The Power of An Idea:

China, Responsibility and Global Governance

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian National University on 18 May 2012.
This thesis is my own original work.

Pichamon Yeopchantong
In memory of my late grandfather ‘Tata’,

May this serve as one more step towards the fulfillment of my promise
ABSTRACT

As China grows as a global power, so have expectations for it to behave ‘responsibly’. Crucially, this has prompted intense debates – both inside and outside of the People’s Republic – on its newfound roles and responsibilities in managing world affairs. Paralleling broader trends in international relations where a distinctive language of responsibility has come to permeate the conduct of world politics, these past few years have seen the Chinese leadership vigorously attempting to project a more ‘responsible’ image of the country. Yet whilst recasting its identity from an outlier of international society to that of a constructive stakeholder has served, in part, to reassure the global community of its intentions, doing so has also given rise to further questions on the nature of China’s obligations and, more specifically, what it means to be ‘responsible’.

The central purpose of the thesis, as such, is to uncover how China understands and acts upon notions of responsibility in the realm of global governance. In particular, it examines China’s engagement with extant structures of ecological governance, with special focus directed to how Chinese attitudes toward responsible stewardship have informed its practices in managing natural disasters and transboundary water resources. Taken together with the concepts of legitimacy and reciprocity, the concept of responsibility, as a fundamental idea undergirding governing processes, is seen to exert both a regulative and constitutive ‘power’ over actors. Of particular importance here is the ‘politics of responsibility’ – or to be precise, the socio-political dynamics of defining, designating, and demonstrating responsibility involved in determining the normative content of conceptions of responsibility as well as the agents tasked with the obligation to act. Occurring both within and between states, it is through these interlocking processes that notions of responsibility relate directly to efforts at governing the globe.

How the People’s Republic interprets and actualises conceptions of responsibility is therefore contingent not only on the context at hand, but also on the underlying politics of responsibility which, in the Chinese case, operates at multiple levels and is animated by a complex cast of local, national, regional and international actors. Connected through interweaving webs of responsibility, these actors have effectively worked to frame how China’s duties and obligations are to be perceived. This has, in turn, given rise to a triangulation effect where indigenous understandings of responsibility intersect with regional and international discourses to influence China’s engagement with an evolving world society.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My stay in China from late 2009 to early 2010, and again from late 2010 to early 2011, had fortunately coincided with the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, as well as the COP16 proceedings in Cancun and the 2010 Shanghai Expo. At the time, not only was the political ‘hype’ surrounding the COP15 Summit covered extensively by the Chinese news media, with the English-language China Daily notably featuring special updates and reports for the duration of the summit, but the ‘great power politics’ underlying the climate negotiations had also stimulated vigorous debates among Chinese policy-makers and scholars alike, as public attention was turned to the diplomatic struggles that potentially determined the fate of our vulnerable planet.

Having witnessed first-hand the optimistic and pessimistic sentiments that ran high during the climate summits and listened to the environmental concerns of everyday Chinese individuals, this impressed on me the very real impact that ecological challenges had on the country as well as its people. Indeed, what compelled me to change my original focus (halfway through my PhD) to China’s engagement with global governance was the complex interplay between responsibility and political power that I saw manifest in debates over managing a fragile environment. Making this change, however, proved more challenging than what I had initially thought. If not for the support I received from my supervisors, the task would have surely been all the more taxing. Over the years Dr. Kathy Morton has gone above and beyond the call of duty to become not just my panel chair but also a mentor. Not only has her own work on China been a constant source of inspiration, but her passion for all things environment-related has likewise left a profound impression on me. Her empathy has also made my PhD experience memorable for all the right reasons. Dr. Paul Keal has also endured much, having had to bear with my frequent office visits to talk about anything from my latest framework to my close encounters of a marsupial-kind. Similarly, talks with Dr. Luigi Tomba always helped me to tease out new ideas, several of which have been used in this thesis.

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It goes without saying that some of the most inspirational people I met during my PhD are in the Department of International Relations at the ANU. The support I have received from Prof. Lorraine Elliott and Prof. Rikki Kersten has given me the added determination to finish this project. I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Greg Fry, whom I frequently relied on for sound counsel and a sympathetic ear. My thanks also to my former office-mate, Dr. Lacy Davey as well as Dr. Thuy Do. Many thanks to the Department’s (past and present) administrative staff: Amy Chen, Marylou Hickey, Liz Conway, and Satomi Ono – how they could bear with all my tedious questions still amazes me! I am particularly indebted to Farnaz Salehzadeh, whom I looked to whenever my fighting spirit needed rekindling.

Finally, it is to my family that I owe my deepest, insurmountable gratitude. My parents have tolerated my ‘writing tantrums’ with such incredible understanding, never-faltering in their encouragement or in their contagious optimism. My mum, especially, has been with me every step of the way. Without her, this journey would surely not have been so meaningful. To my parents: thank you for believing in me, for inspiring me every day, and for always being there.
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<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABMI</td>
<td>Asian Bond Market Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADB</td>
<td>Asian Development Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APEC</td>
<td>Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARF</td>
<td>ASEAN Regional Forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>BRICS</td>
<td>Grouping acronym-cum-multilateral dialogue mechanism referring to the emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAFTA</td>
<td>China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBDR</td>
<td>common but differentiated responsibility principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCICED</td>
<td>China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDM</td>
<td>Clean Development Mechanism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer (MRC Secretariat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CERC</td>
<td>U.S.-China Clean Energy Research Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHINCOLD</td>
<td>Chinese National Committee on Large Dams</td>
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<tr>
<td>CMI</td>
<td>Chiang Mai Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNCIDR</td>
<td>China National Committee for International Disaster Reduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSCAP</td>
<td>Council for Security and Cooperation in the Asia Pacific</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSG</td>
<td>China Southern Power Grid</td>
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<tr>
<td>CWRC</td>
<td>Changjiang Water Resources Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>DRRM</td>
<td>disaster risk reduction and management</td>
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<tr>
<td>DWT</td>
<td>dead-weight tonnage</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECAFE</td>
<td>Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East</td>
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<tr>
<td>EIA</td>
<td>Environmental Impact Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESCAP</td>
<td>Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN)</td>
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<tr>
<td>G-20</td>
<td>Group of Twenty Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>gross domestic product</td>
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<tr>
<td>GMS</td>
<td>Greater Mekong Subregion Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>GTI</td>
<td>Greater Tumen Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICG</td>
<td>International Crisis Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICISS</td>
<td>International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty</td>
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<td>ICOLD</td>
<td>International Commission on Large Dams</td>
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<tr>
<td>IDDR</td>
<td>International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFI</td>
<td>international financial institutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFRC</td>
<td>International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>INGO</td>
<td>international non-governmental organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<tr>
<td>IPCC</td>
<td>Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRN</td>
<td>International Rivers Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRU</td>
<td>International Relief Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>IUCN</td>
<td>World Conservation Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>IWRM</td>
<td>integrated water resources management</td>
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<tr>
<td>KMT</td>
<td>Kuomintang (Taiwan)</td>
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<tr>
<td>kWh</td>
<td>kilowatt-hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>LMI</td>
<td>Lower Mekong Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>MCA</td>
<td>Ministry of Civil Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>MNC</td>
<td>multinational corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoU</td>
<td>Memorandum of Understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>MRC</td>
<td>Mekong River Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>MW</td>
<td>megawatt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDRC</td>
<td>National Development and Reform Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDRCC</td>
<td>National Disaster Reduction Centre of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEAC</td>
<td>Northeast Asian Conference on Environmental Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEACD</td>
<td>Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEASPEC</td>
<td>Northeast Asia Sub-regional Program on Environmental Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>non-governmental organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pH</td>
<td>fourteen-point scale of acidity or alkalinity of a solution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QEC</td>
<td>Quadripartite Economic Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2P</td>
<td>responsibility to protect principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMB</td>
<td>Renminbi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SARS</td>
<td>Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEA</td>
<td>strategic environmental assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEPA</td>
<td>State Environmental Protection Administration (China)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIA</td>
<td>social impact assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOE</td>
<td>state-owned enterprises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TERRA</td>
<td>Foundation for Ecological Recovery (Thailand)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRADP</td>
<td>Tumen River Area Development Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNEP</td>
<td>United Nations Environment Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNFCCC</td>
<td>United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USBR</td>
<td>U.S. Bureau of Reclamation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCD</td>
<td>World Commission on Dams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WWF</td>
<td>World Wide Fund for Nature</td>
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</table>
The *pinyin* system of romanisation, as opposed to the traditional Wade-Giles system, is used throughout this thesis for Chinese names, place-names and terms, with the exception of certain proper nouns such as 'Peking University' or 'Tsinghua University'. The 'Yangtze' River therefore becomes the 'Yangzi' River, whilst 'Li Ping' is rendered as 'Li Bing'. Standard transliteration is applied to other foreign language words and proper nouns, as based on popular usage and phonetic approximation. Translations featured in the thesis are entirely the author's own, unless otherwise indicated.
INTRODUCTION

臣不知过，物不谓宜，但命轻鸿毛，责重山岳。

南朝梁·任昉《为齐明帝让宣城郡公第一表》

I [the minister] know this might not please you [the Emperor], but I do not know of any other way. For though my life is light as a goose’s feather, my responsibilities are as heavy as mountains.

