

China's Rise and "Responsibility" in the 21st Century

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Abstract

In recent decades "responsibility" has become a prominent idea in international political discourse. Against this backdrop, international policy and scholarly communities contemplating China's rise regularly address themselves to "whether, when, and how" China will become a "responsible" great power. This article reviews, unpacks and questions understandings of responsibility in the debates about China. One strand of these debates argues that China can become responsible by adopting and promoting the existing "status quo"; the other argues that China acts responsibly when it challenges the unfair hegemony of the status quo. This article argues that both debates operate with remarkably similar understandings of responsibility. Whether China adopts existing rules and norms or establishes rules and norms of its own responsibility is understood to be rule and norm compliance. The article explores the possibility of an alternative understanding of responsibility suggested by Jacques Derrida. It is argued that a Derridian approach does not dispense with rules and norms but is conscious of the irresolvable dilemma when faced with the demands of multiple others. Such an understanding is helpful insofar as it reminds those who would call for responsibility that such responsibility, and politics itself, is more than simply following rules and maintenance of norms.

Keywords: *responsibility, Derrida, China as a great power, Xi Jinping, Chinese thought, rules and norms.*

Introduction

In recent decades "responsibility" has become an important trope in international political discourse. The demands to act in a responsible way range from military intervention (e.g. the "Responsibility to Protect," or R2P) to the protection of the environment (see Ban Ki-moon's comments reported in Associated Press, 2012) and the responsibility current generations have to future generations and for historical injustices. Furthermore, responsibility extends not just to particular actions but also points to a relationship with the framework and norms that underpin and authorise those actions. Thus, President Donald Trump has called on Russia to "join the community of responsible nations" (Wintour, 2017), and to play its role in recognising and preserving international norms.

Within this context it is regularly asked whether, when and how China will become a “responsible power,” “responsible great power,” or “responsible major country” (*fuzeren de daguo* 负责任的大国). It is said that seeking international legitimacy as such has become “a defining feature of China’s foreign policy” (Loke, 2009: 202), and that “international responsibility” has become “one of the most significant topics in Chinese International Relations studies over the last decade” (Mao Weizhun, 2017: 173). This is reflected in the rhetoric of the Chinese elite. President Xi Jinping made responsibility a key theme of his speech to the 2017 World Economic Forum, paying special attention to the rules designed to mitigate against climate change that were previously agreed upon under the terms of the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change: “One should not select or bend rules as he sees fit ... All signatories should stick to [the Paris Agreement] instead of walking away from it as this is a responsibility we must assume for future generations” (Xi Jinping, 2017).

Yet, despite these calls, literatures also often point out the lack of agreement as to what responsibility means in this type of context (e.g. Loke, 2009: 198; Loke, 2016: 847; Yeophantong, 2013: 329–64). What exactly does it mean for China to become “responsible”? Indeed, what does it mean to talk about any state or actor becoming responsible? Responding to these questions, this article engages with conceptualisations of responsibility that are at work in these debates. Ostensibly, the debate about China’s rise appears to be about two contrasting understandings of how China can act responsibly. The first claims that China is acting responsibly if it adopts, maintains and promotes the “status quo” of the international community. The second claims that China acts responsibly when it challenges the unfair rules and norms or the status quo and promotes a fairer system. This article argues that the *fundamental idea of responsibility* in these debates is more uniform than it first appears. Both positions in the debates agree that as a “major power” China needs to promote peace and stability by complying with certain rules and norms. In other words, in these debates, responsibility is narrowed to mean rule and norm compliance.

Thus, whilst this article does not intend to make a direct contribution to the existing literature on rules and norms, its focus on responsibility as adherence to rules and norms brings it into relation with this literature. The role of norms in regulating and guiding actors in international relations is now well established, and much work now focuses on “how, when and why norms emanate and evolve” (Björkdahl, 2002: 9). This article is concerned with norms understood in their regulative, evaluative, and prescriptive dimensions. As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 891) have observed: “It is precisely the prescriptive (or evaluative) quality of ‘oughtness’ that sets norms apart from other kinds of rules.” Norms, then, are sets of assumptions about what ought to happen and why (Katzenstein, 1996: 20). As such, they are necessarily shared (Katzenstein, 1996: 21; Jepperson et al., 1996: 54). In essence, norms are a set of shared assumptions about what should be done and why. Furthermore, norms establish what kinds of actors there can be in a system, and place demands, permissions, and prohibitions on those actors (Kowert and Legro, 1996: 468). Thus, in Katzenstein’s (1996: 5) words: “In some situations norms operate like rules that define the identity of an actor ... In other situations norms operate as standards that specify the proper enactment of an already defined identity ... Norms thus either define (or constitute) identities or prescribe (or regulate) behaviour, or they do both.” Rules can be considered to be articulated and concrete instructions which issue from the

attempt to realise norms. The rules of any given system tell actors who must act, when they must act, and how they must act. Thus, if norms are the desired destination, then the rules and their practices are directions for getting there.

