. Beijing will undoubtedly be aware of such (*wei qi*) assessment about its belt and road initiative. Indeed, Argentina officially joining the BRI in 2022 will in the long run test the proposition of how much Beijing benefits.


Questions such as—can this Chinese double game help build confidence with India, and is the Chinese strategy outmoded given that this is the twenty-first century?—may arise in the readers’ mind. However, such questions stem precisely from the reasons that this study is trying to illuminate: the inability to accept or understand China’s behavior arising from its strategic traditions.

The author wishes to emphasize that this study is not about the BRI. Rather the BRI is employed to demonstrate how ancient strategic gameplay influences China’s foreign policies and behavior.
Interestingly, with China viewing world affairs from a *wei qi* perspective and the United States from a chess outlook there are higher chances for these superpowers to misunderstand and misperceive one another. Because both are, figuratively speaking, playing different games, each side adheres to and plays by their respective rules of the game—concerning what counts as legitimate wins, losses, moves, etc.—with each perceiving the other’s moves to be illegitimate. Consequently, the United States presumes (erroneously) China plays the same game and perceives the latter's moves (be they human rights, Taiwan, breach of the international law of the sea, etc.) as a violation of the accepted norms defined by the (chess) rules of the game. China too (mistakenly) perceives the United States playing the same game (*wei qi*) and perceives the latter as not adhering to the norms defined by the (*wei qi*) rules of the game. In such disagreements, misperceptions about each other, accompanied by heightened tension, invariably pervade China–U.S. relations.

Aside from drawing upon the wisdom of *wei qi*, China’s past behavior also indicates extracting counsel from its ancient military strategists, the seminal figure being Sun Tzu (circa 500 BCE). There is exceptional scholarship on Chinese strategic culture and its

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relationship with current Chinese grand strategic behavior. Thus, it will suffice to briefly touch upon China’s distinct strategic doctrines of war and diplomacy that continue to tie contemporary culture in order to constantly seek guidance from the wisdom of past experience.

Forged in one of ancient China’s most ruthless epochs (circa 771 BCE to 476 BCE), with rival kingdoms descending into political upheaval and callously seeking to dominate their competitors in the faltering empire (i.e. Zhou Dynasty), these military classics instruct how to survive and emerge victorious in the carnage of that period; lessons which many Chinese leaders in modern times have continued to rely upon for wisdom and guidance. Those that wrote these strategies placed a premium on the understanding, and subtle use, of human psychology, and avoidance of confrontation. We find the most striking expression of these strategies, in the twentieth century, at the hand of Mao Zedong in his successful campaign against the Guomindang during the Chinese civil war, and in the tactics of the Vietnamese revolutionary leaders, Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, as they

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42 During the 1962 Sino-India war, the 1969 Sino-Soviet war, and the BRI, for instance, the Chinese military took lessons from the pages of their turbulent past to tackle their opponents. These are some good illustrations of how these tactics are employed today. See, Mark McNeilly, Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern Warfare (Oxford University Press, 2003); Scott A. Boorman, The Protracted Game: A Wei-Chi Interpretation of Maoist Revolutionary Strategy (Oxford University Press, 1969); Chen and Wilson, “All Under the Heaven is Great Chaos”; and Garver, “China’s Decision for War with India in 1962.”
effectively employed these prized tactics of psychological contest and indirect assault against the French and the United States, respectively.\textsuperscript{43}

More recently, China continues employing strategies from these military classics. Ever mindful to evade direct confrontation, Beijing, for instance, employed indirect tactics such as building economic, infrastructure and extending financial aid in Africa to gain access to its markets. In 1960, taking a cue from Sun Tzu’s strategies, China took an indirect, long-term calculated action to solicit a large African voting bloc in the United Nations (UN) by constructing football stadiums across the continent.\textsuperscript{44} Decades later, in 1971, Beijing garnered enough votes to become a member of the UN.\textsuperscript{45} Such plans were executed by heeding Sun Tzu’s opening maxim, “War is a matter of vital importance to the State; the providence of life or death; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied.”\textsuperscript{46}

It is, therefore, by no means a feeble act to ruminate about a course of action, i.e. war, with due reflection. This is clear in Mao’s decision to launch a sudden and devastating blow to India in 1962.\textsuperscript{47} He made the


\textsuperscript{45} Lai, Learning from the Stones, 11.


