

Confucius' Trap? The roots of China's Strategy

¿La trampa de Confucio? Las raíces de la estrategia de China

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Politics can only be achieved when people move beyond the irrational rule of might and establish a universal and effective rational order.
(Zhao 2019: p. 2)

Abstract

The rise of the People's Republic of China has spurred research into whether this rising power will end up colliding with the United States, following a pattern that Graham Allison has called Thucydides' Trap. However, some of these studies depart from the idea that the State is a unified actor and that conflict is inherent to the international system. In other words, China will behave in the same manner as all western powers on the international stage. This article will sustain that it is impossible to analyse and/or infer the potential conduct of the People's Republic of China without grasping its over 2000-year's cultural heritage. The legacy of Confucianism enjoyed a rebirth in the People's Republic of China since the 1990s. In this sense, the theoretical tool of constructivism is used to study that legacy and its impact on Chinese strategic thinking, which is also linked to Chinese traditions and can be observed in the dynamics of *Wéiqí*: the weakening of the adversary in order to obtain greater territorial control. To that effect, we observe how investment, trade and cultural penetration by China into the world has evolved in the last few years.

Keywords: China, Confucius, constructivism, trade & investment, culture

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Resumen

El ascenso de la República Popular China ha estimulado la investigación académica sobre si el ascenso de esta potencia culminará con un enfrentamiento con los Estados Unidos, siguiendo el patrón que Graham Allison ha denominado la Trampa de Tucídedes. Sin embargo, algunos de estos estudios parten de la premisa que el Estado es un actor unificado y que el conflicto es inherente al sistema internacional. En otras palabras, se espera que China se comporte igual que todas las potencias occidentales en el escenario internacional. Este artículo sostiene que es imposible analizar y/o inferir la potencial conducta de la República Popular China sin tomar en consideración los más de 2.000 años de herencia cultural. Teniendo presente que legado de confucianismo ha vivido un renacimiento a partir de los años 90, se recurre al herramental teórico del constructivismo para estudiar su impacto en el pensamiento estratégico chino, que se encuentra vinculado a ese legado cultural y que puede ser observado en la dinámica del *Wéiqí*: aprovechar la debilidad del adversario para obtener un mayor control territorial. A tal efecto, tomaremos cómo ha evolucionado la penetración de la inversión, el comercio y la cultura china en el mundo en los últimos años.

Palabras clave: China, Confucio, constructivismo, comercio, inversión, cultura

1. Introduction

In less than a generation, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has soared on the international stage; mainly in economic terms. The current ongoing conflicts between the United States and China, which seem to focus on a mere tariff dispute, actually conceal a struggle that has become more evident –after a Huawei executive was jailed in Canada– for technological dominance in the current century: who will take the lead in the 4th industrial revolution. The pressure exerted by the United States onto its partners clearly shows that this will be the core issue in the relationship between both world powers in the coming decades. Other aspects of that conflict include: the sale of US weapons to the Island of Taiwan, whose sovereignty is claimed by China, and the visit of the speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, which resulted in a major Chinese military deployment encircling the island; existing territorial disputes in the China Sea; and the slow –though inexorable– growth of Beijing's military capabilities as elements that will shape the possible outcomes of the ongoing disputes between the US and China.

Both neorealism and neoliberalism “fundamentally share the analytical framework” (Katzenstein 2012: p. 183), which leads them to conclude that States are

unified rational players and that conflict is inherent to the international system. In this regard, some analysis on the relationship between the United States and China depart from this idea and predict that an armed conflict between these two great powers will be almost inevitable.

In this regard, following Katzenstein (2012: p. 193), we argue that the State is a social actor and that their identities are “the product of their interaction with different social environments, both domestic and international.” Hence, Ronald Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter Katzenstein claim that the security environments in which States are embedded are an important part cultural and institutional, rather than just material (...) [and] cultural environments affect not only the incentives for different kinds of State behaviour but also the basic character of States –what we call State `identity ” (1996: p. 33).

In other words, and as argued by Eissa (2015), culture and institutional rules (external and domestic) shape foreign and defence policy decisions. For the purposes of this paper, we understand foreign policy as “governmental political action that encompasses three analytically separable dimensions – political-diplomatic, military-strategic and economic–, which is projected to the external sphere in front of a wide range of governmental and non-governmental actors and institutions, both bilaterally and multilaterally” (Russell 1990: p. 255).

Therefore, it is considered that China’s national interests respond to multiple factors; among them, this work will focus on the cultural legacy of Confucianism, since this is an element in the construction of the identity of that country. In fact, Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, Denguism, Xiism are expressions of permanence and development of the ideological foundations of the PCCh to which it is possible to add the currents of traditional thought (both Confucianism and Legalism) as ingredients that accentuate the national osmosis. Thus, the unique ideological corpus of the PCCh is a characteristic sample of the originality of the “Chinese way”, which makes it an impossible model to imitate, even though some partial aspects can or should be taken into account in the strategies of any country (Rios, 2021b: p. 2)

Likewise, Margueliche (2018: p. 7) “maintains that Confucianism penetrated every corner of the Chinese social structure”; hence its relevance in the current context. Although, during Maoism, Chinese intellectuals could not pass the strict barriers of the Marxist ideology; a strong nationalism emerged in the 90s as a reaction to the opening of the 80s. It is in this context that a rediscovery of Confucianism occurs (Moncada Durruti, 2011). This also permeated the military culture. Indeed, traditional Chinese thought, as both Zhang Heng (2013) and the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity (2009) argue, has influenced and continues to influence contemporary military culture.

We understand culture refers “both to a set of evaluative standards, such as norms or values, and to cognitive standards (...). In short, what the civilians and the military understand to be in their interest depends on the cultural context in which they operate” (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996: p. 56-57). This paper will establish that it is impossible to analyse and/or infer the potential conduct of the People's Republic of China without grasping its over 2000-year's cultural heritage. We will particularly focus on the legacy of Confucianism, which enjoyed a rebirth in the People's Republic of China since the 1990s.

In the first part of this paper, we will review the ideas of some of the most influential western authors regarding the current dispute between China and the United States. We will then study only Confucian thinking through secondary and primary sources, as we argue that it permeates China's foreign and defence policies. We understand the relevance of the legalism school, but we focus in Confucianism school in this paper because Confucianism emerged as victor final and permanent” (Graham, 2012: p. 57). Thirdly, we will analyses the main characteristics of *Wéiqí*, as we consider it a strategic expression of Confucian legacy: the defence and “capture” of territories without fighting. In order to do that, we will point out whatwe consider the core of China's strategy: trade, culture, and investment policy. Lastly, we will conclude with some considerations on how ancient Chinese philosophical traditions are still animportant part of the strategic thinking of PRC's political elites.

In order to carry out this proposal, we resort to primary and secondary sources, and to the analysis performed by other authors on China's cultural, economic and business expansion.

2. How Does the Western Academia Analyze this Scenario?

Odd Arne Westad in *Foreign Affairs*, paralleling George Kennan's 1946 analysis of the Soviet Union, concludes that China is a totalitarian regime that perceives the United States as an enemyseeking influence in East Asia, even though it is already an Empire that subdues peoples like the Tibetan. Later, he adds that the Chinese government “is a nationalist rather than an internationalist [player] (...). The Party considers the United States an obstacle to its goals of preserving its internal control and increasing its regional hegemony, but it does not believe thatthe United States and its system should be defeated to achieve those objectives” (2019: p. 2).