This article reviews, unpacks and questions this understanding of responsibility as rule and norm compliance. It draws on the work of Jacques Derrida to help to show that responsibility as rule and norm compliance is *one* understanding of responsibility, but not the only one that is possible. This opens space for an attendant claim about the location of politics. Existing debates that understand responsibility to be a question of rule compliance take China to pose a dilemma between competing hegemonic visions. In contrast, a Derridian approach suggests that politics and responsibility are concerned with how one responds to others in a world where the foundations for action are uncertain, and where attending to the welfare of some necessarily means neglecting the welfare of others. The contribution of this article is therefore primarily analytical and theoretical. Its aim is to explore the role that responsibility is playing in thinking about China, and to open a space for thinking about alternative ways of framing responsibility. In so doing, it also raises the question about the understanding of politics which stands behind these assumptions. The article therefore prepares the ground and provides some tools for those wishing to think about the meaning and use of responsibility in a wider way, and in areas beyond China, such as R2P, the environment and intergenerational justice.

The rest of this article explores these ideas. First, some conceptual clarification is undertaken specifically to explain standard meanings of responsibility in the Anglophone and Sinophone traditions. What is found is a striking similarity concerning how responsibility is understood (be it explicit or implicit), namely responsibility concerns observing rules and norms and playing one's role within such a system. Second, this article illustrates (in two parts) this claim in relation to demands that China become a "responsible power." Both the understanding of China as accepting and promoting rules and norms (the "status quo approach"), and the view that China can become responsible by challenging these rules and norms, are two sides of the same conceptual coin. The last part of the article looks at an alternative to this understanding of responsibility by exploring the suggestive ideas of Derrida. It is argued that a Derridian approach does not dispense with rules but is conscious of the irresolvable dilemma when faced with the demands of multiple others. Such an understanding is helpful insofar as it reminds those who would call for responsibility that such responsibility, and politics itself, is more than simply following rules and maintenance of norms.

Responsibility: Western, Chinese, and Derridian

Responsibility is a comparatively new concept in the West, and somewhat under-analysed (Williams, 2014). Although instances of the use of "responsibility" can be dated from the late 1550s, in English and French the term has a strong connection to political events such as the American and French revolutions, and only later (in the twentieth century) being more closely connected to metaphysical and moral questions concerning agency (cf. Williams, 2014). In terms of its political heritage, McKeon explains in detail how responsibility was connected to the idea of "responsible government" in the 1800s, and that this notion is an extension of the older notion of accountability (McKeon, 1957: 24; for how accountability is now

associated with “norms” see Brennan et al., 2013: 37). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth OED) records the continuing influence of this original context. Here, older instances of the term “responsible” are connected to the ability and obligation to pay debts or fulfil duties (dating back to the 1500s and 1600s). The OED (2019) also records how responsibility is connected to holding an office, role or appointment, and to be the cause or originator of something.

The entries in the OED reflect the original political and juridical meaning of being responsible, which connects it to holding a role. A juridical understanding of the idea can also be seen in the political debates that frame the origin of the term. To be responsible is to be subject to punishment when infringing the rights of others (McKeon, 1957; Ricoeur, 2000). However, as Ricoeur (2000: 11–12) has observed, currently there is a “proliferation and dispersion of uses of this term.” Significantly, to be responsible is both to “answer for” and “to respond to.” This is what is, in part, reflected in contemporary thinking about being responsible to/for future generations, the environment, and those who suffer poverty, disease, famine, and the consequences of war. In the international context this is realised in terms of adherence to rules and norms. In other words, the juridical sense of being responsible has not been abandoned, even as the notion of responsibility has changed from infringing the rights of others to actively promoting their welfare. Furthermore, an actor is responsible by virtue of the role that they hold; and that role is not only defined by a system or rules and norms, it also places obligations on that actor to adhere to those rules and norms. Failure to do so is occasion for imputation (Raffoul, 2004: 44).

These “European” understandings of responsibility resonate with Chinese understandings. Indeed, both Western and Chinese understanding of responsibility are remarkably similar. There is a longer Chinese tradition of understanding responsibility, which also connects “responsibility” to compliance with some set of established and calculable rules and norms. The Chinese term for responsibility in these debates, *zeren* 责任, is made up of characters indicating “duty” (*ze* 责), and positioning in the sense of to “serve in a position” (*ren* 任) (Hanyu da zidian weiyuanhui, 1995: 6.3626.3, 1.122.6; Karlgren, 1974 [1923]: 634, 1045, GSR67f; Wieger, 1965 [1915]: 82c). The etymology and pictographic makeup of the characters associate them with money (through the radical 贝 in the lower part of *ze*), indebtedness and the duties that come with a particular position. This etymology and pictographic make-up thereby points towards an understanding of *zeren* as something calculable and contractual. Further association with blame and punishment sits in parallel with English language use in terms of accountability in relation to such calculable duties or rules (Williams, 2014). This, then, is the general picture which underpins both the view that supports, and the view that seeks to replace, the status quo. In both accounts, acting responsibly means identifying rules concerning what one should do, and then following those rules.

However, a different, albeit related, use of responsibility in the Chinese tradition conceptualises it not as a duty, but as a virtue. This is the usage that has received the least attention in the discipline of philosophy, dominated by a Western tradition of thought (Williams, 2014). Nevertheless, virtue is clearly important in the Chinese philosophical tradition of understanding *zeren* and many current

exceptionalist claims about Chinese responsibility draw on this understanding of *zeren*. The character *ren* 任 depicts a person (人) and a pole supported in the middle with an object attached at each end (壬). It indicates the burden of carrying something on one's shoulders and emphasises the importance of people to responsibility (Hanyu da zidian weiyuanhui, 1995: 1.122.6; Karlgren, 1974 [1923]: 634, GSR67f; Wieger, 1965 [1915]: 82c). Perhaps responsibility, then, is not only a question of living up to some set and calculable norms or rules that one is duty-bound to perform based on one's position. Responsibility can also be understood as a virtue concerned with the demands and burdens that being with other people places on us in terms of virtues, morals, or ethics beyond rules. Although these ideas find support in Chinese history and etymology, this understanding of responsibility has not been given enough room in the debates over China as a responsible power.