\textsuperscript{47} See, Garver, “China’s Decision for War with India in 1962.”
decision by drawing upon lessons learned from events that occurred thousands of years before.\textsuperscript{48}

Even at the height of the Cold War and only just emerging from its civil war, China had to uneasily maneuver between the two nuclear superpowers that were poised to overwhelm Beijing. Yet, paying careful attention to Sun Tzu’s maxim, Mao’s impervious attitude, and his overt indifference toward the endemic threat of nuclear war in treating as though it did not exist, owes to the thoughtful reflection on war and diplomacy.\textsuperscript{49}

Mao also owed this attitude by gleaning lessons from a classic tale of the Chinese strategic tradition: Zhuge Liang’s “Empty Fortress Stratagem” from the fourteenth century historical novel about the Three Kingdom period (220–280 CE), \textit{Romance of the Three Kingdoms}.\textsuperscript{50}

In gist, Zhuge Liang, of the Kingdom of Shu, was able to stop the attack

\textsuperscript{48} For a prudent illustration of how Mao utilized Sun Tzu’s teachings, see Mao Tse-Tung, \textit{On Guerilla Warfare}. Here Mao paraphrases much of Sun Tzu’s \textit{Art of War} by emphasizing unconventionality, deception, surprise, decisiveness, and illusion, as well as considering all the contextual factors to take advantage of the changing elements.

\textsuperscript{49} As Yang and Xia (2010, 399) write, “Mao was preparing for a nuclear war. He ordered the transfer of CCP central leaders and central organizations from Beijing to various provinces to guard against a Soviet surprise attack. He also accepted the four marshals’ proposal of ‘allying with Sun-Wu (hinting the United States) in the east, and resisting Cao-Wei (hinting the Soviet Union) in the north’ (donglian Sun-Wu, beiju Cao-Wei, a popular ancient Chinese alliance stratagem).” See, Yang and Xia, “Vacillating Between Revolution and Détente: Mao’s Changing Psyche and Policy Toward the United States, 1969–1976.” Also see, Mao Tse-Tung, \textit{On Guerilla Warfare}; Kissinger, \textit{On China}.

on its city by a larger Wei army through a ploy, where he displayed a casual, impervious and indifferent attitude toward the threat by the opponent’s army, thereby making the attackers think twice and doubt their impetus.51

The point being: when you are vulnerable, make your opponent think twice and show no fear in the face of situations beyond one’s mastery. Mao did not show fear of nuclear threat, even when he was aware of China’s relative weakness. Mao, an astute student of Sun Tzu, paid attention to the maxim, “... when capable, feign incapacity; when active, inactivity”;52 and his attitude toward the nuclear threat supports the application of ancient stratagems to realize his purpose.53

It will not be too far-fetched to perceive China’s BRI, for instance, as a multifocal strategy stemming from the wisdom of past events, as well as wei qi, and the military classics. From past world events, China not only learned from the collapse of the Soviet Union by giving significance to economic growth and development to avert a similar fate, but also gained an acute awareness about the U.S. containment policy against the Soviet Union. To avoid containment, China made a strategic move, in the words of Sun Tzu, of “... attacking the enemy’s strategy...”54 by initiating the BRI.55


52 Sun Tzu, The Art of War, 66.

53 “Mao was preparing for a nuclear war... He also accepted the four marshals’ proposal of “allying with Sun-Wu (hinting the United States) in the east, and resisting Cao-Wei (hinting the Soviet Union) in the north (donglian Sun-Wu, beiju Cao-Wei, a popular ancient Chinese alliance stratagem).” See, Yang and Xia, “Vacillating Between Revolution and Détente,” 399.

54 Sun Tzu, The Art of War, 77.
Instead of waiting to be encircled, as the Soviets had been, China first took a calculated long-term stratagem to counter its plausible containment by unveiling the BRI. It was a move that proved to be consequential as the Quadrilateral Dialogue countries (Quad) and Asian states such as Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan are alluding to containing China. The *wei qi* concepts of encirclement and connecting stones closely illustrate the current state of world affairs. China spread out its stones (i.e. the BRI) by connecting Asia with Africa and Europe, which counters any moves by the United States and other Asian states to encircle or contain Beijing. This tactic alludes to what Sun Tzu says, “To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”

In the words of Sun Tzu, another segment of the BRI is the Chinese approach that “… the best policy is to take a state intact; to ruin it is inferior to this.” In *wei qi* terminology, the preceding statement can be interpreted to indicate not as an occupation of a state but as a win-win. Win-win for those involved in the BRI since participating states would secure inflows of foreign investments and infrastructure development without having to adhere to demanding preconditions. China, in turn, gets access to much-needed resources from the participating states to fuel its growing economic needs. This can be best described by one of the primary principles of the ancient Chinese

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55 The author is not suggesting that the Chinese leaders actually say that they were using military classics in creating their BRI. Rather, in BRI we can see the influence of these ancient military classics being played out. Just as it would be outrageous to claim that Indian leaders do explicitly claim that they are employing Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* in the pursuance of their foreign policy.