The author concludes that China is different from the Soviet Union; the issue at stake isnot an ideological competition between two worldviews, nor a clash of civilizations either. However, Kennan's analysis helps to understand whether it is “a political conflict between great powers.”

Graham Allison (2017) has recently wondered if China and the United States will be able to escape the Thucydides'² Trap. According to this author, the Trap entails that the rise of one power and the decline of another lead to the outbreak of a large-scale war, something that occurred on several occasions throughout human history: Athens-Sparta; France-Spain; France-Great Britain; and Great Britain-United States, among others. Indeed, based on the author's research through five hundred years of history, twelve out of sixteen hegemonic rivalries ended up in armed conflicts. However, Allison argues that it is possible to combine conflict and cooperation and, hence, he resorts to an old Chinese concept: "rivalry partnership." In order to reinforce his claim, Allison (2017) mentions two examples. In 1005, the Chanyuan Treaty was signed between the Chinese Song dynasty (960-1279) and the Liao, a Manchurian Kingdom to the north of that country. Through said agreement, both States began to compete aggressively in some areas and to cooperate in others. Despite recurring crises, there was never a great conflict between the two and the treaty was effective for 120 years.

Likewise, the above-mentioned author offers an example about President John Kennedy: he considered the Soviet Union as "bad" and that the world would be better off under the direction of the United States. However, –as Allison (2017) points out– the president held that burying Soviet-led totalitarianism was very dangerous for both parties and that the two powers could co-exist, ensuring a safer world.

Graham Allison (2019: 3) also argues that it is possible to enrich the concept of "rivalry partnership," bequeathed by Ancient China, in which two powers compete aggressively in some areas and cooperate intensely in others, such as preventing a nuclear war; anti-terrorism matters; preservation of the biosphere; containing pandemics; and managing financial crises.

Thirdly, the Chinese academic Minxin Pei –cited by Esteban Actis and Nicolás Creus (2018: 3)– claims that "the post-Cold War era seems to have ended in November 2016 with the triumph of Donald Trump in the United States elections." In that regard, it also recovers the words of Walter Russell Mead, who alleges "that the United States has decided to start a 'second Cold War' by putting all its efforts to contain the influence of China at the global level."

These authors sustain that, in recent years, we have seen an emerging bipolarism that combined a chaotic and disorderly world with a "juxtaposition of actors, agendas and dynamics", making up an international order that they call "entropic bipolarism" (Actis and Creus 2020: p. 212-213). What are the features of entropic bipolarism? According to Actis and Creus (2020: p. 214), global entropy is a pessimistic version of complex interdependence because, in an entropic world,

² Ancient Greek historian and author of the book *The Peloponnesian War*.

international cooperation and agreement –particularly multilateral– will not be sufficient to guarantee a given order and to remove the uncertainty that the process of power diffusion causes (...). Unlike the Cold War, many aspects of today's complex international dynamics overwhelm world powers. They are far from having control over the entire environment. However, China and the United States have the ability to “change outcomes, modify actions, limit options, and shape the preferences of other actors” (Actis and Creus 2020: p. 214).

Regarding the Thucydides' Trap, these authors argue that it has three components: material, psychological and political. Clearly, China is converging when it comes to material attributes. However, China's limitations are still evident and, in fact, it plans to be able to militarily catch up with the United States by 2049, on the 100th anniversary of the Popular Republic of China's foundation. Therefore, they allege that “the excessive fear of Washington to be the main explanatory variable in a possible scenario of war conflict” and “when rivals begin to perceive themselves as identifying and perceiving themselves as enemies, the great fear is the self-fulfilling prophecy” (Actis and Creus 2020: p. 269). The question underlying this reasoning is: why would China naturally identify the United States as an enemy? And if it does, why would China resort to military confrontation to settle a conflict with another country? We are not stating that it cannot happen, but there is no cause-and-effect relationship between the rise of one power and the decline of the other. A threat is intersubjectively constructed, that is why it would take two to dance that deadly tango and –as we will attempt to prove– China is building its walls and will only accept to take part in that dangerous dance if the United States crosses the red lines drawn by the PRC's leadership. That is why it is important to try to approach Chinese thought.

Therefore, Celestino del Arenal (2015) claimed in his book *Una introducción a las relaciones internacionales* that the discipline of international relations is marked by deep ethnocentrism in its main theories because it was born and developed in the West exclusively, disregarding other relevant historical background and most non-English written productions that respond to the anglo-saxon mainstream. Obviously, the discipline was marked by the need to respond to the international interests of the United States and the United Kingdom. Likewise, it was built as a discipline following the scientific standards developed in the West. Thus, this Spanish thinker concludes that said development limits the capacity of the main theories on international relations to analyse contemporary international reality and to offer solutions to its problems.

3. An Overview of Chinese Confucianism Thought

As we have anticipated in the Introduction, studying Chinese culture is fundamental as more than 4000 years of history leave their mark on people and societies. In this regard, it is important to recall these words from Xulio Rios: Culture is a key factor in understanding a country like China, certainly to a much greater extent than when we refer to other countries. And it is doubly so. First, because it is the basic nutrient of a civilization that has managed to last for thousands of years, until the present day. Second, because it continues to exert a powerful influence on the behavior of its society. The counterpoint to this question is that their worldview is substantially different from ours. China has known how to imagine and recreate another world, with codes and keys that are not familiar to us. A universe, therefore, that we do not know. But if we want to understand and be correct in our interpretations of China's behaviour or intentions, following the script of culture, without fully guaranteeing success because historical contexts evolve, does offer us remarkable chances of success (2021: p. 1).

Indeed, the 5th to 3rd centuries BCE are called by Karl Jaspers the Axial Age, given that in those centuries the emergence of philosophical reflection took place not only in Greece, but also in China and India. In that same sense, Chantal Maillard (2021: p. 41) argues that:

[F]ew stages in the known history of humanity were as important for thought as the one between the 6th and 5th BCE centuries. The 6th century was in Greece the time of the pre-socratics; in India, that of Buddha, in China that of Confucius, the 5th will be that of Socrates and Plato (translated by the author) (2021: p. 41)

In the specific case of China, its most important philosophical legacy began during the period of the Warring States (481 to 221 BCE). At this time, several schools emerged and competed with each other. That was a reflection of the political, social, and economic crisis in which China was plunged that led to the fall of the feudal system of the Zhou Dynasty.

Zhu Xi established the Confucianism canon (Great Learning, Analects, Doctrine of the Mean and Mengzi) in the 12th century CE. Also the *Five Classics* integrated this canon. But we work with the following texts that are also part of the Confucian school (Trautz, 2014): *Analects* of Confucius, *Mengzi* of Mencius, *Xunzi* of Xun Zi, and two smaller works: *Daxue* and the *Zhongyong*.

In as much as Nicholas Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke, in the 5th to 3rd centuries BCE, Chinese philosophers addressed the problem of how to end all wars between the different Chinese States and to establish a political order.