In this discussion about the meaning of responsibility the Derrida's thought provides some resources to develop an alternative perspective and understanding. Derrida's account offers a view of responsibility which explicitly opposes "responsibility" to the obedience to rules. Simply put, by obeying rules one is not making any decision about what is an appropriate course of action, as that decision has already been made. This does not mean that Derrida is advocating the abandonment of rules (Peterson, 1997: 288); it does however mean that the moment of responsibility comes before and after any given action (Peterson, 1997: 288), and outside of any rules and norms. Furthermore, whereas adherence to rules and norms would seem to imply that the "right thing" can be done, Derrida's view understands responsibility to be made conceivable by an irresolvable form of dilemma. In acting, one can never know what is right. Derrida is not merely concerned that some rules may contradict other rules – such a dilemma could be resolved *if* it were possible to construct a consistent set of rules. Nor is he concerned with finding a way to know that the norms that underpin the rules are the correct ones. Derrida's key concern is that there is simply no way to choose between the foundations for sets of rules – indeed, Derrida doubts the existence of any such foundations. Thus, responsibility is marked by an irresolvable dilemma not because one must choose between two equally valid rules, nor because one cannot be certain of the basis of those rules, but because responsibility is a recognition of the unjustness of any decision. There are no solid foundations for making a decision about whose call for help is responded to, and in helping some there are always others who are not helped.

This leads to the final suggestion. Derrida's notion of responsibility opens a path to understanding how responsibility is – and must be – political. Given that politics involves plural others, in attending to the needs of some inevitably, necessarily, the needs of others are neglected. Sometimes duties will be exclusionary of each other. In such a situation, to perform any duties at all, one must decide which "other" will be responded to. By linking responsibility to the undecidable decision, Derrida does not conceive of responsibility in relation to a technology or legislation of politics, but to a politics which is understood to be focused on the encounter with the other. Thus, Derrida's deconstruction of the concept helps understand China's rise in a more nuanced way and reemphasises the politics of its ethico-political decisions as a responsible power. Thus, politics is not about the power-play between sets of rules backed by aspiring hegemonies but about the very choices involved in setting rules and responding to others in conditions of uncertainty.

China as Responsible Power, Part 1: Maintenance of the Status Quo

In this and the next section the article considers how understandings of responsibility have been articulated by politicians and thinkers in relation to Chinese foreign affairs. Renewed interest in China's "great power responsibility" emerged after 2005, when Robert Zoellick (then US deputy secretary of state), called on China to become a "responsible stakeholder" by sustaining and strengthening "the international system that has enabled its success" (Zoellick, 2005: 94, 98). Such responsibility would see China adjusting "to the international rules developed over the last century" (Zoellick, 2005: 94). Zoellick's speech explicitly connected responsibility to maintenance of the status quo. To be responsible meant recognising and adhering to established norms. It also placed an obligation on China to protect and develop such norms. China's "responsibility" was to accept existing norms and find its relevant place in the status quo; failure to do so would cast China as irresponsible and a threat.

Zoellick's speech expresses what is more than a decade later a commonplace view of Chinese responsibility. His connection between responsibility and norms has been most visible when China is criticised for failing to act in accordance with norms and values which are considered "absolute." Chief amongst these are the protection of human rights and the prevention of genocide. Two examples illustrate this. First, China has been accused of irresponsibly assisting genocide in Darfur through providing loans, weapons, and military training to the government regime. For example, Nicholas D. Kristof asked, in the *New York Times*, "whether China's rise will be accompanied by increasingly responsible behavior in its international relations." "Darfur is a test," he added, "and for now China is failing" (Kristof, 2006). Second, in 2012, a UN Security Council resolution calling on Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to resign was vetoed by China and Russia. Then British foreign secretary William Hague's comment reflected the views of many state leaders: "Russia and China will be held responsible for this terrible situation ... They didn't cause the situation, but they are standing in the way of the Security Council" (BBC, 2012b).

When China (together with a number of authoritarian states) voted against a later resolution these sentiments were reiterated in the English-language press. *The Atlantic* argued that "Beijing's support for pariah states is undermining its goal of becoming a responsible global player" (Piekos, 2012). In both cases, the PRC was accused of being irresponsible, because it broke what were thought of as norms of the international system. As a result, scholar Yong Deng has negatively labelled China a "post-responsible" power that irresponsibly challenges the rules and norms of the status quo (Yong Deng, 2014: 118).

China has also been accused of failing to act responsibly by not doing more to promote international norms. On this view, acting responsibly is something more than simply not acting irresponsibly. It involves the active acceptance and promotion of obligations, burdens, and duties. For example, the higher level of responsibility required by the UN for members of the Security Council has resulted in some criticising China for remaining detached from its responsibilities as a council member after joining it in the 1970s. The apparent shift in later years to increasingly constructive contributions to the decision-making process has also been praised as China "stepping up to its responsibilities." Likewise, Chinese support at the 2005 UN

World Summit for the adoption of “responsibility to protect” as a “guiding principle” has been lauded as indicating a more “responsible” China (for a discussion on China's shifting attitude to R2P see Teitt, 2011). Such a China acts responsibly by accepting existing international norms and its appropriate role in developing rules from those norms.