Nan Chaoliang • Ren Fang, from Xuancheng Prefecture’s memorial to the Qi Dynasty’s Ming Emperor

The basic premise driving this thesis is a simple one: that power exacts responsibility in the conduct of international relations. It takes as its departure point the modern phenomenon of China’s striking re-emergence as a global power and the commensurate ways in which it is acting ‘responsibly’ in the governance of global affairs. Simply put, the central research question motivating the thesis is: How does China understand and act upon notions of responsibility within the realm of global governance?

The primary concern of this thesis is to deepen our understanding of Chinese conceptions of responsibility and explore the extent to which multiple and contending

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1 I have opted to refer here to the PRC’s ‘re-emergence’ as a major power as this expression better captures the historical precedent of China’s rise.
notions of responsibility have come to motivate China’s foreign-policy behaviour. More fundamentally, it examines why China, as a rising power, is also expected to behave as a responsible power. The overarching argument I maintain in each chapter is that the study of international relations is not simply about power relations between states; it also requires a deeper understanding of the ‘politics of responsibility’ – that is, the social and power relations existing both within and between states that undergird the political processes of defining, designating and demonstrating responsibility.\(^3\) It is through these dynamics involved in delegating agents with the obligation to act and determining the normative content of responsibility under given circumstances that responsibility emerges as a key idea in international life, working to constitute and regulate state interactions within an evolving world society.

Responsibility, as a result, matters in world politics because it is fundamental to the architecture of global governance. Indeed, manifestations of this idea are ubiquitous in the conduct of international relations. From calls to ‘promote global justice’, ‘spread democracy’, ‘stop world hunger’, ‘create a nuclear-free world’, and ‘safeguard human dignity’ through to actual practices such as the provision of humanitarian assistance to those in need, committing to carbon emission targets and climate protection, as well as in more conventional terms, respecting the sovereign integrity of other states, these all constitute acts informed by a sense of obligation. One need only look to Tony Blair’s defence of the ‘war on terror’ which, he argued, was launched foremost on the basis of values rather than security; Russia’s call for North Korea to ‘demonstrate responsibility’ in response to the latter’s underground nuclear test in May 2010;\(^4\) or Barack Obama’s ‘Prague speech’ on nuclear weapons and his ‘Libya speech’ on humanitarian intervention, for clear instances of how a normative language of responsibility has now come to permeate official foreign-policy discourses, and can even be seen, under certain circumstances, to motivate behaviour.\(^5\)

\(^3\) These processes underpinning the politics of responsibility are discussed at greater length in Chapter One.

\(^4\) Interestingly, a Chinese scholar was quoted in an International Crisis Group (ICG) report as saying that the launch of a long-range missile by North Korea back in early 2009 had reportedly been opposed by Beijing on the basis of the notion that ‘along with rights come responsibilities’ – with ‘responsibility’ here referring to the expectation for North Korea to return to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (which it had withdrawn from earlier in 2003). ICG, ‘Shades of Red: China’s Debate over North Korea’, *Asia Report* 179 (November 2009), fn. 5 on p. 1.

Although the term ‘responsibility’ might not always be explicitly articulated in state discourses, the sentiment remains the same. There is an expectation, often expressed in collective terms, that some entity – whether it be a state, transnational actor, or even international organisation – is obligated to do something or act in a certain way. President Obama, for one, has remarked on how the United States has ‘a responsibility to act’ when its ‘interests and values are at stake’. However, this is not a new notion, but one that has historical precedents in international thought. Winston Churchill, for example, famously proclaimed to an audience at Harvard University in 1943 how ‘the price of greatness is responsibility’, after which he went on to elaborate how the people of the United States – as people belonging to an ascending power – ‘cannot escape world responsibility’. Writing in the aftermath of the Great War, Sir Alfred Zimmern similarly observed how ‘the problem of international politics is not the elimination of the conception of Power, but its transformation—we may even say its sublimation—through the influence of the notion of moral responsibility’.  


For more on Obama's Libya speech, see fn. 195, pp. 73-74 of this chapter. Furthermore, it is noteworthy how in one article he authored, Blair made the following comment: ‘Our response to the September 11 attacks has proved even more momentous than it seemed at the time. That is because we could have chosen security as the battleground. But we did not. We chose values. […] We will not win the battle against global extremism unless we win it at the level of values as much as that of force. We can win only by showing that our values are stronger, better, and more just than the alternative. That also means showing the world that we are evenhanded and fair in our application of those values. We will never get real support for the tough actions that may well be essential to safeguarding our way of life unless we also attack global poverty, environmental degradation, and injustice with equal vigour’. Blair, ‘A Battle for Global Values’, Foreign Affairs 86:1 (2007), p. 79.

6 See Obama, ‘Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya’, 28 March 2011.

7 Winston Churchill, ‘The Price of Greatness is Responsibility’, speech given at Harvard University (6 September 1943). Of course, the motivations behind Obama’s and Churchill’s are perceptibly different. Obama’s conception of responsibility is much more tied to perceptions of the national interest, whereas Churchill, given the historical context within which he is speaking (i.e. towards the end of the Second World War), is articulating responsibility more in terms of a ‘duty to humankind’. For a very similar outlook vis-à-vis the U.S.’s ‘expanding’ responsibilities, see A.E. Zimmern, ‘The Future of Civilization’, in Randolph S. Bourne (ed.), Towards an Enduring Peace: a symposium of peace papers and proposals 1916-1918 (New York: American Association for International Conciliation, 1916), p. 228.

As a rising power, China’s international behaviour is now heavily scrutinised. Its practices are often judged in terms of value-laden imperatives framed in terms of a ‘moral duty’ or ‘special obligation’ to the global community. Particularly striking are calls for the People’s Republic to become a more ‘responsible power’ (fuzeren de daguo)\(^9\) and assume a more constructive leading role in global governance. Robert Zoellick’s 2005 speech in which he called upon China to become a ‘responsible stakeholder’,\(^{10}\) for instance, resonated throughout the international policy community, giving rise to vibrant debate inside and outside of China.\(^{11}\) Another example is the United States’ 2010 National Security Strategy report, which continues to stress the need for China to provide ‘responsible leadership’ for the sake of global interests,\(^{12}\) mirroring the Obama administration’s urges for China to become more ‘proactive’ in international affairs.

Of interest is how China’s neighbours have been equally anxious to see the PRC assume the role of a responsible regional power. Despite Chinese reassurances, the spectre of a China Threat continues to loom large,\(^{13}\) as doubts over China’s ‘real’ motives and intentions persist in debates over the broader implications of its rise. Certainly, given how Beijing can, at times, send ‘mixed signals’ in its foreign policy, one cannot entirely blame its neighbours for harbouring some suspicion of Chinese

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\(^9\) It should be noted, however, that a more direct translation of fuzeren de daguo would be ‘responsible major country’, or for a more popular rendition, ‘responsible great power’.


\(^{11}\) It deserves note, however, that Zoellick’s speech was not entirely unprecedented. A decade earlier in October 1995, then U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry had made the point in his speech to the Washington State China Relations Council in Seattle that the United States should pursue a policy of engagement with China so as to compel it to act as a ‘responsible member of the international community’, whilst also emphasising how U.S. policy ‘accepts China at its word when it says that it wants to become a responsible world power, but it also requires that China act like one’. Around the same time, then Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Stanley Roth similarly commented at the 1997 World Economic Forum on how the U.S. wanted ‘China to take its place as an active and responsible member of the international community’. For the full text of the speeches, see William H. Perry, ‘U.S. Strategy: Engage China, Not Contain It’, Defense Issues 10:109. [On-line] Available at: http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1023 (accessed 3 October 2009); and Stanley O. Roth, ‘U.S.-China Relations on the Eve of the Summit’, address at the World Economic Forum, Hong Kong, 14 October 1997. [On-line] Available at: http://www.state.gov/www/policy_remarks/971014_roth_china.html (accessed 11 October 2009).


disingenuity. Attempts by ASEAN to draw China deeper into the folds of regional governance through its ‘ASEAN Plus’ mechanisms or the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) serve as a manifestation of these underlying concerns. With the regional architecture having undergone considerable transformations over the years, this has resulted in the emergence of novel arrangements that have furthered the cause of incentivising China into complying with existent rules of engagement.\footnote{14} One is particularly reminded of such initiatives as the Asian Development Bank’s Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) programme, or the milestone China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA),\footnote{15} where ongoing Chinese cooperation constitutes an important prerequisite for their success. Here, a ‘responsible’ China is one attentive not just to its needs, but also to those of its neighbours.

Having said this, it does deserve note that China has responded rather enthusiastically to such overtures for deeper cooperation. State-sanctioned discourses of ‘peaceful development’\footnote{16} (heping fazhan) and ‘harmonious world’ (hexie shijie) 

\footnote{14} It should be noted that China’s involvement in regional institutions can actually be traced back to the early 1990s when it became a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, while participating in second-track dialogue through such mechanisms as the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD) and the Council for Security and Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). Nevertheless, it is arguably from the late 1990s onwards (particularly following the Asian financial crisis) that China became more involved with regional institutional mechanisms, especially those of Southeast Asia. This effectively marks the beginnings of China’s integration into the overarching architecture of governance in East Asia. For a collection of (somewhat ‘idealistic’) essays on Sino-ASEAN relations, see Saw Swee-Hock, Sheng Lijun, and Chin Kin Wah (eds), *ASEAN-China Relations: Realities and Prospects* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2005).