Confucianism looked for the ideals to restore a political order in the past, mainly in the reigns of mythical emperors of antiquity, such as: Yao, Shun, and Yu

from 2300 to 2100 BCE. That is to say, “the elaboration of an ethical and political model aimed at achieving the stabilization of disunited kingdoms that threatened to plunge order into chaos” (Maillard 2021: p. 41). For that reason, Confucius aimed at restoring a powerful dynasty that would re-establish said order through a patriarchal and conservative humanism. This thinker despised riots and longed for order among individuals and within the State. The sovereign should not only guarantee the material wellbeing of the people, but also “be a[n] [moral] example for all; someone who, before demanding something from others, should have put it into practice himself” (translated by the author) (Maillard 2021: p. 57). In other words, those responsible for achieving these goals were the sovereigns, not only through the laws, but also by setting an example to be followed by individuals.

As regards Mencius ([4th century BCE] 2015), he claims that the basis of the State is the people and, hence, the State must serve the people. However, it does not follow from this that the people are the basis of the sovereign's legitimacy. In this sense, the thought of Confucianism does not come close to any form of government similar to Greek democracy.

In the same line of thought, Xun Zi ([3rd century BCE] 2015) considers that having the monopoly of violence is not enough for the State, it must also promote the education of all its subjects, as morality leads to power and immorality to its loss. For that reason, the best sovereign is the one who does not exercise violence and, when governing for his own benefit, the people will follow his example, which in turn will lead to chaos and cause the fall of the sovereign. In this sense, political power consisted for Xun Zi ([3rd century BCE] 2015) in the consent of the people, who would deny him obedience in the face of, for example, an external attack. According to Xun Zi, “the sovereign is the boat and the lower people the water. Water can carry the boat, but it can also make it capsize (...). Heaven has not created the people for the monarchs, but has installed the monarchs for the sky” (Schleichert and Roetz 2013: p. 279). In this regard, Ignacio Villagrán (2016: p. 157) points out that “the theories of benevolent government that will be fundamental to the political discourses of pre-modern China is the idea of the ‘mandate of Heaven (*Tianming*)’, which entailed that Heaven (*Tian*) provided its support to the dynasty ruler as long as it guarantees the welfare of the people (*min*). Should the ruler deviate from the principles of government, Heaven could withdraw its mandate (*ming*)” (translated by the author).

A second topic refers to the nature of the human being. Some authors consider Confucius to be a humanist. However, Maillard (2021: p. 52) argues that “humanism” according to this author “is something that is not given, but has to be

achieved" and the perfection of the human being is relative.³ The concept that translates as "virtue of humanity", the *ren*, "is something that always takes place between two, so that perfecting what is human means perfecting the interpersonal relationship." Likewise, this is not something that is achieved forever, "but rather it is something to tend toward" (Maillard 2021: p. 53). It is a path and a teaching (*dao*).

While Mencius ([4th century BCE]) considered human beings as naturally good, Xun Zi ([3rd century BCE] 2015) believed, in consistency with contractarianism, that human beings are bad and that only through much preparation and effort that condition can be overcome. Thus, they tend to exercise violence against other human beings. In this regard, Ignacio Villagrán (2016b: p. 185) thoroughly points out that: [I]t is possible to conceive a point of chaotic and violent origin from which it was necessary to establish the political institutions that would guarantee the survival of the community (...). The primitive political community presents an almost animal stage, which can be overcome thanks to the advent of wise men (*sheng*), since it is their knowledge that will allow men to enjoy the first benefits of civilization (translated by the author).

Thus, from this point on, Xun Zi ([3rd century BCE] 2015) justifies the existence of the State and claims that neither it nor culture belong to the natural order.

Thirdly, Confucian thinkers –Confucius himself, like Mencius and Xun Zi– were not pacifists, but they frown on war. A good ruler had to guarantee, according to Confucius, food in abundance, a people who trust their rulers and a large army. However, when all three requirements could not be met, the first to be foregone was the army.

In this regard, Mencius ([4th century BCE] 2015) did not depart from the teachings of Confucius and he believed that no war is fair since States do not correct each other, as none is superior to the other. However, a State had to prepare for a defensive war by building walls and digging graves. Second, another State could only be conquered at the request of its people or when it happily welcomed the conquest. This requirement was important because Mencius ([4th century BCE] 2015) believed that any action could generate a reaction. Therefore, should the conquered people rebel, the conquering ruler would face challenges that would entail hardships for his own people. In that sense, Xun Zi ([3rd century BCE] 2015) did not depart from Confucian thought either since he claimed that, when exercising violence onto another people, hatred towards the conqueror would arise and one day such sovereign would have to pay for the damage caused, bringing misfortune to his

³ This does not mean any type of egalitarianism at the social level. "It does not consist in making the other an equal, but knowing how to put oneself in the other's place and understand what, in that place and from that place, corresponds to and suits the other (...) relationships never dispense with rank and hierarchy" (Maillard 2021: 53) (translated by the author).

people who, in turn, would attempt to get rid of him. Hence, Xun Zi ([3rd century BCE] 2015) recommends maintaining the unity of the people by avoiding any problems in relation to foreign policy.

These ideas are deep-rooted in the thoughts of Confucius. In other words: without the trust of the people, no state can stand. An empire is won or lost by the affection of the people, and affection and trust are obtained by following the *dao*, by acquiring the virtues that derive from its practice and understand the laws that govern actions (Maillard 2021: p. 57).

The sinogram that translates as “govern” (*zheng*) includes the sign “to rectify” (Maillard 2021: p. 63). Thus, Confucius considered that “to govern is to straighten the rudder” (Maillard 2021: p. 63).

Fourth, Xulio Rios (2021: p. 1) points out that: [F]or our Aristotelian approach, one thing and its opposite are opposed: night and day, life and death, good and evil... However, in Eastern reasoning not only there is not such a radical contradiction but these concepts even supplement each other building a harmonious unit (...). In accordance with this approach, our disquisitions about whether today's China is capitalist or communist, let's say, or which of the two will ultimately impose upon the other, express a diatribe weighed down by this primary misunderstanding. China meets both criteria at the same time. It is a systemic hybrid (translated by the author).

Now, how is this worldview translated in relation to the approach to the international scene? At this point, it is necessary to determine how Lao Tse's idea of harmony is translated into foreign policy.

Likewise, and based on recent discoveries, Kaplan (2005: p. 37) argues that: The original *Tao Te Ching* is actually a very political book (...). Clearly, the aim of the author(s) was to show how to achieve hegemony over the empire. The sage who appears so often in the *Tao Te Ching* is the ideal ruler with the heart of a Yogin (...). The best way to control is through minimal interference and by keeping the people simple, without knowledge and without desires—two pervasive themes of the *Tao Te Ching* (...) The text as a whole is designed to serve as a handbook for a ruler.

As Chantal Maillard (2021: p. 87) explains, both language and the interpretation of the universe “work through the game of opposites.” The *dao*⁴, unlike Confucius's ideas, is not a path or any “first cause, but rather the neutral point at which discourse ceases to be operative and where, therefore, opposites come to rest” (Maillard 2021: 87). The *dao* is not merely the balance point between opposites. According to Chantal Maillard (2021: 94), “the movement of the *dao* is a movement of

⁴ The path is not given in advance. It is rather a being-going, a waymarking: a path being made (Maillard 2021: 88).

return (...), to return is to go from knowledge to un-knowledge". Thus, "the *dao* will give rise to the one and the one will separate into two" that are not opposing forces, "they are two phases of the same movement" (Maillard 2021: 96). In short, "the utility of the clay pot it is not in the clay from which it is made, but in the hollowness without which nothing can be contained in it (...): the full is useful as a function of the void". In this new scenario, what will be the vessel and what will be its content? Or who contains whom?