Clearly China has its role to play – but this does not mean that all roles are equivalent. States play different roles depending on their position and capabilities, and responsibility is differentiated. This has led some to claim that China acts responsibly when it recognises and fulfils its role in the status quo. Advocates of the “China responsibility” thesis (*Zhongguo zeren lun* 中国责任论) sensitive to context and emphasise the need for the PRC to rethink its national interest in light of its rise (Yeophantong, 2013: 348). This is a question of recognising and fulfilling various criteria that would indicate responsibility. Such “responsibility requirements” (*zeren xuqiu* 责任需求) have been outlined by Wang Yizhou (1999), and separately by Xia Liping, who lists a number of “criteria of [a] responsible power” (Xia Liping, 2001: 17). This line of reasoning resonates in a number of concepts deployed in the debates over Chinese international responsibility, including China’s “self-positioning” (*ziwo dingwei* 自我定位) and “international responsibility positioning” (*guoji zeren dingwei* 国际责任定位), that all tie the responsibility a particular actor should take to its position (*dingwei* 定位) in the international system (Chan 2006, 15–16; Wang Yizhou, 1999; Xiao Huanrong, 2003: 48–49). The idea of what kind of things should be taken responsibility *for* appears uncontested – it is just a question of who is in an appropriate position to do what. The key task becomes a question of establishing the allocation of duties; and these duties depend on the norms of the status quo. This is also reflected in Xiao Huanrong’s analysis of three different power positions in international society, each of which corresponds to a different set of responsibilities. In Xiao’s scheme a superpower’s local responsibility is to strengthen wealth and security, its regional responsibility to acquire spheres of influence, and its global responsibility to take charge of international order (Xiao Huanrong, 2003: 48; for a discussion see Yeophantong, 2013: 351). The question, then, becomes one of whether China is a “superpower.” If it is, then it should take on the responsibilities attributed to this status, which means accepting the established norms of international society. If it is not, then it can act responsibly by recognising this and fulfilling the duties that its position dictates.

Notions of differentiated responsibility feed into the view that China can best discharge its responsibility in international affairs by focusing on its own stability and development. On this view, China’s responsibility is a kind of “self-responsibility” (Shih Chih-yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu, 2013: 351). This thesis contrasts with the idea that China needs to take on external responsibilities that come with great-power status (for example Hu Liping, 2002: 121–23; Liang Shoude, 1997: 1–9; Yu Xintian, 2006: 102–14). On this logic of self-responsibility, Shih Chih-yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu argue that

China is neither culturally nor politically prepared to be effectively involved in global governance. In their recurring pledge that China will be a “responsible major country” ... effective self-governance is how the Beijing authorities currently believe China should contribute to global governance (Shih Chih-yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu, 2013: 352; cf. Xi Jinping’s rhetoric in Wenweipo, 2009).

In other words, China's self-responsibility *is* international responsibility (Ren Xiao, 2007: 27, cited in Zhu Liqun, 2010: 42; Shih Chih-yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu, 2013: 365; Yeophantong, 2013: 357; see also Hua Jian, 2011: 43). In this way, the PRC government has emphasised how it will not challenge the status quo, so that China will never be a threat to anyone (see BBC, 2012a; Qin Jize, 2007). Thus, whilst it might be claimed that China's alleged fragility prevents it from taking an overt role in international leadership and thus assuming responsibility (Shih Chih-yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu, 2013; Shambaugh, 2011), some interpret this as a strategy of strength based on a Chinese disposition to cooperation.

From this perspective then, China is cast as responsible or irresponsible depending on how closely it is perceived to adhere to play an appropriate role in the maintenance and realisation of the rules and norms of the existing status quo. In other words, China is expected to assume its differentiated role on the world stage and work in cooperation with other states to ensure the smooth running of the international system. According to this view, China knows what is expected of it, and when it fails to meet these expectations it can be said to be acting "irresponsibly." Furthermore, where China does act "irresponsibly" by failing to act to meet given norms (or by blocking others from ensuring that they are maintained) then it is said to carry some culpability for the ensuing disorder and infraction of those norms.

China as Responsible Power, Part 2: An Alternative to the Status Quo

The previous section highlighted commentary which understands China to act responsibly if and when it adheres to established rules and norms. In contrast, there is an alternative line of argument which claims China acts responsibly when it challenges the status quo and tries to establish an alternative – and fairer – set of rules and norms. This idea has a clear precedent in foreign policy of the Mao Zedong era, in which China explicitly aimed to export revolution (see Yeophantong, 2013: 340–42). This position is exemplified by Beijing-based think tank analyst Yuan Peng's declaration that "China, for its part, does not base its notion of international responsibility on U.S. expectations" (quoted in Hachigian and Yuan Peng, 2010: 82).

The accounts discussed in this section portray a Chinese state and civilization whose responsibility it is not to maintain, but to challenge and change, the current world order, and replace it with a better one. However, these accounts fall back on the same understanding of responsibility that has been seen in the approaches they wish to challenge. In these alternative literatures, responsibility is still understood as upholding a set of norms and rules, it is just that these norms are said to be Chinese rather than Western. At the same time, the "Chinese" norms are also said to be universal and good for everybody. Like in the so-called Western discourses that they criticise, the norms being advocated are said to be understood by a group which can represent others – it is just that "international society" has been replaced by a set of elites with distinctly Chinese characteristics.