\footnote{16} The language of peaceful development came to supplant that of peaceful rise (heping jueqi) in official discourses by 2004 when President Hu Jintao made repeated references to the concept – as opposed to the notion of peaceful rise – during his keynote speech at the Boao Forum. This term was also incorporated into the State Council’s white paper on ‘China’s Peaceful Development Road’ in 2005, with peaceful development recognised as being ‘inevitable’ for China’s modernisation, and the establishment of a ‘harmonious world of sustained peace and common security’ deemed as a moral necessity. Notably, observers have commented on how this constitutes a ‘strategic’ shift in the official discourse, as the term ‘development’ was seen to be less assertive and, as such, less ‘threatening’ than the word ‘rise’, which was likewise seen to be loaded with other negative connotations as based on the logic that what ‘rises’ will also have to invariably ‘fall’ one day. See Information Office of the State Council, ‘China’s Peaceful Development Road’ (22 December 2005). [On-line] Available at: http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/20051222/eng20051222_230059.html (accessed 14 June 2008); and Liu Guoli, ‘Domestic Sources of China’s Emerging Grand Strategy’, *Journal of Asian & African Studies* 43:5 (2008), pp. 543-561; Bonnie S. Glaser and Evan S. Medeiros, ‘The Changing Ecology of Foreign-Policy Making in China: The Ascension and Demise of the Theory of “Peaceful Rise”’, *The China Quarterly* 190 (2007), pp. 291-310.
are essentially derivative of Beijing’s so-called ‘charm offensives’, 17 meant to
enhance the country’s soft power attraction, especially towards other developing
states. 18 Indeed, early debates over an emergent ‘Beijing Consensus’, 19 as opposed to
the prevailing ‘Washington Consensus’, could be seen to reflect the PRC’s
broadening appeal abroad. While the notion of the Beijing Consensus has (somewhat
ironically) proven to be a contentious one, the fact that there has been talk of a
‘consensus’ at all, with observers remarking on how developing states have sought to
emulate the Chinese ‘development style’ (fazhan moshi) that has lifted 400 million
people out of poverty within two decades, 20 arguably suggests the effectiveness of
China’s soft power diplomacy. Apart from its growing influence at the interstate level,
the establishment of more than 300 Confucius Institutes in various parts of the

17 For more on China’s ‘charm offensive’, see Joshua Kurlantzick, Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft
Power is Transforming the World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Kurlantzick, ‘China’s
International Peace.

18 For a sampling of the diverse literature dealing with the soft power dimensions of Chinese foreign
policy, see Alan Hunter, ‘Soft Power: China on the Global Stage’, Chinese Journal of International
Politics 2 (2009), pp. 373-398; William A. Callahan, ‘Tianxia, Empire and the World: Soft Power and
China’s Foreign Policy Discourse in the 21st Century’, RIIC Working Paper 1 (May 2007); Yanzhong
Huang and Sheng Ding, ‘Dragon’s Underbelly: An Analysis of China’s Soft Power’, East Asia 23:4
Rising Cultural Power and Global Promotion of the Chinese Language’, East Asia 23:2 (2006), pp. 3-
International Review (2009). [On-line] Available at:

19 For studies looking particularly at the implications of Chinese soft power for the U.S., see Carola
McGiffert (ed.), Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States: Competition and
Cooperation in the Developing World (Center for Strategic and International Studies: Washington,
D.C., 2009); Thomas Lum, Wayne M. Morrison and Bruce Vaughn, ‘China’s ‘Soft Power’ in
Southeast Asia’, CRS Report for Congress (January 2008).

20 It should be noted, however, that Beijing elites have been wary of this idea and more so of the notion
of ‘exporting’ it to other developing states. The reason for its hesitation in explicitly promoting the
Beijing Consensus lies largely in the fear that Chinese actions would be misconstrued as ‘threatening’
in a hegemonic sense.

For a further treatment of this issue, see Pang Zhongying, ‘China’s Soft Power Dilemma: the Beijing
Consensus Revisited’, in Mingjiang Li (ed.), Soft Power: China’s Emerging Strategy in International
Politics (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 125-141; Drew Thompson, ‘China’s Soft Power in
Available at: http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=3901
(accessed 30 June 2010).

20 This refers to the period from 1978 to 2000. A similar sentiment resonates in former World Bank
President Paul Wolfowitz’s remarks on how ‘in the last quarter century, over 300 million people have
escaped poverty in China. With ingenuity and pragmatism, they have pursued a path that offers
valuable lessons’ (although the validity of such claims have now come under much contestation and
debate). Paul Wolfowitz, ‘China has valuable lessons for sub-saharan Africa’, Financial Times, 30
October 2006.
world,\textsuperscript{21} along with the PRC’s involvement in social initiatives like the ‘Sister City Program’,\textsuperscript{22} are also indicative of an eagerness to expand its reach at the ‘people-to-people’ level.

Accordingly, it is important that we do not discount China’s role in the management of both regional and global affairs as it takes on the mantle of responsibility. What this warrants is a closer look at the nuances of Chinese foreign policy which would invariably reveal the People’s Republic to be a highly complex actor, one that defies the simplistic characterisations commonly attributed to it in the current literature on China’s rise. The challenge is one of steering a middle course between essentialised extremes of China as ‘threatening’ on the one hand, and ‘peaceful’ on the other, so as to arrive at a deeper understanding of its evolving roles and responsibilities in global governance. As argued later, rather than fixating on questions of whether China constitutes a revisionist or status quo power, or whether it will heighten great-power tensions by challenging the United States’ predominant position in the international system, interpreting Chinese foreign policy on its own terms first is necessary for capturing the dynamism of China’s contemporary interactions with the governance of an evolving world society. And needless to say, this is precisely what the study seeks to do.

\section*{China and the burden of responsibility}

China’s rising status in the world creates both reassurance and anxiety amongst Beijing’s elites.\textsuperscript{23} According to Chih-yu Shih, this is because, for the first time since the Opium Wars, China has been recognised as a major power by the rest of the international community. Yet at the same time, China’s newfound status has also incurred widespread misgivings over the implications of its growing power and influence for the future of the global order.\textsuperscript{24} However, I would add that a more


\textsuperscript{22} This initiative is basically aimed at forging ties between Chinese and other ‘global cities’.


\textsuperscript{24} Shih, ‘A Responsible State’, p. 5.
fundamental source of Chinese unease over its international identity stems from Beijing’s increasing awareness of the expectations and obligations that come with this new status. This refers back to the notion that power exacts responsibility and, more specifically, that great power is bounded by even greater responsibilities. No longer a ‘peripheral power’, the People’s Republic now finds itself the focus of much public attention. But just as its actions have become constantly subject to external scrutiny (and in certain cases, intense criticism) by the global community, so have its internal challenges appeared ever more complex. In essence, what this underscores is the ‘dual’ nature of China’s burden of responsibility, where its expanding obligations abroad are accompanied by demands for greater accountability at home.

With twenty-two percent of the world’s population and a vast territory spanning 9.6 million km², the tasks facing the Chinese state are undoubtedly great. And how it responds to them will affect the Chinese people as well as the rest of the world. The reality has become one where it is no longer possible to isolate China’s domestic issues from the global sphere. Insecurities at home can quickly translate into insecurities abroad and vice versa. As posited by Chinese scholars, the PRC’s own ‘self-governance’ already constitutes a sizeable contribution to global order. Maintaining social stability, along with a friendly international environment, are seen as strong imperatives to bring about China’s successful emergence as a world power. Though elites in Beijing may still favour a ‘China first’ policy, the emergent realities of a globalising and interdependent world require them to also take into consideration the views and interests of other actors. As former Foreign Minister Qian Qichen told an audience at Peking University in 2001, ‘only by having friendly relations with neighbouring countries and by cooperating with other countries in a spirit of mutual benefit, can we maintain the external conditions necessary for

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26 This statement is based on interviews I conducted with Chinese scholars and policy-makers over a cumulative course of six months.

building our country. China must rise peacefully. Presumably, this is a matter not just of high-sounding rhetoric, but of necessity.

Of critical importance here is the fact that expectations for China to behave responsibly are now imposed as much by other state and non-state actors (e.g. international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and multinational corporations (MNCs)) as by China unto itself. This suggests a growing convergence in domestic and global interests. Arguably, it also points to a potential convergence over values. In fact, the language of responsibility within official Chinese foreign-policy discourses predates the famous ‘responsible stakeholder’ speech made by Zoellick in 2005. Jiang Zemin was reportedly the first to use the term ‘fizeren de daguo’ in his speech to the Russian State Duma in April 1997. It was notably in the same speech that Jiang made a clear reference to the notion that power is invariably tied to responsibility: ‘Both being major powers of influence and permanent members of the UN Security Council, China and Russia shoulder an important responsibility for safeguarding world peace and stability.’