Xulio Rios (2021: 2) is clear about it:

The persistent good-evil duality, for example, nurtures eastern ambition to make its approach prevail everywhere, in view of what it considers to be its absolute, even moral, superiority. China, on the other hand, would hardly succeed in reproducing the model of western hegemony. In fact, it is a world unto itself. The option is co-existence, precisely because he considers that the unity of opposites, subject to dialogue and evolution, is the natural state of things (translated by the author).

Based on the above, we could summarize Confucian thought as follows: order, good ruler, frown on war and wisdom in foreign policy towards other States; i.e., Peaceful Rise and Harmonious World. Now, how does this translate into strategic practice?

4. Chess or *Wéiqí*?

There is a long tradition in China of military strategists, e.g., Sun Tzu⁵, the most renowned of all. This author conceived war –in as much as Clausewitz– as diplomatic policy by resorting to other means. Likewise, Tzu had a prudent vision of interstate war conflicts. If there is no real benefit, the war machine should not be set in motion because not only enemy soldiers will die, but also the ruler's own troops; that may bring –as Confucianism argues– great tragedies upon the ruler's country. The main goal is to defend the vital interests of the State without resorting to war and, to that effect, the use of force is ancillary.

The *Wéiqí* reflects this Chinese approach to war and diplomacy. In the words of Sun Tzu ([circa 300 BC] 2007: 35), "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." The *Wéiqí*, known as Go in the West, is mentioned by Confucius ([4th century BCE] 2015) for the first time in Book 17, from the *Analects*; while the purpose of a chess game is to defeat the enemy army, the goal in the Go game is to control territories: whoever acquires more territories wins. Likewise, what is relevant in the game is tactics; in its Chinese counterpart, it is necessary to constantly balance tactics with strategy.

In *Wéiqí*, there is no direct confrontation between the two opponents as there

⁵ Sun Tzu uses elements from different traditions of classical thought, including Confucianism.

is in chess. The first fifty moves are crucial: they are called opening-stage moves. They are so important because they affect the next strategic moves. As there are more pieces –there are no minor or major pieces– on the board, the game becomes more complex, and it forces the player to think about new tactics and strategies to adjust them to the opponent’s counterstrategy. In *Wéiqí*, as in business, both players can be satisfied with a same positioning as it is difficult for both to get all the profits and benefits. A win-win strategy can lead to disaster. Moreover, an idea of Sun Tzu present in the game is that all movements need to strengthen each player’s position, who will have to wait until the enemy shows signs of weakness (Lai, 2004).

In addition, we empathize three aspects of *Wéiqí*. Firstly, Shih and Huang (2020: 2) allege that “essential role relations of the players are the relationships between each player and the stone-board,” which symbolize “All under Heaven” (a Chinese concept of the world order), as they depend of their relative position on the board. Secondly, security concerns emerge primarily from the position of the players (countries) on the board, and do not depend “on any relationship with the other player” (Shih and Huang 2020: 3). Thirdly, there are no rules about how each player must address the other: “the strategies adopted in *wéiqí* include expand, kill or squeeze; the players decide the timing of the application of these strategies as the game proceeds” (Shih and Huang, 2020: p. 3). Fourthly, any player can eliminate their opponent because “the board guarantees the coexistence of both players, but this coexistence does not in any way guarantee harmony” (Shih and Huang, 2020: p.4). Fifthly, the *wéiqí* allows any player to surrender; namely, defeat does not purport destruction of the enemy (Shih and Huang, 2019).

Lastly, the “two players compete for territories. The one who acquires more wins” (Lai, 2004: p. 7), but if the space available is “still sufficient, players do not engage.” Thus, “China can proceed with coexistence and rivalry at the same time” (Shih and Huang, 2020: p. 5): these are symbiotic concepts for China (Shih and Huang, 2020).

As we have previously noted, China will not adopt an offensive defence policy, but it will not accept to be threatened either. China will not neglect its moats and walls. The country’s defence policy will clearly seek to maintain Chinese territorial integrity. It will not seek territorial expansionism, though it is not willing to suffer the humiliation experienced in the 19th century. China is not a pacifist, but its leadership is not prone to war either and the building of the 21st century’s wall will take time.

Classical Chinese thinking also appreciates political order, both domestic and international. Years ago, a journalist claimed that there has been no change in the political regime of China: it went from the dynastic empire to the CCP Empire. In

this regard, the CCP exercises significant political control over society: China abhors disorder and political emptiness. On the international stage, China defends multilateralism, which has paved the way, in only one generation, for the country to turn into the second largest economic and trade power. In this line of thought, the preservation of that order through diplomatic means responds not only to a cultural legacy of Confucianism, but also to a pragmatic need that relies onto the objectives that China has set for the year 2050.

5. How Did/Does China Achieve/d its “Pacific” Rise?

In *Wéiqí*, the winner is whoever has captured more territories and China is not an offensive power; hence, how did/does China achieve/d its “pacific” rise?

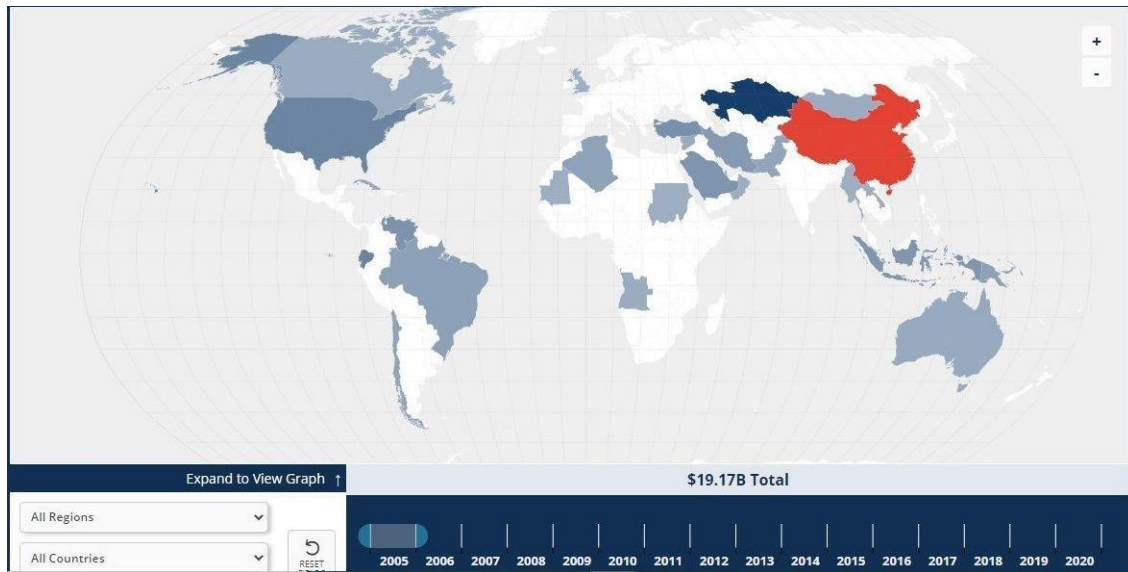
China has opted for economic, trade and cultural strategies: investments in Africa and Latin America, and in other countries around the world, as well as cultural policies. The key is to control as many territories as possible to weaken the adversary. This is what we called Confucius ‘Trap. Territories and countries do not fall under the influence of China because of direct action, but through indirect means such as economic, commercial and cultural agreements. Likewise, and unlike the United States, China neither exports nor imposes its political model.