In this strand of literature, the notion of the status quo is often tightly bound up with ideas of immoral and selfish American leadership (although such accusations have been levelled from different parts of the globe, for numerous reasons, and for a

long time; see Bull, 1979; Dumbrell, 2002: 279). Nevertheless, the claim is exceptionally persistent as a core part of contemporary Chinese international relations scholarship and forms the backdrop against which arguments about a better Chinese alternative are formulated. Some scholars argue that “Chinese assertions of responsibility differ significantly from the so-called ‘China responsibility’ claim currently advocated by Western leaders and scholars, a claim whose primary motivation appears to be restraint and regulation imposed by Western powers” (Wang, 2013: 523). To these thinkers, the “China responsibility” thesis is just another version of the purported “China threat” thesis, designed by a self-interested West to limit Chinese autonomy (Ma Zhengang, 2007: 5–12; cf. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang in Reuters, 2017a).

In other areas the Chinese state’s approach to intervention in cases like Darfur and Syria are said to be guided by its aspiration to “play the role, and cultivate an image, of a ‘responsible great power’” (Lee, Chan, and Chan, 2012: 436). However, responsibility in these cases was long understood in China as standing up *against* rules like R2P. Although China was part of adopting the R2P norm at the UN World Summit meeting in 2005, senior Chinese officials have advocated the notion of “responsible protection” as a Chinese way of contributing to the building of a new and just international political order (Ruan Zongze, 2012: 41). For example, with regards to debates over the application of R2P in Syria, Chinese government representatives used the resolutions passed by the UN in 2013 and 2014 *and* their opposition to the three resolutions that had preceded them to claim that they were acting as a responsible power (Niu Xiaolei, 2014). Then assistant foreign minister Le Yucheng explained: “Being responsible means keeping to principles and saying ‘no’ to what is wrong ... what we need is not just ‘the Responsibility to Protect’ but also ‘responsible protection’” (Xinhua, 2012). The Chinese media defended Chinese opposition to Western interventionism by portraying its supporters as the irresponsible ones. Claiming that the West used wars to distract its public, Li Qingsi (2012) wrote in *China Daily*:

In fact it is the West’s support ... of the Syrian opposition that has led to the prolonged violent unrest in Syria ... As a responsible power, China, in addition to diplomatic mediation, should formulate more practical strategies to respond to Western power practices.

Since then, China has affirmed its position by vetoing Security Council resolutions about Syria (Reuters, 2017b). On this line of thinking, the implementation of rules of the current system (such as the R2P) are thus bound-up with Western, particularly American, self-interest. This represents the “wrong” in opposition to which China is portrayed as responsibly insisting on some other principles. An indication of what these principles are is gained by looking both to what the Chinese political leadership says. Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream” slogan sometimes appears to be deployed in a more universalist “win-win” sense, for example when Xi said to President Barack Obama that the “Chinese Dream” incorporates the “American Dream” (Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, 2013: 3, cited in Callahan, 2014b). Yet as part of a more exceptionalist logic Xi also deploys the Chinese Dream rhetoric in a more confrontational manner, stressing that China is a socialist alternative to the liberal capitalist US-led world order (Callahan, 2014b). Chinese scholars have also portrayed the relation between the Chinese Dream and the American Dream in terms of a

contest of opposing values (Hu Shuli, 2013; cf. the discussion of the Chinese and American dreams in Callhan, 2014a).

Whilst government rhetoric is (intentionally) vague about the specifics of its morals and ethics, a somewhat more detailed idea of what principles are involved in the Chinese “alternative” can be constructed by looking at academic discourse. Emerging in conjunction with the government rhetoric of “harmonious world” and the Chinese Dream, but drawing on a legacy of Chinese thought that goes back much further, a growing body of literature is developing that has been described as “harmonist discourses that aim to challenge Western hegemonic discourses and create a new system of governance” (Son, 2012: 400). Going further than most of the discussions of concepts such as “The Beijing Consensus,” “The Chinese Way,” “The Chinese Experience,” or “The China Model,” the harmonist discourses continue “to a rather explicit questioning of the very ‘constitutional structures’ that are the core of the international system” (Carlson, 2010: 96). These are fundamental norms of the “international order” (Reus-Smit, 1999: 14, cited in Carlson 2010, 95; cf. Breslin, 2011). The harmonist discourses appeal to China’s history and culture, and its allegedly superior moral standards that set it apart from the West (Wang, 2013: 525; see also Shi Yinhong, 2009: 5–8).

One influential attempt to articulate these alternative Chinese rules and norms of responsibility can be seen in Yan Xuetong’s theorisation of “hegemonic power” and “humane authority.” Yan explicitly identifies China’s top strategic interest to be the establishment of a “new world order” (Yan Xuetong, 2014: 163) or “new international norms” (Yan Xuetong, 2013: 217, 231). He understands the claims to responsibility, as well as accusations of irresponsibility, to be a significant factor shaping contemporary foreign policy behaviour in China, most recently the shift under Xi’s Chinese Dream from “keeping a low profile” to “striving for achievement” (Yan Xuetong, 2014: 4, 31; see also 2013: 232). For Yan, the current international system was constructed by egocentric hegemonies, and especially the US (Yan Xuetong, 1999). The US exemplifies a kind of bad world leader that Yan encapsulates in the Chinese concept *ba* 霸 or *badao* 霸道, which is translated as “hegemony” or “hegemon” (e.g. Yan Xuetong, 2008: 136, 137; 2011, ix, 71), or sometimes as “lord protector” (Yan Xuetong, 2008: 136). *Ba* represents the bad and irresponsible leadership against which the advocated good and responsible Chinese leadership can be contrasted.