57 Ibid., 77. It is essential to recognize that we should refrain from the literal interpretation of quotes from these classical texts, as this will do a lot of disservice in our quest to understand.
concept of Tianxia or “all-under-heaven.” This principle, as entailed in the Book of Odes (dating from circa 11 to 7 BCE and thought to have been compiled by Kongzi), requires an indispensable “inclusion of all people and all land,” without excluding anyone. Since no one can be pushed aside because no one is incompatible with others, nothing can be considered foreign.\(^58\) China’s engagement and dialogue with the Taliban, as the United States withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, is a case in point. The BRI in both metaphorical and literal sense connects and includes (at least those willing) “all people and all land”; after all, tianxia assumes a shared future for all mankind.\(^59\)

Naturally, there are increasing criticisms about China’s win-win adage as a euphemism for debt traps for the participating countries, especially developing states. One could no doubt find it hard to justify the Chinese debt trap because the Sri Lankan economy teetered on the verge of collapse in 2022 partially due to huge debt repayments to China, or that there is a huge gap between Chinese good intentions and the results they are producing.

Yet, a flip side of this is to approach it from the Chinese strategic emphasis on the people’s welfare. Ancient military strategists, such as Jiang Ziya/Tai Kung (circa 1015 BCE) and Wuzi (circa 440 BCE), highlight the fundamental guiding principle of looking after the people’s welfare and conditions. As Jiang Ziya (also known as Lu Shang/Tai Kung) replies to King Wen: “Profit them, do not harm them. Help them

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\(^{58}\) Zhao Tingyang, “A Political World Philosophy in terms of All-Under-Heaven (Tian-xia),” Diogenes 221 (2009): 5–18.

\(^{59}\) See, Zhao, “A Political World Philosophy in terms of All-Under-Heaven (Tian-xia).” Tianxia as a concept of how China engages with the world remains one of the ‘yet to be understood concepts’ in international relations scholarship. For example, see William A. Callahan, “Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony?” International Studies Review 10 (2008): 749–61.
succeed... Give them life... Grant, do not take away... Make them happy, do not cause them to be angry.”

Jiang Ziya believes that a thriving, well-ordered, and satisfied people will wholeheartedly support their government and that a society with adequate material resources can better train, instruct, and furnish truly motivated soldiers.

This is vital to note because contemporary Chinese leaders place great strategic importance on internal stability given their fear of chaos and disorder emerging from past historical experiences—the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE), the warring states period (476–221 BCE), the period of three kingdoms (220–280 CE), the five dynasties and ten kingdoms period (907–960 CE), and, most recently (in terms of contemporary historical timeline), the Chinese civil war, and the Cultural Revolution. With an immense population that requires equally immense resources, thriving economic growth and progress becomes an overarching necessity. Lu Shang’s response to King Wen’s question on how to preserve one’s state goes to the heart of contemporary China’s dilemma: “… the ruler must focus on developing wealth within his state.”

The wealth can be generated through what Lu Shang refers to as the three treasures: great agriculture, great industry, and great commerce. Predictably, the attainment of these three treasures constitutes the prime impetus for the BRI.

From a strategic point of view, it is a vital national security issue for China to ensure that the agricultural sector performs well to feed its immense population, and the industry employs its populace and produces goods for trade. The rationale behind the BRI is that it should

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60 Sawyer, The Seven Military Classics, 43.

61 Ibid., 46.

62 Ibid., 47.
succeed in making Chinese society thrive economically. Equally pressing is a corollary to the need for internal security: external order or international stability. From a *tianxia* perspective, external order is a necessary condition for internal stability and order.\(^63\) The connection between internal security and external order originates from ancient Chinese philosophy of *yin* and *yang*, a harmonizing interplay between opposites that are complementary and relative to each other.\(^64\) Each is essential for the subsistence of the other, and to maintain cosmic harmony and balance.\(^65\) Indeed, the BRI can be seen as Beijing’s quest for internal stability through external international order. The tributaries of connecting networks become essential to maintain that external stability. China preoccupied with external disorder and confusion will neglect and drain resources from its three great treasures, creating conditions for internal discord. Or as a prime minister in the Qin period (221–206 BCE), Lu Buwei, says: “no state can be safe if the world is in disorder; no family can survive if the state is thrown into turmoil; one has no dwelling place when one’s family is ruined.”\(^66\)

The analogy of the connecting stones on the *wei qi* board illustrates the state of affairs reflected in the cultural concept of *guanxi* or a network of relational social relationships, obligations, and reciprocity. In terms of its foreign policy, China views *guanxi* as the guiding principle in its engagement with other states without defining or being

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\(^{63}\) Zhao, “A Political World Philosophy in terms of All-Under-Heaven (*Tianxia*),” 10.