Through the use of the language of responsibility, together with other dialogic devices (e.g. appropriate praise or blame), China is effectively making a self-binding commitment to what Frank Schimmelfennig has referred to as ‘rhetorical entrapment’. That is to say, its rhetoric become the standard against which its actions can be legitimately judged by others. This begs the immediate question of why China, with growing global interests and reach, would want to constrain its ‘freedom to manoeuvre’ by making such statements. If it were indeed the ‘high church of realpolitik’ of the post-Cold War world, as certain scholars contend, why would China seek recognition as a responsible power?

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What this directs our attention to is the significance of identity politics in international relations. To highlight the identity politics underlying Chinese foreign relations is not to suggest that its foreign policy is motivated solely by ideational or normative concerns; it is also to underscore the deeply strategic thinking behind China’s behaviour and rhetoric. In other words, the normative and the strategic can be difficult to disentangle from one another. Strategic behaviour can be embedded in ideal positions, and vice versa, whilst ideational discourses have the potential to produce consequences beyond intended strategies.

This is, of course, the logic underlying Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink’s notion of the ‘strategic social construction’ of intersubjectively-held commitments.34 Actors are instrumentally rational insofar as they are aware of how they should act politically. Nevertheless, this rationality is ultimately socially bounded by significant limitations in actors’ abilities to fully anticipate or intentionally ‘plan’ the consequences of their actions. As I note earlier, strategically, China would not want to be singled out as a ‘threat’, as this would pose significant constraints on its ability to exert power and influence in the international arena. One need only look to the Chinese Communist Party’s 11th Ambassadorsial Conference in 2009 where Hu Jintao’s keynote speech introduced a new foreign policy formulation, the so-called ‘four strengths’ (sìlì).35 Of importance is the fact that three of the four strengths – broadening political influence, enhancing image affinity as well as moral suasion – clearly fall under the categories of identity-building and soft power.36

More pertinently, how the language of responsibility has been employed in Chinese foreign-policy discourse is striking. While China’s understanding of its global responsibility continues to be tempered by the state’s capacity to fulfil its commitments, the political elite has actually never really challenged the idea of responsibility itself – that is, the very notion that states have a duty or obligation to act in a certain way.37 Rather, the point of contention has centred more on the tensions between China’s multiple roles and contending responsibilities as both a rising power

and major developing state, which effectively raises broader questions about the scope and nature of China’s contribution to global governance.

A more detailed analysis of how ‘responsibility’ affects China’s participation in global governance essentially involves three tasks: first, discerning the extent to which ‘responsibility’, both as an idea and political process, underpins global and regional institutional arrangements; second, defining the contours of responsibility, together with the parameters of political agency and legitimate authority; and third, identifying the constitutive and regulative effects of responsibility on China’s foreign-policy behaviour, as reflected in its engagement with governance architecture. By engaging with these, I aim to illustrate the centrality of the politics of responsibility to the framing of Chinese approaches to issues of collective, global concern.

A global governance perspective

‘There is more to global governance than political and economic structures. A necessary question is which fundamental values form the basis for countries to cooperate and engage internationally...Which values should shape the world that we want to live in? What concepts should guide international cooperation?’ 38 This observation aptly speaks to the reasons why this study has chosen to employ a global governance lens to make sense of responsibility.

A global governance framework allows us to locate at the centre of world politics the key normative ideas and principles (e.g. legitimacy, responsibility, reciprocity, and sovereignty) that constrain and regulate actors’ behaviour, and which form the basis of the world society to which states and peoples presently belong. As argued by Klaus Dingwerth and Philipp Pattberg, ‘the most fundamental observation we make when we make use of our global governance lens is not the existence of specific actors (i.e. states), but the existence of norms, rules, and standards that structure and constrain social activity’. 39

The idea of responsibility has frequently been associated with notions of governance, especially in relation to great powers and their obligations to manage the international system. To think about global governance is to necessarily think about

responsibility. The common imperative of states to engage in managing global affairs is inevitably based on a shared sense of 'purpose' — that there is a need to work collectively to maintain global stability and order, or more specifically, that states as international actors have an obligation to respond to exigent challenges to that order. Even though the nature of these challenges may change over time, the sentiment remains the same: some form of collective action needs to be taken on a global scale. This, if nothing else, constitutes the crux of the idea of responsibility.

A global governance perspective, moreover, customarily equips us with a model set of normative and practical questions — questions like 'where do global norms, rules, and standards come from?'; 'How are they constructed, interpreted, implemented, and adjudicated?'; and 'what are the implications of the current transformation of governance for core political concepts (e.g. authority, sovereignty, legitimacy)?'. These are all crucial questions which can be adapted and applied to the study of responsibility as a fundamental idea in global governance. Engaging with these substantive questions also allows for a closer fit between the study's theoretical and empirical dimensions. It also helps in anchoring the conceptual discussion of responsibility with a stronger appreciation of the actual political processes involved in appropriating and demonstrating responsibility. Issues of 'governing without government' not only have deep historical roots, often manifested as a perennial problem in international political thought and the practices of states, but the very concept of global governance itself constitutes a notion which is highly contested and politicised. This parallels the amorphous nature of 'responsibility', which constitutes another much-politicised idea. Taken together, they raise important, fundamental questions about the proper locus of authority in international affairs (given the existence of multiple, and sometimes, conflicting power centres), the legitimacy and accountability of international actors (i.e. states, institutions, and non-state entities), as well as the nature of global order and justice.

In short, a global governance lens brings into sharper focus the elusive relationship between agency, authority and responsibility in the conduct of international relations. A consideration of both the practical and normative dimensions of responsibility further heightens the relevance of analysing policy statements as a tool for uncovering the motivations and political processes behind

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40 Dingwerth and Pattberg, 'Global Governance as a Perspective on World Politics', pp. 199-200.
foreign-policy behaviour. It also speaks to the thesis’ proposed conceptual framework which highlights the role that processes and practices of responsibility serve in mediating between agents and the ideational structures constraining them.

Ultimately what a global governance perspective accentuates is the fact that we are now living, not so much in an international society, but a world society, where the consequences of globalisation are becoming progressively pronounced. This is a world where transnational movements and actors (e.g. international organisations, civil society networks) have a growing influence on how international politics is conducted, as well as on how state actors act and conceive of their interests. Processes of global fragmentation and integration occur in tandem, as national boundaries – if not national borders – become increasingly blurred, and with the international arena becoming characterised by the complex crisscrossing of domestic, regional and global politics. As Hedley Bull lucidly sets out,

By a world society we understand not merely a degree of interaction linking all parts of the human community to one another, but a sense of common interest and common values, on the basis of which common rules and institutions may be built. The concept of a world society, in this sense, stands to the totality of global social interaction as our concept of international society stands to the concept of international relations.41

World society, in other words, denotes the ‘now global scope of international society’42 and presupposes the presence of a ‘world-wide community-sentiment’.43 A reflection of this is seen in how the exercise of power now comes with the inescapable burden of expectation for states, especially major powers, to behave responsibly not only towards their own people, but also toward peoples beyond their borders.44 The

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41 Bull, The Anarchical Society, p. 279.
43 Martin Wight, ‘Western Values in International Relations’, in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds), Diplomatic Investigations (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 97. This quote is taken from Martin Wight. Though Wight made this remark in relation to the existence of an international society, I believe it is an equally – if not more – fitting observation of the nature of a world society.
global players of today’s world are thus faced with the incontrovertible task of balancing between the necessity of order, on the one hand, and demands for justice, on the other.\textsuperscript{45}

However, it is important to recognise that while a world society lens favours bringing relations of peoples and societies back into the study of IR, or in this case, the study of global governance, one still cannot entirely dismiss states as the major actors in world politics. Accordingly, I contend that the main contribution of a world society perspective lies in its nuanced appreciation of the pluralism intrinsic to the current international system. Especially with China’s rise to prominence, the political plurality and cultural porosity of this emergent world society has now been further accentuated. As noted by Jiang Zemin at the UN Millennium summit meeting in September 2000, ‘The world is multi-colored. Just as the universe cannot have only one color, so too can’t the world just have only one civilization, one social system, one developmental model, or one set of values’.\textsuperscript{46}

It is in this regard that a global governance framework renders this study more mindful of the novel realities of the present world order. It also reminds us how China’s domestic political situation can – and does – impinge on the international realm, greatly affecting the course of its foreign relations.

**Governing nature and responsibility**

Rather than attempt to cover multiple aspects of global governance, this study focuses specifically on ecological governance, which emphasises the interrelations between complex human and natural ecosystems, and is concerned with how to best manage these interdependencies so as to enhance human development, environmental sustainability and eco-social resilience. Accordingly, I consider collective efforts to protect the environment as a common public good, as well as human attempts to govern and alter the environment for the sake of greater security and well-being.