To Yan, China’s pre-Qin dynasty thinkers distinguished between *ba*-style power, based mostly on (irresponsible) military and economic force, and *wang* 王 - style authority, based primarily on (responsible) legitimacy and trust. Although Yan argues for an overhaul of international institutions he also taps into the same notion of a “differentiated responsibility system” that maintainers of the status quo also promote (Yan Xuetong, 2013 [2011]: 14–15). Nevertheless, for Yan China should compete with the US for responsibility and establish alternative norms (for example Yan Xuetong, 2010: 290). China can establish new international norms in opposition to liberalism that aim to “transcend” it (Yan Xuetong, 2013: 233). Furthermore, these are popular concepts in the literatures on responsibility and on Chinese international relations more generally. Wider literatures that discuss China’s idea of a “harmonious world” typically contrast it with hegemonism (*baquan zhuyi* 霸权主义), harmony theory with hegemonic stability theory, or hegemonic security (*baquan anquan* 霸权

安全), and Chinese harmonious nationalism with US nationalism as hegemonism (cf. Nordin, 2015: 2016a). All tend to follow the structure that sees responsibility as being linked to the adherence to norms; the only question is *which* – or *whose* – norms.

Another influential example of this line of argument is Zhao Tingyang's elaboration of the concept of *Tianxia* 天下 (Zhao Tingyang, 2005, 2006, 2009; for an example of such influence see Li Baojun and Li Zhiyong, 2008: 84; for critiques see Callahan, 2008; Barabantseva, 2009; and Nordin 2016a, 2016b). *Tianxia* literally translates as "All-under-heaven," but can be variously rendered as "the world" or "empire." It develops ancient Chinese ideas of world order that were supposed to operate more through attraction than coercion. The idea of responsible *Tianxia* is conceptualised in direct opposition to the international state system and in particular "America's disastrous leadership in the world" (Zhao Tingyang, 2009: 6). Zhao maintains that *Tianxia* is "completely different from Western civilisation" and based on a Chinese understanding of inclusivity (Zhou Jianming and Jiao Shixin, 2008: 28). What is needed is a "view from nowhere" (Zhao Tingyang, 2003) which will enable us to "take responsibility for the world as our own responsibility" (Zhao Tingyang, 2005, as translated in Callahan, 2007: 18, and cited in Yeophantong, 2013: 360; see also Zhao Tingyang, 2014). For this to happen contradictions need to be overcome, by turning "the enemy into a friend" and transforming "the bad into the good" through a voluntary process where others emulate the superior Chinese values (Zhao Tingyang, 2006: 34, 36).

The "good" to which all should conform is explicitly arrived at in an anti-democratic manner by both Yan, Zhao, and a majority of scholars that adopt this "alternative Chinese" approach to responsibility. In this line of thought, which is often referred to in the literatures on Chinese responsibility (including Loke, 2009: 203; Yeophantong, 2013), harmonious relationships were traditionally hierarchical relationships. In such a framework, everybody assumed their proper place as well as the responsibilities and duties particular to that position. In the contemporary literatures on responsibility, the responsibility of the ruler is to lead by virtuous example (Yan Xuetong, 2011: 68). The responsibility of those in an inferior position is to follow and obey (see Yeophantong, 2013: 335 ff.). In this manner, both Yan and Zhao imagine responsibility as compliance with a set of norms that are in some form supposed to be universal. Behaving "responsibly" involves "acting in accordance with both the formal and informal rules governing society and its institutions" (Yeophantong, 2013: 334). The difference here is that the rules and norms against which responsibility is measured are those agreed on by a *different* society to that of the West; a society shaped by the Chinese elites that properly understand how to govern All-under-heaven through humane authority. The standard bearer for measuring responsibility may thus be different to that of current status quo maintenance, but the basic idea of responsibility that underpins it is the same: one is responsible if one knows, promotes and protects the rules and norms that order the system and define and dictate one's role.

Deconstructing Responsibility

In what remains of this article, a space is opened for an alternative understanding of responsibility – an understanding which this article suggests connects responsibility to politics not simply as the implementation of a programme of rules, but as a

recognition of intersubjectivity with an emphasis on responding to others (cf. Slater, 1997: 68). This approach has similarities with accounts that draw on ancient Chinese thought to emphasise how responsibility is concerned with relating to those who are different, or “other,” to ourselves. Thus, thinkers such as Zhao might welcome the (re)emphasis on relationships that has been brought to elaborations of responsibility by thinkers such as Derrida. Derrida’s notion of responsibility can help understand the role of China in world politics, and world politics more generally. Derrida claims that responsibility is formed in relation to others who call on us to act responsibly towards them. However, situations where we are called upon to act responsibly – where China is called upon to act responsibly – are almost always characterised by the presence of a number of demands and the impossibility of satisfying them all. In other words, situations are rarely presented where one course of action can lead to only good outcomes for everybody. Two examples can be used to illustrate this. China’s aid programmes and especially the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and China’s potential role in R2P.