For that reason, we use three indicators to understand how China is putting the *Wéiqí* strategy in practice in the international scenario: a) the evolution of foreign investments in the world, b) the evolution of bilateral trade relations with different countries; c) the number of Confucius Institutes around the world.

The graphs below clearly show how the Chinese investment network has expanded in different nations, including the United States.

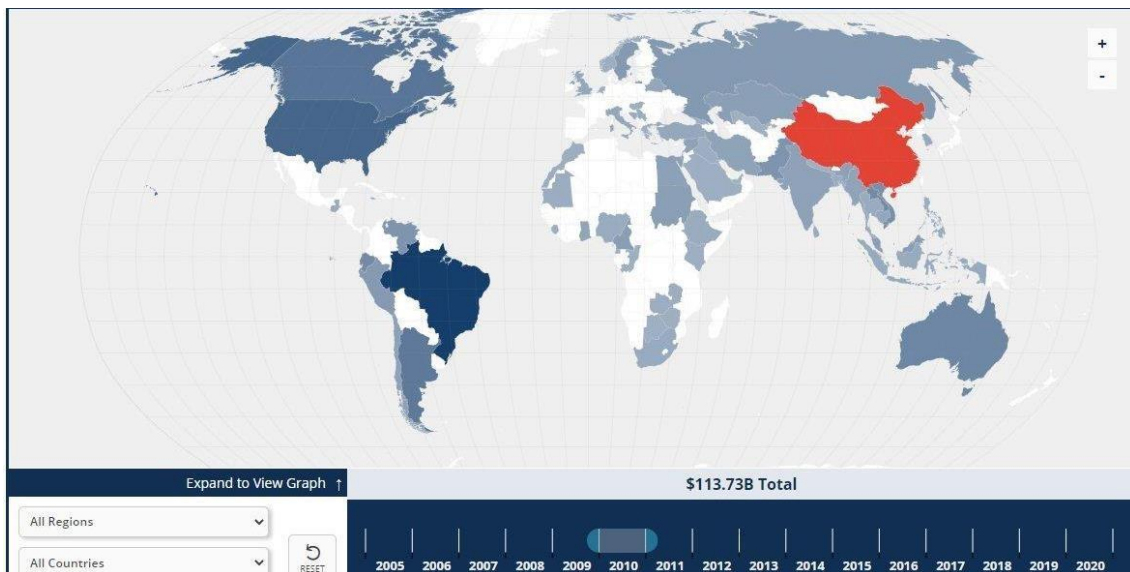
As explained by Rodríguez Salcedo (2021) and shown in the graphs below, Chinese foreign direct investment rose from 1% at world level to 11% in 2020, only behind the United States and the European Union.

Graph 1: Worldwide Chinese Investments & Constructions (2005)



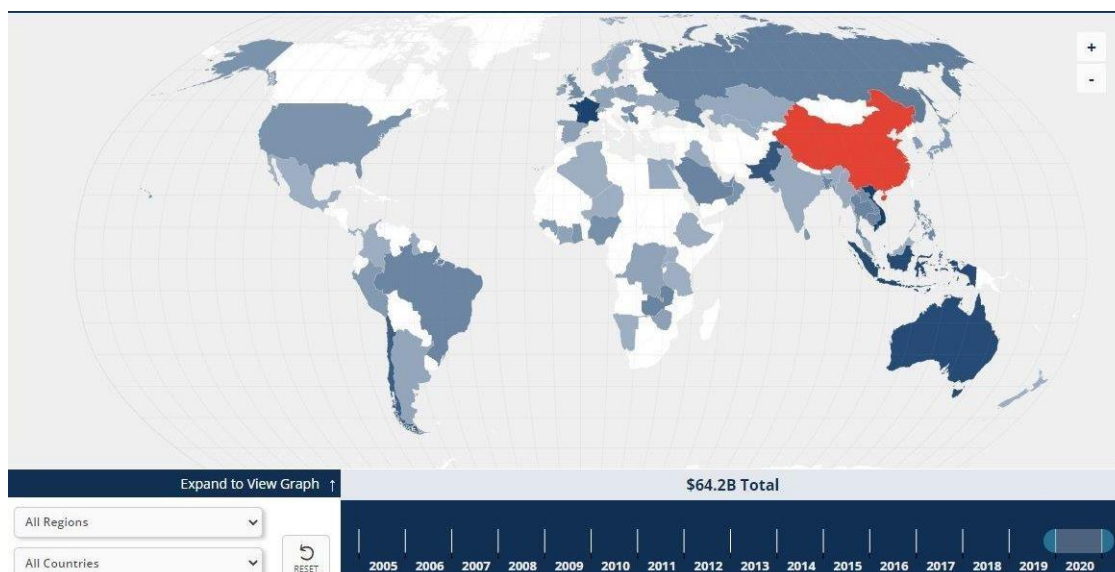
Source: China Global Investment Tracker (2021).

Graph 2: Worldwide Chinese Investments & Constructions (2010)



Source: China Global Investment Tracker (2021).

Graph 3: Worldwide Chinese Investments & Constructions (2020)



Source: China Global Investment Tracker (2021).

Already in 2016, Gustavo Girado (2016: 196) said that: “China can be said to constitute a new actor in the game of the largest economies (considering that China, of course, is already part of that group) whose FDI stocks are still short, but its annual flow is already significant; that makes China rank 3rd as a worldwide source of funds”. That said, the current situation results in that the number of shares held by Chinese capital (FDI outflows from China) constitutes a relatively small but growing stock, which is only a quarter of the accumulated FDI that is held by foreigners in China. However, the emergence of China as a source of FDI in the world may be considered a logical step in China’s economic development. Everything indicates that China will continue to seek investment opportunities abroad in the future, and FDI outflows from China are likely to accelerate (translated by the author).

Secondly, in terms of trade, Chinese presence has also expanded remarkably, as we can see in the graphs below. The People’s Republic of China has become the main trading partner of the European Union, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, but also of other world regions such as Latin America. Indeed, a report by Banco Santander Río (2021), based on figures from the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, sets forth that China is already the world’s largest exporter and the second in terms of imports. Likewise, it is important to note that its main trading partner –with surplus trade balance– is the United States. Lastly, the International Monetary Fund projects a 7.8% growth in the export of goods and services for the year 2021.