As water resources become scarce and with many parts of the world threatened by natural disasters and extreme weather conditions, safeguarding the environment has quickly become a major concern for governments as well as the international community. The rapid growth and modernisation drives of industrialising states have further rendered the sustainable management and protection of the world’s natural resources all the more imperative. Indeed, within only four decades (from 1961), the Asia-Pacific region’s demands on world ecological capacity alone expanded significantly from 15 to 40 percent, with its ‘ecological footprint’ being 1.7 times greater than its local biological capacity.47

Yet contrary to conventional belief, the challenge of ecological governance is not a uniquely recent phenomenon, especially for a country like China. This is an area that has historically been – and continues to be – significant in the practice of Chinese statecraft at both the domestic and international levels.48 The host of challenges posed by climate and water related disasters have, of course, long held a crucial place in accounts of Chinese environmental history. Ever since dynastic times, they have been inextricably tied to the legitimacy of the ruling elite. How the Chinese government responds to the socio-ecological consequences of widespread environmental degradation and global climate change impinges upon both the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) public standing, as well as the PRC’s international status. It is for these reasons that the environment provides a useful lens for studying the politics of responsibility. It is an issue-area that demands attention from inside and outside states, and one with a very long history that can help to illuminate how notions of responsibility have evolved over time.

China’s natural environment has clearly felt the full brunt of ongoing industrialisation. Rivers and forests have taken the toll as the country is bedevilled by long-term atmospheric and water pollution. Grasslands are being ploughed up as forests are felled for timber,49 with more than 30 percent of China’s land base suffering from desertification and its wetlands having been reduced by 60 percent.50

50 Morton, China and the global environment, p. 4.
According to an annual report of the Chinese State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), 90 percent of China’s grasslands were already degraded by 1999. These environmental strains are the consequences of rapid industrialisation coupled with a growing resource-hungry population. In 2003, domestic demands in China reached the stage where the equivalent of ‘two Chinas’ would have been needed to provide for the population’s resource consumption and to absorb its wastes. As the 2003 CCICED-WWF report reveals, China has long been running an ‘ecological deficit’ as it demands more biological capacity than what its ecosystems can provide each year.

It is thus the case that the People’s Republic stands to lose considerably from ongoing climatic variability and environmental degradation. Not only are many of its provincial areas already suffering from serious underdevelopment, they are also increasingly plagued by problems like soil erosion, desertification, and critical water shortages, as found in the northern provinces. Two-thirds of China’s 660 cities are water stressed, whilst 70 per cent of its rivers and lakes are seriously polluted, including the mighty Yellow and Yangzi Rivers. Air pollution remains a major problem, as notably highlighted during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, with acid rain (i.e. pH under 4.5) having developed into a widespread national (and growing transnational) problem, affecting one-third of China’s land surface by 2005. With severe droughts, an increasing population, and relatively limited land suitable for agricultural cultivation, China also finds itself in the midst of a highly precarious situation, marked by exigent concerns over food security. To critically question whether the PRC’s growth is sustainable not only in an economic or social sense, but also in environmental terms, has now become more imperative than ever.

Due to the interdependent nature of our current world, the implications of an environmentally-impoverished China have the potential to affect China as much as the rest of the world. It is for this reason that examining the Chinese role in environmental governance becomes particularly important, serving as a reflection of

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54 Morton, *China and the global environment*, p. 4.
55 A pH less than seven denotes high acidity.
China’s broader participation in global governance architecture. Global environmental issues underscore how domestic matters, especially unresolved ecological issues, can easily spill over into the international realm and become transnational problems, as the case of extreme air pollution across East Asia aptly demonstrates. It has even been suggested that desertification in China’s north has resulted in sandstorms, which reach across the Pacific Ocean to as far as Los Angeles. In fact, this spillover effect dates back to at least the 1980s, when the flooding of the Yangzi River in 1988 reportedly washed rubbish all the way up to Japan’s west coast.\(^{56}\)

The transnational dimension of these issues spotlights how vital ecological stewardship is to human, state and global security. It also speaks to the emergent realities of a world society, where agency no longer belongs solely to the state. This is a world where people matter, with transnational actors and movements having a growing impact on how politics is conducted and how states behave. For China, environmental sustainability has become crucial for the maintenance of its domestic stability, as well as the cultivation of its status. The environment has, in effect, become a new litmus test for assessing the international behaviour of the People’s Republic, where responsible behaviour here has come to mean ‘sustainable’ behaviour.

While most observations made on China’s environmental crisis-in-the-making are by no means exaggerations, one should not underestimate the strides China has taken both domestically and internationally, in pursuit of environmental sustainability. To merely posit that China is either responsible or irresponsible when it comes to the environment is to lose sight of the nuances surrounding China’s foreign policy, as well as the bigger, unresolved issues to do with ‘good’ or ‘responsible’ governance. In effect, a key question here is whether China is capable and actually willing to assume a leading and constructive role in promoting environmental cooperation and governance beyond its borders.\(^{57}\) It is for this reason that the exigent issues of disaster and transboundary water management – considered amidst overarching climate change concerns – serve as apt illustrations of the multifaceted nature of China’s

\(^{56}\) Zhang Yulin and Gu Jingtu, *Shei shi huanjing wuran de zuida shouhaizhe? [Who are the biggest sufferers of environmental pollution?]*, article collected at the Universities Service Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (2003?).

international engagement, and the complex interplay between interests, power, and responsibility.

The Argument

The central argument of the thesis builds upon existing constructivist, neoliberal institutionalist and English School scholarship on norm compliance and reciprocity to claim that the idea of responsibility, in a similar vein to these two concepts, requires a heightened awareness of the commonality of shared interests between actors. Understood as the notion of there being *an obligation, need or imperative for agents to act in a certain way or be accountable for certain behaviour*, the concept of ‘responsibility’ is viewed in this thesis as a *fundamental* normative idea in international life, serving both a regulative and constitutive function in global governance. That is to say, conceptions of responsibility can work to enable *and* constrain behaviour, whilst (re)defining new identities, interests and categories of action\(^{58}\) that consequently inform the expectations and practices of actors. Taken together with the concepts of legitimacy and reciprocity, it forms a ‘tritych’ of global governance,\(^ {59}\) as a first-order idea that imbues action with meaning. Action without a sense of responsibility would be action devoid of purpose.

That said, it should be borne in mind that the concept of responsibility is an inherently political one. Especially given how the thesis is referring specifically to the notion of the ‘responsibility of power’, articulations of this idea will be inextricably linked to the socio-political context in which they were articulated, being coloured by the motives and interests of its articulator. Following from this, it is also important to note that the idea of responsibility as understood here is not an absolute principle; rather, it is a contextually contingent one. Because of its amorphous nature, the idea is susceptible to gaining multiple interpretations, making it possible to talk not just about an idea of responsibility but about *conceptions* of responsibility. As illustrated later in the thesis’ empirical chapters, how ‘responsibility’ is defined in the case of water governance and disaster governance invariably differ as both issue-areas feature varying agents and referents of responsibility, as well as distinct sets of norms and expectations.

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\(^{59}\) The triptych of global governance is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 1.
This observation sheds further light on what I have termed the ‘politics of responsibility’, which essentially refers to the social and power relations undergirding the processes of normative contestation. It is this notion which largely animates the study’s theoretical and empirical inquiry, serving as an analytical prism for making sense of how notions of responsibility come to be discursively constructed and how they can impinge on foreign-policy behaviour through the appropriation of certain social roles and normative expectations. The key contention here is that different conceptions of responsibility will inevitably have varying effects on actors, as they command different levels of compliance.\textsuperscript{60} Certainly, notions of responsibility do not emerge in a normative vacuum, but would have been articulated in spaces already occupied by pre-existing ideas and discourses. Even in the case of disaster governance where China appears to exhibit a degree of engagement with prevailing norms and expectations of responsibility, this does not mean that no contestation existed previously. At the international level, contestation was initially reflected in debates on how state responsibilities to peoples in disaster events were to be understood in relation to the principle of the responsibility to protect, whereas domestically, as evinced from reactions to the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, contestation had mainly surfaced with public disapprobation with the government’s handling of the earthquake’s aftermath, specifically the issue of poorly-built school buildings.

Moreover, through the practical application of this concept, it is hoped that this will ameliorate our understanding of when, where and why ‘responsibility’ matters: or put alternatively, the particular circumstances under which certain conceptions of responsibility, and their corresponding norms and values, gain meaning within the Chinese context. As argued by Finnemore and Sikkink, uncovering the processes that culminate in a norm’s – or in this case, a normative idea’s – emergence and its ‘tipping point’ constitutes an area that has been relatively understudied by IR scholars.\textsuperscript{61} Current scholarship on norms tends to focus more on their evolution and internalisation by actors once these ideas have already been established to varying degrees in the international political realm. It is for this reason that looking at how

\textsuperscript{60} Finnemore and Sikkink, ‘International Norm Dynamics’, p. 892. Legro has also noted, with regard to norms, how they are ‘continuous, rather than dichotomous, entities’ and how they do not simply ‘exist or not exist but instead come in varying strengths’. This observation can be equally applied to understanding the influence of various conceptions of responsibility on state behaviour vis-à-vis global governance. Legro, ‘Which norms matter?’, p. 33.

\textsuperscript{61} Finnemore and Sikkink, pp. 896-901. One obvious exception would, of course, be Legro’s piece on ‘Which norms matter?’
issues like water and disaster management have been politically ‘framed’ and negotiated by the various stakeholders involved stands to be potentially insightful, given the competing interests and, oftentimes, contending responsibility claims of the stakeholders involved.