\(^{66}\) Zhao, “A Political World Philosophy in terms of All-Under-Heaven (*Tianxia*),” 10.
defined by any of them as enemies, rivals, or opponents. Mutual respect and “reciprocal dependency”\textsuperscript{67} are deemed vital to maintaining stable and good relations. From this perspective, reciprocity is more about equal standing and mutual respect; it does not necessarily mean that exchanges must equally benefit both sides or must be of equal value or quantity. This is evident, for example, in China’s trade deficit with Australia, South Korea, Japan, Brazil, Taiwan, and member-states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) such as Malaysia and Brunei.\textsuperscript{68} For China, it is seldom solely about profits or margins of returns on their investments or other trade deals.\textsuperscript{69} Instead, it is more about preserving guanxi with other states by highlighting the significance of nonmaterial aspects, such as reputation and prestige, of stable relations.\textsuperscript{70} China’s pledge, in January of 2020, to buy US$ 200 billion worth of goods and services from the United States,\textsuperscript{71} even though it makes less sense in terms of its trade and commerce calculus,

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\item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 14.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Qin Yaqing, “A Relational Theory of World Politics,” \textit{International Studies Review} 18 (2016): 33–47; and Zhao, “A Political World Philosophy in terms of All-Under-Heaven (Tian-xia).”
\item \textsuperscript{70} Qin, “A Relational Theory of World Politics.”
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is an appropriate example of Beijing’s approach to harmoniously engage with other states based on the concept of guanxi.

The Chinese decision (on February 25, 2022) to abstain from voting, instead of veto, on the UN Security Council draft resolution opposing Russia on its use of force against Ukraine, is another instance best grasped in light of guanxi, not outside of it. Guided by its premium on maintaining relations, guanxi, on the one hand China abstained rather than casting a veto as a placid nod to the U.S. sponsored Security Council resolution since Beijing wants to sustain its relations with Washington. On the other, Beijing has close ties with Moscow and relations with Kyiv, which China does not want to spoil by choosing sides either by condemning (as an “enemy” or “evil”) or supporting (as a “friend” or “good”) one party over the other. What is of interest here is that from the guanxi lens, relations are not viewed from an “either-or” standpoint—an unequivocal principle in tianxia. Moreover, because guanxi assumes vital importance of context, “It is the social relationships that define what is rational and appropriate.”\(^2\) In other words, it is the relational context, in which parties are inexplicably embedded, that defines the appropriateness and rationality of actions—just as what is deemed an appropriate norm or action in father-son relationships (filial piety, for instance, in Confucian societies), may neither be appropriate/rational nor applicable in friend-friend relationships because the relational context is different. China’s decision to abstain from voting (rather than veto the Security Council

\(^2\) Qin, “A Relational Theory of World Politics,” 38.
resolution opposing Russia’s use of force), thus, becomes intelligible in this embedded relational context.\footnote{From the perspective of the international community, it sees Beijing’s silence as ignoring the plight of the invaded state, which only exacerbates the customary view on China’s poor human rights records.}

Guanxi signifies that once relations are established, they must be sustained. There will no doubt be challenges and hurdles to overcome, which is common in all relations. Yet, these should not terminate the ongoing relations since relations are always ongoing processes—never finalized or defined once and for all time and space. What’s more, relations are not short-term or one-time affairs based on short-term goals and convenience. Instead, relations require great care, effort, and attention from all the parties involved to sustain and develop them. When viewed from such perspective, much of China’s past and present (as well as future) strategic and foreign policy behaviors should begin to make sense for other states, especially the United States, since it is the sole superpower.

**The Future is in the Past**

What emerges, then, in China’s ancient traditions and wisdom is a distinctive mode of thinking unique to Chinese culture and society. Engaging with China, therefore, obliges one to understand China in the way they perceive the world.

In our quest for more inclusive global international relations theories, the trajectory of this study alludes to one vital query for further investigation: inquests into alternative investigative methods to study China, perhaps inclining toward normative and historical (“with Chinese character”) approaches, and inquiries into plausible alternative methodologies that will assist in gaining an insight into China’s
understanding of the international order compared with that of the United States and the West, in general.

With the rise of China, there is a pressing need to grasp these facets that will immensely alleviate the United States’ Cold War mindset and improve its insular understanding of China. These conclusions have much broader ramifications in terms of policymaking: a prudent evaluation of Beijing’s foreign policy and strategic engagements is a prerequisite to understand the rise of China and to preserve peace in Asia.

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