Therefore, based on the Wéiqí analogy, in the last two decades China has

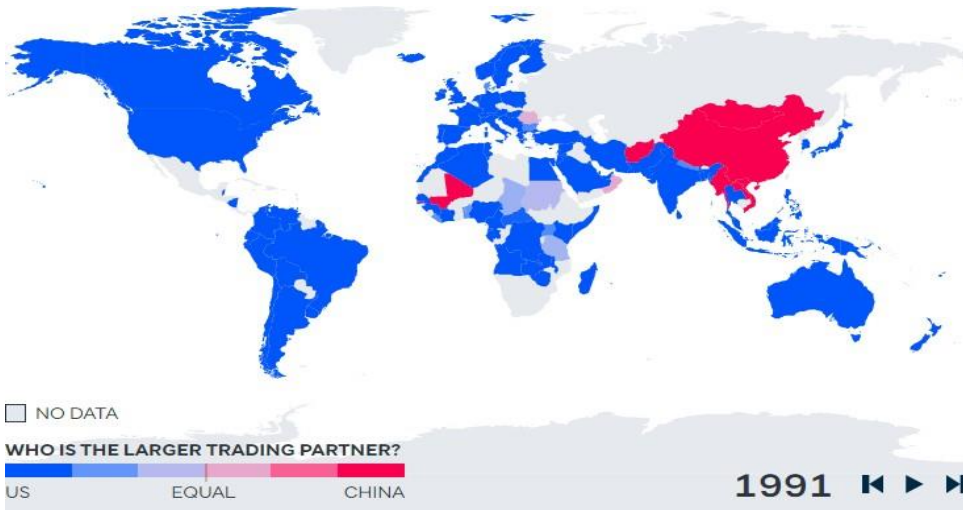
seized more and more spaces around the world in the terms of investment, displacing its competitors, as we have seen, but also in terms of trade flows.

Graph 4: Most Important Trading Partner (1980)



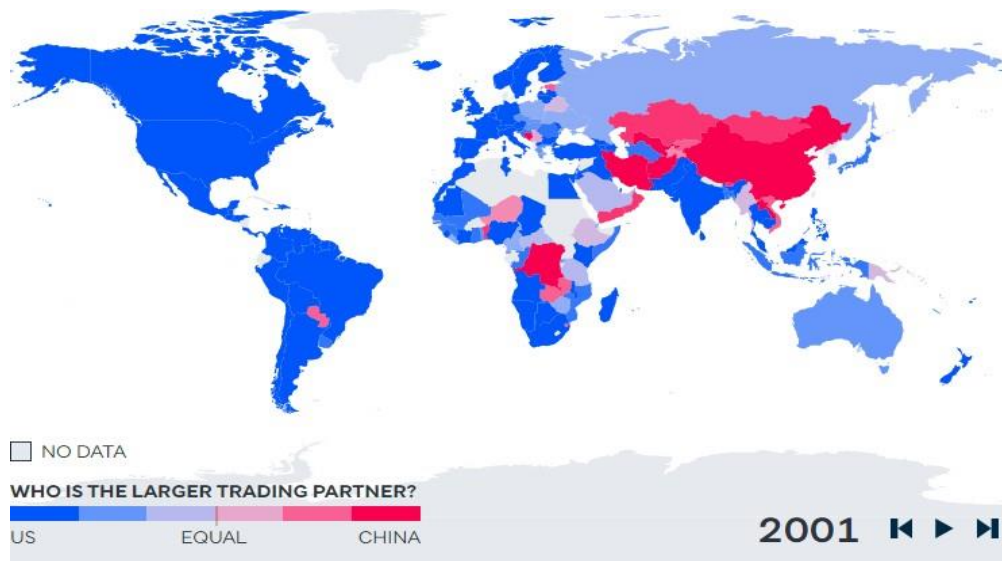
Source: Leng and Rajah (2019).

Graph 5: Most Important Trading Partner (1991)



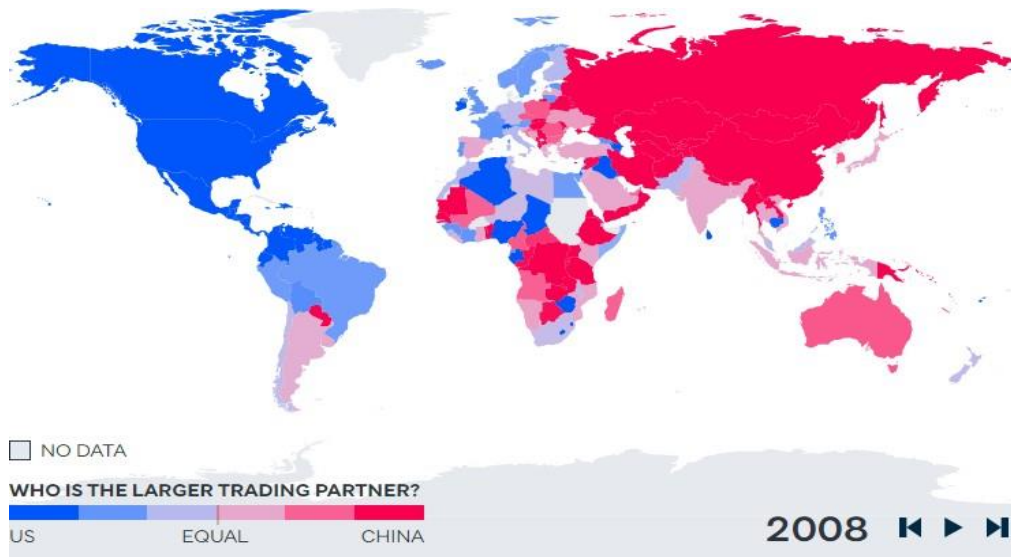
Source: Leng and Rajah (2019).

Graph 6: Most Important Trading Partner (2001)



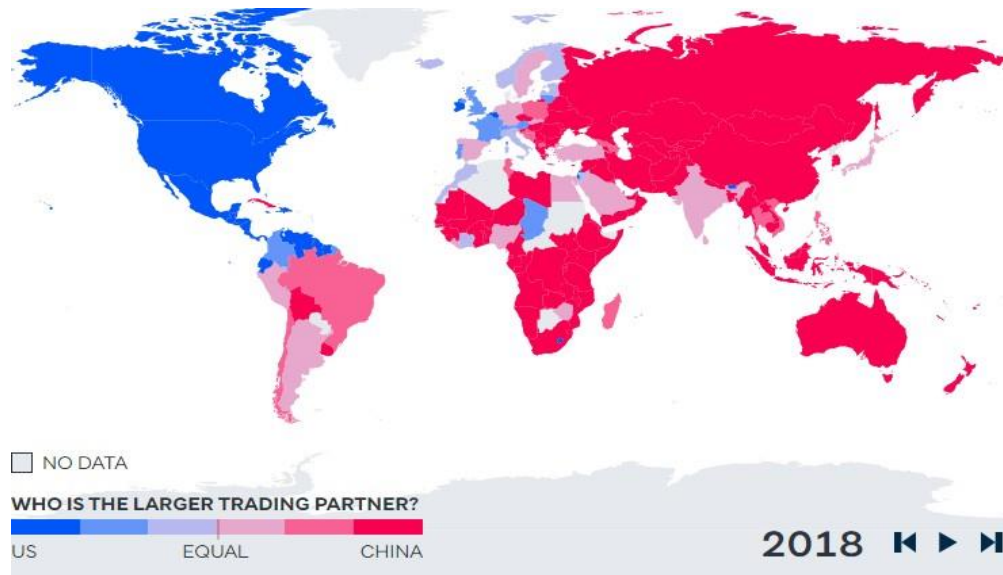
Source: Leng and Rajah (2019).