The BRI has been seen by many as an effort by the Xi leadership to implement his understanding of China as a responsible great power, by “striving for achievement” on the international stage, rather than biding one’s time. This effort has involved shift to a more active role in rolling out a system of trade, connectivity and cultural exchange under clear Chinese leadership. Domestic debate in China is divided over the extent to which the BRI constitutes an effort to strengthen and improve on the existing international system, or alternatively embodies Xi’s efforts to articulate and alternative set of rules and norms that can grow into a challenge to that status quo. As such, these debates carry on previous domestic debate over China’s aid programmes and other overseas undertakings. Most notably for our argument at this point of the paper, previous domestic controversy has been heightened in debates around the BRI. Advocates of the BRI suggest that it shows China taking on international responsibility and demonstrating its status as a “responsible great power” by enabling development beyond its own borders. At the same time, critics fear that a massive programme of investment abroad comes at the expense of poor Chinese citizens and underdeveloped regions at home. In other words, through the BRI the Xi government is seen by some to shoulder more responsibility for international development and world order, but in doing so to act irresponsibly towards China’s poor. As such, these debates arguably illustrate a common dilemma in Chinese foreign affairs, of choosing between responding to different “others” at the expense of “other others.” Needless to say, such a dilemma is not unique to Chinese foreign relations.

In the case of Syria and R2P, China is called upon by others who demand its protection. However, the response to this call cannot be one of either protecting or not protecting. If UN forces intervene in Syria people will die because of the violence authorised by the rules of R2P, because of the actions of those the UN is fighting, and as an “unintended consequence” of this (such as through the disruption of aid conveys, devastated infrastructure, and so on). If UN forces do not intervene in Syria, people will also die. If what China is called upon to do in the evocations of “responsibility” under R2P is protect people from death, then China will inevitably fail in this “responsibility.” If it responds by protecting some lives, it is neglecting its responsibility to protect the other lives that may be taken in the process.

Furthermore, resources committed in Syria cannot be committed elsewhere, Darfur for example. “This,” as Maja Zehfuss puts it, “is a constant problem: To whose call do we respond? And whom do we end up ignoring?” (Zehfuss, 2009: 146).

It is the impossibility of resolving this dilemma that rests at the heart of Derrida’s account of responsibility. In Derrida’s (1995a: 68) words, “I cannot respond to ... another without sacrificing the other other, the other others.” Thus, an *aporia* is reached where there is no way forward, the path is blocked (Derrida, 2006: 63). This *aporia* is a paradox that lies at the heart of the very idea of responsibility:

As soon as I enter into a relation with the other ... I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me also to respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others (Derrida, 1995a: 68).

If Derrida is right, and it is simply not possible to respond responsibly and ethically to everyone all the time, then the ethics of international responsibility cannot be understood in terms of doing good rather than bad. It is important to note that in this characterisation of responsibility the “responsible” subject is not responsible by virtue of any action that they have taken, or not taken. It thus departs, radically, from older meanings of responsibility which connected it to infringement of the rights of others, or the failure to perform prescribed actions. Whilst not necessarily choosing a given situation, nevertheless Derrida maintains that we are responsible for it. On this view, responsibility does not begin when we have chosen our conditions, or when we can easily apply moral rules. Derridian responsibility is nothing to do with owing a debt because of our past actions or omissions. Responsibility begins with an encounter with the other in situations that neither of us “choose.”

A positive ethical outcome, accordingly, cannot be reduced to China’s internalisation of, and compliance with, the purported rules and norms of international society, as Loke and others would have it (Loke, 2009: 2016). Instead, the question of ethics or justice arises precisely in the experience of *aporia*, “moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule” (Derrida, 1992a: 16). This means that we need to make a decision – that Chinese people or authorities need to make a decision – in the context of profound uncertainty about what is the right thing to do (Derrida, 1995b: 273; Derrida, 2003: 118). Derrida’s point is deceptively simple, but it runs counter to the account that prioritises following rules. If the path is clear, rules and norms mean that the correct course of action is obvious, then it makes no sense at all to speak of “responsibility.” If what China (or some other actor) needs to do is pre-ordained there is no need to make a decision – the actor need only apply the rules or implement the programme. It might be said that this attitude is the ultimate irresponsibility, a pretence that there is no real choice, no contradictory demands, no uncertainty. Generalised rules of “justice” or “ethics” inevitably fail to do justice to the singularity of an event. Therefore, “far from ensuring responsibility, the generality of ethics [as conventionally understood] incites irresponsibility” (Derrida, 1995a: 61). It also eschews politics which is predicated not on certainty but uncertainty, and the encounter with others rather than the compliance with rules.