Another major argument sustained in this thesis relates to current literature on the responsibility of Chinese foreign policy. Much of the policy and scholarly debates on this issue have a tendency to stagnate over the question of whether China constitutes a ‘truly’ responsible power. Such questions leave little room for responses that go beyond lukewarm answers, and are also inherently problematic as they demand the making of subjective, moral judgements. Whose standard of responsibility should we use to pass judgement on the moral weight of Chinese actions? In addition, by asking questions to the effect that China is categorised as either ‘responsible’ or ‘irresponsible’, one is already presuming the significance of the idea, with ‘responsibility’ becoming framed as an attribute to which China should, at the very least, aspire. This is, however, not a statement that can – or should – be taken unproblematically.

The problem, in part, lies in how responsibility has been conceived in discussions over China’s international responsibility. Limited attention has been afforded to considering ‘Chinese’ interpretations of responsibility on their own terms prior to engaging in comparative assessments. A similar problem is also found in debates over whether China is best described as a ‘status quo’ or ‘revisionist’ power. Again, the dichotomous categories that China is constantly being pushed into tend to obscure more than they reveal, proving to be rather irrelevant to the conduct of post-Cold War global politics. Some scholars have alternatively identified the presence of a ‘learning’ or socialisation process, in which China is seen to be gradually adapting to prevailing norms within international society. While this is a welcome development, the underlying conceptualisation remains flawed as it forwards a static depiction of China being on the receiving end of a one-way learning process. As such, I contend that a critical reconsideration of China’s international engagement in light

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of processes of normative contestation would better capture the co-constitutive dynamic of socialisation, with China perceived as being both ‘socializer’ and ‘socializee’. Accordingly, I contend that it is more prescient to conceive of China as engaging in an ongoing process of navigating and (re)negotiating the social space surrounding it. Even though the PRC might ultimately be doing so within the confines of existent ideational and institutional structures, this is a point that cannot be taken-for-granted but needs to be validated by examining how China has imbued this shared social space with meaning and constructed discourses that have acted as frames of reference for its behaviour. Hence, the need for a shift towards addressing the extent to which China is shaping – as opposed to simply responding to – pre-existing international norms and rules: that is, in terms of it potentially being both a ‘rule-taker’ and a ‘rule-maker’.64

As a final argument, this thesis contends that both endogenous and exogenous factors are vital to informing how actors – or in this case, China – come to conceive of their responsibilities. Elucidated in greater detail in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, apart from spotlighting the importance of a multileveled approach to global governance, the triangulation of local, regional and international discourses also prove significant in determining the course of the politics of responsibility.

Methodology

This study uses Chinese historical and academic sources, official statements as well as policy documents. A major part of the project is also informed by interviews with Chinese policy-makers, NGOs, and experts in the field, which took place during the period from 2009 to 2010. The research method adopted is thus an interpretivist one, based on a theoretical framework which merges constructivist insights with an English School approach to highlight the significance of ideas and historical processes in foreign policy. By employing a global governance perspective, the study also engages at a more practical level with a set of empirically oriented questions (e.g.

'where do global norms and rules come from?" and 'how are they constructed, implemented, and adjudicated'). The result is a project better attuned to both the normative and practical dimensions of responsibility and governance.

Building on this framework further I add another conceptual layer to the theoretical and empirical analysis featured in this thesis by referring to what I have termed the 'politics of responsibility'. By applying this concept to the study of Chinese foreign policy and, more broadly, to global governance, it helps to tease out the convoluted processes of defining, designating and demonstrating responsibility which, I argue, fundamentally animates the workings of governance. As explained later in this section, it is in consideration of the multiple layers of analysis used in this thesis that a thematic approach to addressing the study’s empirical cases becomes all the more warranted, as it promises to better capture the full range of ideas and political action visible in the cases examined.

**Interpretivism, narratives and history**

In adopting an interpretivist approach, the study integrates the use of political discourses and narratives. The underlying assumption here is that discourses are socially-constructed and necessarily *Standortgebunden* (i.e. culturally and historically contingent), to the effect that a discourse is rarely, if ever, monolithic. This is important because even though certain discourses, particularly those relating to policy issues, may maintain the façade of coherence and consistency, oftentimes within such discourses one will find tension between the multiple, overlapping narratives undergirding them. It is these narratives that constitute and reconstitute the discourses themselves, leading to what Margaret Somers has referred to as the 'narrative constitution of identity'. While individuals, and indeed states, construct discourses to imbue meaning to their actions, they also locate themselves – or are located – within a repertoire of interacting emplotted stories, which in turn guide them to act in certain ways.\(^\text{65}\) In short, narratives are simply the stories within a story.

**Meanings**, as such, are what matters here most. As appositely observed by Quentin Skinner, the relationship between terms and concepts is not a necessary

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one.⁶⁶ Even though the term ‘responsibility’ might not always be featured explicitly in political texts and foreign-policy rhetoric, this is not to be taken as the complete absence of the idea. It is often the case that notions of responsibility will have been tacitly woven into the language employed by actors, as is the case for classical Chinese texts on statecraft. It is, therefore, imperative that we embed discourses within the specific contexts which they were articulated.⁶⁷

This interpretivist approach is, moreover, an inherently ‘historical’ one. Despite calls in favour of bringing history back into the study of world politics, noticeable lacunae in the literature can still be seen. Especially with regard to existing scholarship on global governance, there is a tendency to treat contemporary issues as historically isolated phenomena. Although the past should not be used to deterministically illumine the present, this does not negate the fact that current challenges tend to have roots in the past. In this respect, continuity is as important as change, and how the two interact often has important implications for states and the social settings to which they belong. What I advocate, in effect, is the fusing of historical and contemporary perspectives, so as to move beyond the spatiotemporal divide of past and present. And it is precisely for this reason that the thesis pays extensive attention to excavating the historical precursors of responsible statecraft and stewardship in Chinese political traditions. A historically-informed approach to understanding how China understands and acts upon notions of responsibility in global governance today is not only timely, but also of practical significance.

*Performative discourses: the logic of rhetorical entrapment*

Demonstrating causal linkages between words and actions is, without doubt, a difficult task. Most observers would be quick to point out the incongruities between what a state says and what it actually does. Indeed, the very phrase ‘mere rhetoric’ is enough to convey the sentiment that what matters is not so much the ‘language people use but the material power resources upon which they can draw’.⁶⁸ Whilst there is no denying the fact that a gap between rhetoric and reality persists in the conduct of international relations, to quote the words of Ronald Krebs and Patrick Jackson, ‘talk

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is not always cheap'. Studies have shown how state leaders often have strong incentives to abide by their rhetorical promises and commitments, should they wish to avoid bearing the substantial costs of domestic or international censure. This is not to mention the simpler fact that the practice of diplomacy still revolves around the skilful manipulation of words. Language precedes and succeeds political action. And as such, rhetoric necessarily lies at the heart of politics today.

An appreciation of the importance of discourses in international relations is encapsulated in the Habermasian and constructivist concepts of ‘rhetorical action’ and ‘norm entrapment’. This refers to a situation where states make value-referential arguments in order to add legitimacy to their actions, but in so doing, inadvertently come to constrain their freedom to manoeuvre within that particular language. According to Schimmelfennig, this is due to ‘the requirement of consistency’ which entails a ‘match between arguments and actions’ made by actors, as well as a ‘match between arguments used at different times and in different contexts’. In other words, a state’s rhetoric comes to serve as a ‘standard’ against which its actions can be judged, with the possibility of any inconsistency between a state’s rhetoric and actual conduct becoming publicly exposed and used against the state, harming its credibility and reputation.

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71 Krebs and Jackson, ‘Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms’, p. 42. Of equal note, the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott has also been known to observe that ‘politics has always been three-quarters talk’. Oakeshott, Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), p. 206.
Here, intersubjectivity among actors proves to be a crucial variable. For the dynamic of rhetorical entrapment to work, the ideas expressed by a state need to be shared — or at least acknowledged — by other actors. Only then can expectations be formed and imposed onto the state, forcing it to take into consideration the perceptions of others. On this view, these expectations effectively provide states with the impetus to behave in line with their articulated commitments, lest they be seen as ‘disingenuous’ or ‘irresponsible’ for reneging on their duties and obligations. The result is an ironic situation where references to ‘legitimacy’, ‘rightful conduct’, or ‘responsibility’ can grant states with the opportunity to pursue their interests without too much external opposition, just as it simultaneously acts as ‘an external institutional resource and constraint’ upon the state.\(^\text{75}\)

Linked to the concept of rhetorical action is the idea of ‘performative discourses’. To analyse such discourses would be to consider how they are employed and the consequences of their usage. As mentioned earlier, a key assumption sustained throughout this thesis is that discourses, and the narratives emplotted within them, are as important as actions. It is possible to conceptualise them as equivalent to a communicative form of action (i.e. a ‘speech act’). As J.L. Austin observes, with regard to performative utterances (e.g. ‘I swear’, ‘I agree’, ‘I do [as in to marry]’), ‘it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it’.\(^\text{76}\) It is in this sense that discourses, which are themselves formed through social relations, manage to create and establish ‘networks of meanings’ among agents, whilst being concomitantly perpetuated by such agents through communication and consistent iteration — both of which constitute the ‘micro-processes’ of discursive performance.\(^\text{77}\) Important from a normative

\(^{75}\) Schimmelfennig, ‘The Community Trap’, p. 63.