Graph 7: Most Important Trading Partner (2008)



Source: Leng and Rajah (2019).

Graph 8: Most Important Trading Partner (2018)



Source: Leng and Rajah (2019).

The Belt and Road Initiative, involving more aspects than mere transactions of goods, also accompany this commercial expansion. As explained by Xulio Rios (2018: 1):

The core of the project is the connection of infrastructures, the flow of trade and investment or industrial cooperation; other cultural and social dimensions should be added to these areas. The proliferation of free trade zones (from Georgia to Belarus, to the Maldives) heralds a geopolitical acupuncture that will allow China to exert significant influence along these transportation hubs and to promote alternative globalization under its own aegis.

With its projects, Beijing advances the yuan, its own currency, along with its financing instruments. The AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), with an initial share capital of 100 000 million dollars and the support of dozens of countries, including Spain, supports the industrial development of the region. Five of its partners belong to the G7 (except Japan and the US); 15 to the G20; and 4 are permanent members of the UN Security Council. Only the World Bank outweighs the AIIB. In addition, China has contributed \$ 40 billion to a Silk Road Fund to support the construction of the "Belt and Road" with special emphasis on promoting infrastructure or industrial cooperation (translated by the author).

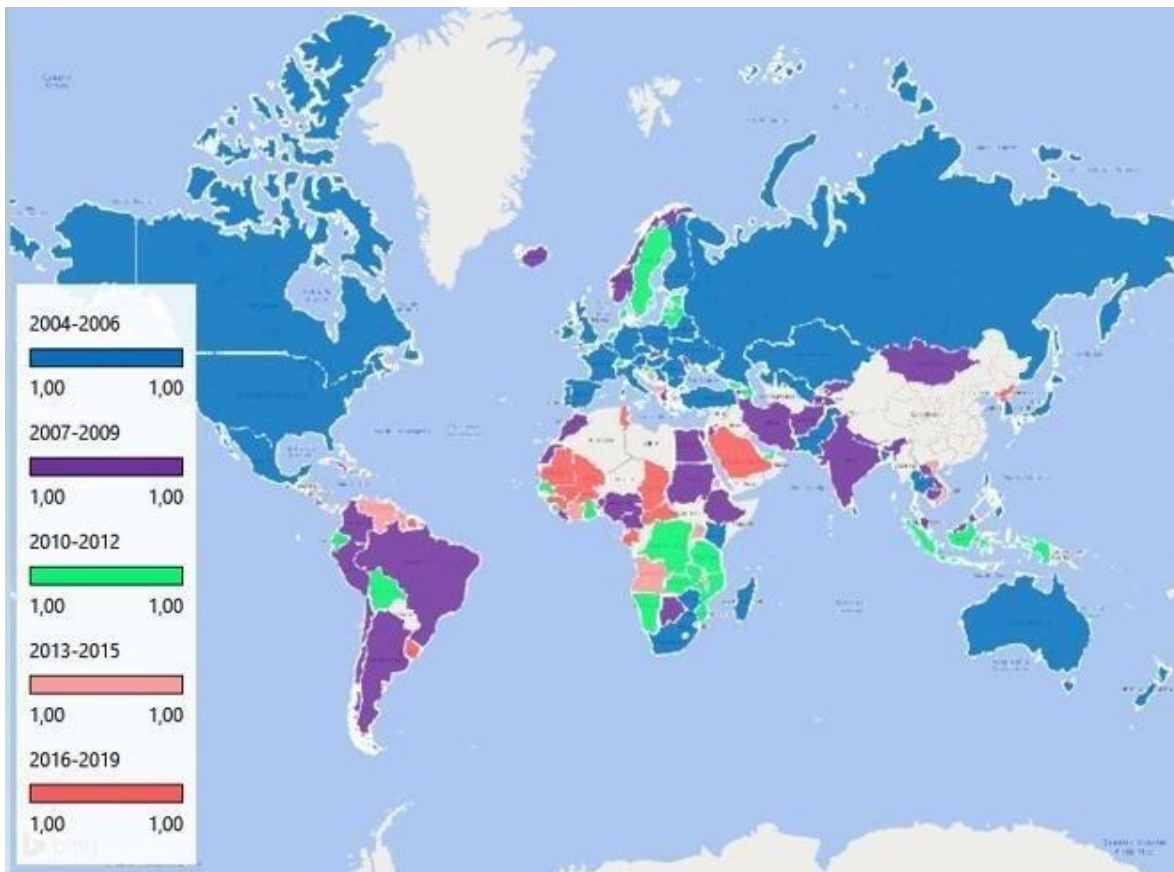
Lastly, the Confucius Institutes, along with economic-trade policy, are another element of China's smart power that translated into the foreign policy concepts of Peaceful Rise and Harmonious World. As we can see, both concepts have Confucian roots. As Lo and Pan point out, quoted by Alcalde (2017: 43):

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the People's Republic of China has used

Confucius Institutes projects to build harmonious international relations, enhance socio-cultural understanding, globalize Chinese culture, and promote collaboration with foreign countries.

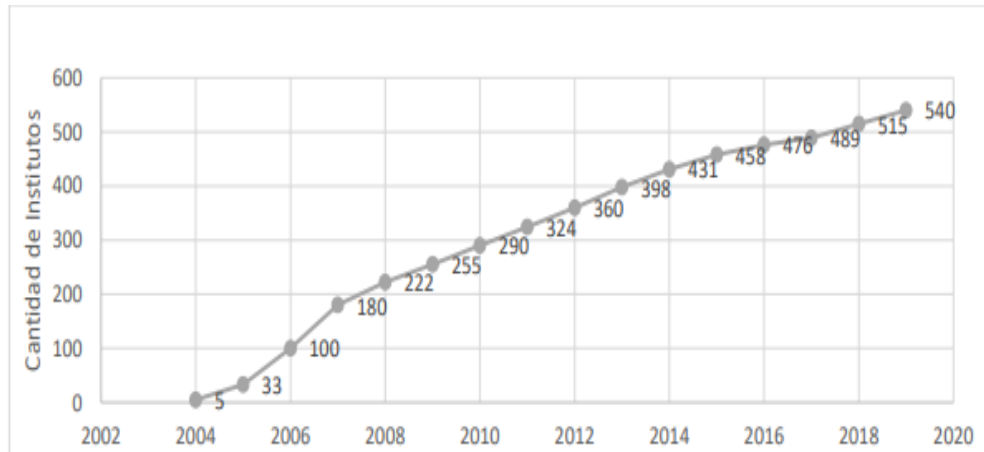
These institutions, in addition to cultural activities, carry out others such as “training Chinese teachers, administering the international HSK exam, organizing festivals and exhibitions related to art, literature and cinema, among others” (Alcalde 2017: 43). Thus, since 2004 to this date, when a pilot test was carried out in Uzbekistan, 500 Confucius Institutes and more than 1000 Confucius classrooms have been established around the world (Alcalde, 2017), as we can see in the graph below.