It is difficult to do what Derrida asks: to both respond to the other and to recognise that such a response has no foundation or certainty, and simultaneously fails to respond to the “other others” (Derrida, 1992b: 79). It is difficult to accept that knowledge, calculation and rules will not guarantee justice, ethics, or responsibility. Certainly, we should contemplate principles and try to be as informed as we can, but ultimately knowledge and principles are not enough and cannot provide us with the “responsible” choice (cf. Zehfuss, 2007). Importantly, as E. Jeffrey Popke (2003: 307) puts it, “to assert that the decision is ultimately undecidable does not mean that there can be no such thing as truth, right or good. It means, rather, that if we purport to know in advance the specific content of such notions, then the event of the decision is divested of its political content,” as though it was deduced by a calculating machine (Derrida, 1999: 240). Such a machine follows the rules it has been set. A part of the political condition is realising that we establish norms and set rules without foundations. This does not mean we can never act and never order our collective world, but it does mean that all action is provisional and necessarily fails to respond to all the calls upon us. Responsibility “affirms the necessity to judge, to analyze, to make decisions, in the context of an event that is conditioned by our inexhaustible responsibility to the other” (Popke, 2003: 307; see also Derrida, 1997: 18). Such a judgement and decision in response to the other is political. Thus, an important point about this decision is that we are not somehow isolated and autonomous in our decision making. Rather, when we respond to the world around us, to others, that world and those others are profoundly implicated in our decision, to the point where Derrida writes of “the Other’s decision in me, or through me” (Derrida, 2006: 103). In this sense, the decisions that China makes in response to others’ demands are not simply or straightforwardly under China’s control. We could even say – to Xia Liping’s approval, perhaps – that the decisions “China” makes are never purely “China’s.”

Conclusion

From the debates reviewed in this article, it is clear that there is a diversity of opinion in existing discussions on China as a responsible power. Some understand China’s duties in absolute terms, whereas others focus on their distribution based on relative power and position. Some describe or even advocate an inward-looking attitude to responsibility, whereas others argue China can and will be more outwardly proactive. It has been shown how the debates on Chinese responsibility are cast in terms of a dichotomisation of change and continuity, where “responsible great power” behaviour means to either support or resist the rules and norms that uphold the current international system. As a result, actors in the West and US have often been highly critical of what is understood as Chinese irresponsibility. China is “irresponsible” because it should recognise the existing rules and norms, and it is capable of following them – but it chooses not to.

This article has argued that both the revisionist and the status quo strands of responsibility thought, that point to one another as irresponsible, can be criticised for a similar politics of domination, imperialism or hegemonism. Both fall back on an understanding of responsibility as the compliance with some set of rules and norms that are supposed to be universal or agreed upon in society. In one case they tend to refer to “international society,” (a euphemism for Western elites); in the other case they tend to refer to the “humane authority” of *Tianxia* (a euphemism for Chinese

elites). Both arguments fall back on the same underlying notion of responsibility as “acting in accordance with both the formal and informal rules governing society and its institutions” (Yeophantong, 2013: 334). Large portions of both strands of literature also fall back on a notion of differentiated responsibility, where appropriate responsibility can be judged and described in advance by accurately measuring the PRC’s capabilities and position. Once one has accurate information about these capabilities, one will be able to refer to principles that can indicate what precise actions would constitute appropriately responsible behaviour.

In relation to such dominant notions of responsibility, this article has suggested entertaining a different understanding. Drawing on the thought of Derrida, a construction of responsibility that sees it as the opposite of compliance with established rules and norms has been developed. On this view it only makes sense to speak of responsibility in the context of radical uncertainty. An “ethics of international responsibility,” to pursue Loke’s term, needs to acknowledge the undecidable nature of the choices China faces, or else it falls back into irresponsibility. Yeophantong (2013: 364) concludes her investigation of the historical evolution of responsibility in China by arguing that “tensions undeniably surface between Chinese and Western conceptions of responsibility and corresponding approaches to global governance, as well as between domestic and international understandings.” These tensions revolve around what is to be done by whom. It can be added that tensions equally undeniably surface between different Western concepts, and between different Chinese concepts. Different systems offer different priorities; different systems respond to some and neglect others. However, such tensions should not be understood as something that makes responsibility impossible. Rather, it is precisely these tensions that point to the deeper idea of responsibility: that we must always act without ultimate justification, and in choosing some we neglect others.

What are the effects of thinking through a Derridean understanding of responsibility? In contrast to the view that responsibility is about rule compliance, the possibility of making simple and categorical judgements of right and wrong is lost. Lost, too, is the possibility of a stable knowledge of what constitutes responsible behaviour. Even the possibility of being responsible in a complete and absolute sense is lost. What is gained is perhaps the possibility of being responsible at all (rather than executing a programme which in effect has nothing to do with responsibility). Arguably, also regained is the *politics* of speaking of China as a responsible power. As Zehfuss puts it, “the aporia of the undecidable does not make responsibility impossible; depoliticisation, which turns ethical questions into technical problems awaiting technical solutions determined by pre-given rules, does” (Zehfuss, 2009: 147, with reference to Derrida, 1992b: 71–2). In Chinese assessments of whose demand is urgent to respond to, there is also a new need for political commitment. As Derrida might put it:

For such assessment, there is, by definition, no pre-existing criterion or absolute calculability; analysis *must begin* anew every day everywhere, without ever being guaranteed by prior knowledge. It is on this condition, on the condition constituted by this injunction, that there is, *if* there is, action, decision and political responsibility – repoliticization (Derrida, 1999: 240, emphasis in original).

Perhaps a different way of approaching the notion of China as a responsible power is then to steer away from the exclusive focus on established rules and norms as a standard-bearer for measuring such responsibility. The attempt to eliminate the radical undecidability, the *aporia*, from China's decisions about what kind of power to be is precisely what eliminates responsibility itself. If responsibility is to be possible, the *aporia* must remain (Derrida, 1995a: 66). Indeed, it *does* remain, and denying it is a refusal of the responsibility that recognising it would place on all states including China. Denying responsibility by equating it to following rules is also an eschewing the very ground on which a politics can be based.

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