This is also the basic idea behind the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism, whose notable adherents, like Charles Herbert Cooley and Erving Goffman, highlight the importance of ‘theatricality’ in the conduct of personal relations in human societies. See, for instance, Charles Herbert Cooley’s notion of the ‘looking-glass self’ in his *Human Nature and the Social Order* [1922] (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1902);
standpoint is how these networks of meanings consequently feed into actors’ frames of reference for determining appropriate or expected social behaviour.

In analysing policy discourses, this study casts light on how the process of rhetorical entrapment adds to the ‘politics of responsibility’ as a key process in global governance, with actors being compelled to ‘act’ out their dialogic commitments in front of a watching international or domestic ‘audience’ by engaging in the politicised processes of normative contestation.

**Thematic cases: water and disaster governance**

In applying the discourse approach to actual practice, the thesis seeks to trace the evolution of Chinese policy discourses so as to uncover how issues pertaining to ecological governance – and more specifically, water and disaster governance – have been politically framed over time, and the extent to which they have been informed by conceptions of responsibility. The first thematic case investigates the PRC’s performance in managing shared water resources, particularly in the Mekong River Basin, whilst the second explores China’s evolving role in disaster management from the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake to the more recent 2010 Pakistan Floods and 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake. I adopt a thematic as opposed to simply issue-centric focus here, as it provides a broader realm of action for making sense of China’s emerging role in global governance. By the same token, I focus on ecological governance as a unifying theme because it captures the major dynamics at play in the thematic cases examined, as well as the linkages between them considering how water scarcity in the Mekong region is relatable to the increased frequency of natural disasters within the context of global climate change.  

There are four main reasons for why I have selected these two cases. First, both involve looking at multiple levels of governance. While China’s involvement in water governance in the Mekong River Basin seems to be confined to a regional scope, the problems raised in this issue are in fact symptomatic of broader challenges in

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79 Although there are scientific studies currently being conducted on the correlation between climate change and the increased frequency in the occurrences of earthquakes and other forms of natural disasters, climate change should not, however, be seen as a *cause* of earthquakes.
international river management, taking on an explicitly transnational dimension. Similarly for disaster governance, natural calamities have now been recognised by most governments as a common threat that requires global responses and local action. The benefit of adopting this multileveled perspective lies in its potential to shed light on the varying degrees of contestation occurring within these issue-areas, and reveal how the politics of responsibility permeates all levels of governance.

Given that I am considering instances of both responsibility and irresponsibility, these issue-areas are of added interest as they depict scenarios where Chinese involvement remains ongoing and at times equivocal, thereby working to reveal the dynamic processes inherent in locating agency and responsibility. Indeed, considering ‘irresponsibility’ promises to offer contrastive insights into the idea of responsibility itself. As Jeffrey Legro once wrote in relation to international norms, ‘Why norms did not emerge or were not consequential is as important as why they did or were’. Just as inaction on China’s part can be as important as actions (i.e. abstaining from UN Security Council voting or, more recently, opting to remain silent on North Korean provocations), so can the abstention or abrogation of responsibility be as instructive as responsibility acceptance.

The challenge of water governance in the Mekong River Basin constitutes an important instance in this regard, epitomising the host of problems that arises when industrialising states are forced to share highly valuable resources. Questions over rightful ownership and exploitation of natural resources inevitably emerge in tandem with problems of enforcing compliance among stakeholders, with China frequently portrayed as the main culprit responsible for derailing collective efforts at governance. Serving as a stark contrast to the case of disaster governance, which is marked by Chinese compliance to evolving international norms, this raises the important question of why the People’s Republic would want to be seen as a responsible power in certain contexts but not in others. An even more ambitious question here would be under what conditions does ‘responsibility’ actually matter?

Furthermore, due to the highly politicised nature of the problems dealt with in each thematic case, this renders both cases particularly well-suited for illustrating the political processes involved in defining, designating and demonstrating responsibility, as oftentimes reflected in the contestation that surfaces with actors advancing

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contending responsibility claims. It is in this sense that these two cases have the potential to not only reveal the intersections between politics (i.e. power, authority, and competing state interests) and notions of responsibility, but also to exemplify the interplay between domestic and international considerations in China’s interest conception and its pursuit of a ‘responsible’ foreign policy (i.e. domestic responsibility to the Chinese people versus ‘global responsibility to peoples’).

Lastly, it deserves note that, in both cases, it is not merely the resource or ecological security of states involved that is at stake, but more importantly, it is the livelihoods and security of local communities living along the Mekong or in disaster-prone areas. In analysing the politics of responsibility, it is therefore crucial that we take into account the role that non-state actors play in bringing about normative change. By looking beyond the state, this generates a more human-centred perspective that highlights how the challenges currently facing China are derivative of an increasingly interdependent world. Accordingly, in order to arrive at a more holistic understanding of global governance, a thorough appreciation of the linkages between state, ecological and human security is a necessity.

Significance of the study

In interrogating the relationship between responsibility and global governance vis-à-vis China’s engagement with the unique challenges that come with a globalising world, the thesis contributes both theoretical and practical value to the study of International Relations and China studies. Aside from contributing to existing China studies literature on how ‘responsibility’ features in Chinese foreign policy, the thesis makes five other contributions. First, not only is there an ongoing divide, albeit an artificial one, between IR scholarship and China area studies, but studies of responsible governance and of responsibility in foreign policy have also been largely treated as distinct from one another. This is due to the fact that the former is often viewed as taking place within the domestic sphere (i.e. the issue of responsible government), and thereby distinct from the modes of governance that occur at the global level. By exploring responsibility within a Chinese context which sees frequent overlaps between these two realms, this thesis seeks to highlight the contingencies between the two and, in so doing, contribute to both research fields.
Second, in exploring this local-global nexus, the study contributes to a ‘human-centred’ – as opposed to a solely state-centric – approach to conceptualising global governance. Challenges pertaining to ecological sustainability and human security are spotlighted vis-à-vis more conventional concerns centring on state security and global order. By going beyond the state and shifting the focus back to ‘people’ and ‘the environment’, I seek to bring into relief the emergence of a nascent global public sphere, understood as ‘an evolving arena where social movements, non-state actors and “global citizens” join with states and international organisations in a dialogue over the exercise of power and authority across the globe’.  

Third, in terms of the project’s contribution to IR scholarship, the conceptual framework set out in this thesis is unique in that it locates responsibility as both a fundamental idea and political process in global governance – one which undergirds the very social institutions underpinning world society. As discussed in the next chapter, even for English School scholars who have advanced the notion of ‘Great Power responsibility’, the impact of the idea of responsibility on world politics remains largely understudied. To fill this lacuna in existing scholarship would thus amount to a key contribution of this study.

To account for the significance of particular conceptions of responsibility, this clearly requires an appreciation of how such conceptions had originally evolved into their current forms. As a fourth contribution this study works to bring history back into analyses of global governance, as it incorporates an historical-interpretivist methodology for understanding the evolution of ‘responsibility’ from a global governance perspective. Most studies conducted under the rubric of global governance are, of course, inclined towards dealing with ‘contemporary’ issues. While this is understandable seeing how such issues often pose as the most pressing problems, I contend that it should not be made at the expense of overlooking the legacies of these challenges within the Chinese past, which have the potential to greatly enrich our understanding of the historical sources and social contingencies of some of the most serious challenges facing the world today.

As a final point, this thesis is situated in the midst of burgeoning scholarship devoted to the study of key concepts in IR within a non-Western context. Bringing a Chinese perspective to bear on responsibility effectively problematizes the idea, as

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opposed to merely presuming its existence in a particular given form. Tracing how China has interpreted and appropriated the idea of responsibility will further help to shed light on the existence of multiple and contending notions of responsibility, as founded upon historical and cultural particularities. This begs the question of what such diversity in views signifies for global governance, which is supposedly based on common understandings and a degree of global integration. Needless to say, to uncover the tensions between ‘global’ conceptions of responsibility and more context-specific, ‘Chinese’ understandings of responsibility constitutes one of the main objectives driving the study.

**Organisation of the thesis**

This thesis is divided into two main parts. Part I is both theoretical and historical in orientation. The chapters in this section (Chapters 1 and 2) are devoted to analysing conceptual and historical issues to do with the relationship between responsibility and global governance, especially as they relate to Chinese foreign policy. Part II then raises the question of how notions of responsibility are reflected in the actual practice of ecological governance at home and abroad. The chapters here (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) focus specifically on Chinese involvement in governing nature.

In attempting to define the elusive concept of responsibility, Chapter 1 introduces the idea of the ‘responsibility of power’ as understood within the realm of international relations. In particular, it unpacks how this concept is central to global governance. English School insights on the social institutions of international society are adopted to complement a global governance perspective, resulting in a conceptual framework that locates responsibility as a fundamental idea in the regulation and constitution of an emergent world society and the various state and non-state actors that inhabit it. As such, I focus on the ‘politics of responsibility’, viewed as a process of normative contestation, which contributes to the political framing of global governance issues. Responsibility is, in this sense, understood as both a key idea and an important political process – one which informs the normative fabric of global governance.