Graph 9: Confucius Institutes around the World



Source: Ramírez Grisales et al. (2021).

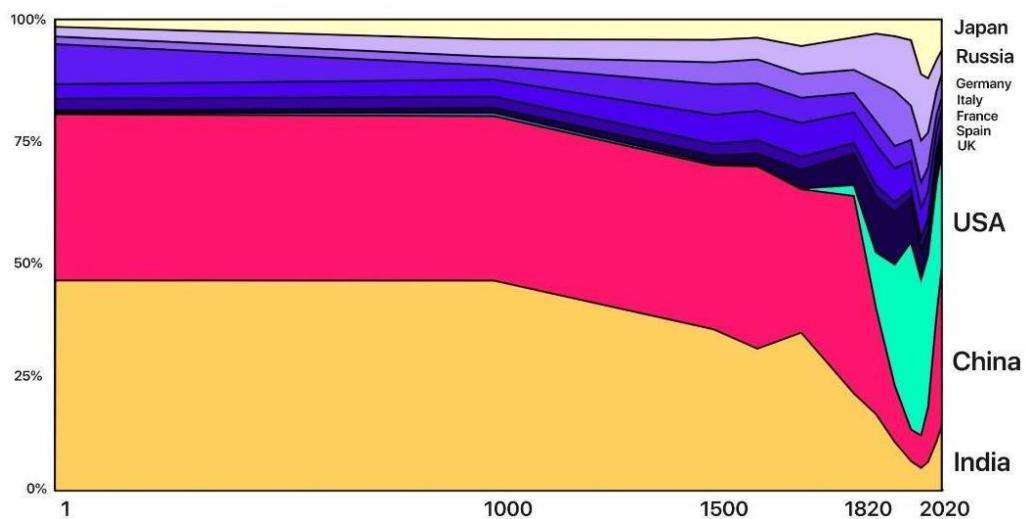
Graph 10: Evolution of Confucius Institutes around the World



Source: Ramírez Grisales *et al.* (2021).

As stated by Xulio Rios: “China will be great again” (López Arnal, 2019). During a lecture at the Master’s degree in International Relations course in FLACSO-Argentina headquarters, Professor Sergio Cesarín told us an anecdote: “Once, when I was doing my doctorate in China, a professor told me: ‘How old is the American empire? 100 years old? 200years old? We have 5000 years of history. We can wait.’” Likewise, Gore Vidal (2001: 159) considers that “Europe began as the Wild West of Asia (...); later, the Western Hemisphere became the Wild West of Europe. Now, the Sun set in our West and has risen again in the East.” This is explained in the graph below.

Graph 11: Share of World Powers in Combined GDP From Year 1 CE to Year 2020 (Uniform Time Scale)



Source: India in Pixels (2020).

We could undoubtedly argue that, in the current context of globalization, such territory occupation is not literal and it can be understood as “control.” For that reason, the decoupling between China and the United States is not functional to the interests of the former: globalization allows the Asian power to control the flows of goods, services, money and data through 5G; hence, it constitutes the great dispute over the latter in this 4th industrial revolution. The first three maps clearly reflect the *wéiqí* strategy of encircling the opponent and exercising increasing control closer and closer to their immediate surroundings, until the opponent is unable to make a move. Thus, China plays *wéiqí* more than chess; Sun Tzu and Mao Tse Tung rather than Erich Ludendorff; and Deng Xioping rather than the Bush family.

5. 结束语 or Final Considerations?

The leaders of the CCP and the authorities of the PRC make use of the traditional ideas about the infeasibility of war, present in Confucianism, to claim that the rise of China does not represent a threat to the international order or to any other State.

First of all, the *Wéiqí* (Go) game could shed light on China’s strategic vision. Why would China confront the United States directly –this also reminds us of Mao Tse Tung and Sun Tzu– if the former can control the territory surrounding its enemy: broadly, control over land, maritime space, aerospace, cyberspace, trade and economy, as seen in the examples above. Obviously, control does not mean possession. This is China’s strategy. As Kissinger (1973) would say, China is a territorially (almost) satisfied power.

Secondly, China will not seek confrontation, but it will not admit threats either. China’s evident goal is to become a superpower by the mid-21st century and it recognizes its need for economic growth and leading in science and technology during this new phase of capitalism. The dispute with the United States is not over tariffs, but over who will lead the 4th Industrial Revolution: the dominance of 5G.

Thirdly, based on the above, China does not neglect moats and walls: armed forces. As we said above, China’s defence policy will undoubtedly seek to maintain its territorial integrity, which –from the country’s perspective– includes Taiwan and the islands of the South China Sea. The Asian giant will not seek territorial expansionism through military resources; however, it is not willing to suffer the humiliation it experienced in the 19th century. China is not a pacifist, but it is not warlike either.

Fourth, China appreciates the political order both domestically and internationally. On the international stage, China defends the emerging multilateralism of the Second World War, as it has allowed the country, in only one generation, to become the second economic and trade power. In this regard, the

preservation of this order through diplomatic channels does not only respond to a cultural legacy of Confucianism, but also to a pragmatic need derived from the objectives that China has set for the year 2050.

Fifth, the rise of China has to overcome a stumbling block. Although Confucius Institutes have spread throughout the world, the American culture continues to prevail in the West.

Sixth, Chinese national interests do not respond solely to what Confucius taught in the 5th century BCE. More than 2000 years have passed and China was forced to open up to the West in the 19th century: a little 100 years ago. It is a grain of sand in China's long history. However, we ignore the impact of the Western transfer on Chinese identity and how it affected its foreign and defence policy: will the pressures of the international system foreseen by neorealists be stronger than Confucianism? Should that be the case and war be unavoidable, China will endeavour not to be humiliated again. China will continue building a strong military (the Great Wall of the 21st century) mostly to defend China's territorial integrity and its right to development. Both aims require time and a peaceful world until China can rely on that strong wall to defend its interests. If all of the above is true and if China abides by Confucian statements, trade and economic expansion in other countries should be free from any conditions entailing an interference in the domestic policy of third-party States.

Seventh, China, unlike the United States, does not promote a "monotheistic" vision of the world, nor does it try to impose it through war or economic sanctions. China is a world in itself, where diverse cultures have co-existed throughout history (Tingyang 2021). This is reflected in the strategic agreements reached, recreating the silk road, where both democracies and authoritarian countries have joined.

Lastly, we would like to finish with a quote from Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. In one of his lesser-known works, *El libro de los seres imaginarios* (1980), he tells us that in ancient times the world of men and the world of mirrors had no communication, as they have now. Diversity prevailed among them. Different beings, colours, and forms existed, and it was possible to move back and forth from and into both worlds. However, when the mirror beings tried to invade the Earth, they were fought back and defeated by the magic of the Yellow Emperor. He imprisoned them inside mirrors and condemned them to replicate all the actions performed by human beings. One day, the magic spell will vanish and these beings will again invade the world of men. Borges (1980) points out that before the invasion occurs, we will be able to hear the murmur of weapons coming from the mirrors.

The key question here is: when China wakes up, will it follow the western pattern of Thucydides, of the Confucius 'Trap, or a mixture of both? All of this is

happening now. We do not know yet if China will ever come out of the mirror, but western lenses are certainly not enough to study the Pacific's giant.

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