Chapter 2 examines how notions of responsibility feature in Chinese views on global governance, as reflected in the officially-sanctioned ideas of ‘Harmonious World’ and ‘self-governance’. In arguing that both ideas are anything but new, having
instead deep roots in the Chinese past, the evolution of the idea of responsibility is contextualised within China’s changing political terrain. Starting from the time of Imperial China\textsuperscript{82} until the contemporary era in the 1990s, this chapter explores the way in which conceptions of responsibility – understood here in terms of responsible statecraft and governance – have been negotiated and renegotiated according to varying socio-political circumstances. More specifically, I analyse how notions of responsibility were appropriated locally within Chinese political traditions, prior to examining the extent to which these notions became manifest in China’s external behaviour.

Chapter 3 then considers conceptual shifts in relation to imperial authority and contemporary political leadership and their linkages with ‘nature’. Equal attention is given to how Chinese perspectives on the environment have evolved in tandem with shifts in how the human-nature relationship has been historically conceived. Linkages are subsequently drawn between historical Chinese attitudes toward ‘governing nature’ and more contemporary understandings of ecological governance. Following from this, I chart parallels between post-1990 developments in China and those occurring at the global level with regard to the ‘responsible’ management of the environment. The chapter then turns to reflect broadly on how China has dealt with environmental issues. In identifying the impacts of such engagement on Chinese conceptions of its roles and responsibilities, special attention is given to the PRC’s stance on global climate change and the key principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ (CBDR) – a central norm within the context of international climate negotiations.

Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to unravelling the study’s corresponding thematic cases of disaster relief and water management. The overarching concern of these two chapters is on the core question of how China’s performance in these areas corresponds with ideas and political processes relating to responsible foreign policy. In Chapter 4, China’s performance in the politics of transboundary water governance in the Mekong River Basin is examined. I analyse how the PRC’s roles and responsibilities as an upstream power have been normatively contested and (re)negotiated by the different stakeholders involved in this issue, as well as how the matter of upstream-downstream water rights has consequently been framed in terms

\textsuperscript{82} The timeframe referred to here for Imperial China is from the founding of the Qin Dynasty in 221 BC up until the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911.
of both ‘state’ and ‘ecological’ responsibility. Of note is how this chapter provides an important contrast to the subsequent one on natural disasters. China’s involvement in the shared management of this international river continues to be obscured by the lack of transparency and information-sharing between the People’s Republic and downstream riparian states, which has been widely read as the PRC’s apparent disregard for prevailing norms on ‘equitable use’ and ‘do no harm’. A major purpose of this chapter is thus to determine the reasons for — along with the implications of — China’s reticence in joining extant institutional mechanisms and complying with operative water norms on regional ecological governance and confidence-building.

In Chapter 5, notions of social responsibility at both the domestic and international levels are critically evaluated in relation to China’s ‘disaster policy’. Given the heightened vulnerability of peoples due to the greater frequency and severity of natural disasters, the chapter focuses in particular on applying the contentious concept of the ‘responsibility to protect’ (R2P) to disaster situations, taking note of how sentiments of humanitarian obligation attached to this principle have gradually become palpable in China’s evolving disaster policies. Following from this, it traces how Chinese perceptions of natural catastrophes have evolved over time in accordance with its newfound role as a major provider of international disaster relief. The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami is highlighted as a turning-point in the securitisation of natural disasters in national policy agendas, with calamities becoming viewed as a common challenge for the global community. Apart from the Indian Ocean Tsunami, the cataclysmic 2008 Sichuan Earthquake along with the recent 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake and 2010 Pakistani Floods are also taken up as significant episodes, marking shifts in the Chinese government’s attitude toward its responsibility to peoples in disaster events both within and beyond its borders.

To conclude, I bring together the theoretical and empirical threads of the thesis to revisit the conceptual framework set out in Chapter 1. I review how the cases attest to the significance of the politics of responsibility, together with the corresponding processes of contestation, in regulating state behaviour and constituting the parameters of legitimate action via interlocking governance structures at the local, regional and global levels. The thesis goes on to posit that, contrary to conventional explanations that tend to characterise Chinese norms and values as being either internally derived or externally imposed, Chinese conceptions of responsibility and responsible governance have, in fact, been informed by a complex triangulation of
international, regional and indigenous discourses, as derived from actors operating at multiple levels of governance. Finally, I provide some observations on how the exercise of responsible power is – and will continue to be – an issue of overriding concern for Beijing in its foreign-policy manoeuvres as well as for the rest of the world in their interactions with this rising power. With direct implications for the country’s ongoing efforts at global and regional confidence-building, the idea of responsibility will endure as a crucial component in the development of China’s power.

Some caveats

On a methodological note, two important qualifications are in order. First, I am aware that references to ‘China’ as a subject risk oversimplification by reifying China or labeling it as a monolithic actor, without first ascertaining intent on the part of the Chinese government, which is also invariably riddled by factional politics and contending group interests. Without doubt, the use of such language has the potential to conceal more than it reveals, obfuscating the interacting set of agents, institutions, and traditions that shape international political behaviour. But to fully engage in the unpacking of the ‘China-black box’ would take this study beyond its appropriate scope. The fact that states often seek to present themselves as unitary actors, in the sense that their decisions and actions are based on some form of social or political consensus, means that it is not entirely without reason to assume the existence of a ‘China’, ‘Russia’ or ‘India’. I therefore ask the reader to bear with this unavoidable but necessary abstraction.

As for the second caveat, I would like to borrow the words of Hedley Bull. Bull once set out to readers in his seminal article, ‘Order vs. Justice in International Society’, that he had no intention of proposing ‘any private vision of what just

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conduct in world politics would be, nor to embark upon any philosophical analysis of the criteria for recognising it.84 ‘My starting-point,’ wrote Bull, ‘is simply that there are certain ideas or beliefs as to what justice requires in world politics and that demands formulated in the name of these ideas play a large role in the course of events’.85 The same goes for this study.

Substitute the words ‘just’ and ‘justice’ for ‘responsible’ and ‘responsibility’ respectively, and this proviso forwarded by Bull would equally speak to the central motivation behind this research. Dealing with concepts like responsibility or legitimacy inevitably involves, more or less, dealing with the normative realm, understood as what states as international actors ‘ought to do’. While this is by no means a subject to be eschewed, it is an inherently problematic one, riddled by ambiguity on the one hand, and personal subjectivities on the other. It is for this reason that I do not seek to address the concerns of how ‘responsible’ states ought to behave or what the common set of criteria for identifying responsible conduct should be. Making normative or moral judgments are not part of this study’s aims. My starting-point is that there exists a key idea within international life prescribing how power exacts responsibility, and to paraphrase Hedley Bull, that expectations flowing from this idea play a significant role in the course of world events.

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PART I

Conceptualising ‘Responsibility’:
Global Governance and Chinese
Statecraft
CHAPTER ONE

The ‘Responsibility of Power’ and the Politics of Responsibility: A Global Governance Perspective

[N]ation-states find themselves less able to deal with the array of issues – some old, some new – that face them. States and their people, wishing to control their destinies, find they can do so only by working together with others. They must secure their future through commitment to common responsibility and shared effort. [...] We are in a time that demands freshness and innovation in global governance.


With globalisation come unique challenges to the nation-state. When James Rosenau and Ernst-Otto Czempiel’s seminal book *Governance without Government* was published in 1992, Rosenau made the following observation of the (then) current state of world politics:

At a time when hegemons are declining, when boundaries (and the walls that seal them) are disappearing, when the squares of the world’s cities are crowded with citizens challenging authorities, when military alliances are losing their viability – to mention but a few of the myriad changes that are transforming world politics – the prospects for global order and governance have become a transcendent issue.\(^6\)

What was written two decades ago clearly remains pertinent today. The past decade has witnessed the emergence of a plethora of novel threats to states and the

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international community writ large, just as problems with institutionalising ‘responsible’ or ‘good’ governance continue to constrain policy action at the national, regional and global levels. That issues ranging from terrorism, transboundary environmental pollution and climate change, to currency crises and the spread of infectious diseases like the SARS or avian influenza epidemic, now feature prominently in the global agenda – as well as the policy agendas of most states – highlights just how crucial it is to develop an effective system of global governance for dealing with such collective challenges.

Often relegated to the areas of non-traditional and human security, these problems underscore the interdependent nature of our contemporary world. These are issues which rarely, if ever, respect national borders. Nor are they amenable to traditional military solutions. They affect the world as a whole and, as such, cannot be tackled by any state alone, regardless of its material capabilities. The raison d’être behind most of the multilateral, bilateral, and even minilateral arrangements currently in place (e.g. G-20, the BRICS, the ASEAN Plus mechanisms, or the U.S. and China’s ‘constructive partnership’) commonly serve as reflections of these shifts in the trajectory of world politics. It is in this regard that the demands and pressures placed upon states residing in a globalising world prove to be both great and exigent.

Within the past three decades, the international environment has undergone considerable transformations as a result of the processes of globalisation: state and non-state actors now find themselves deeply and inextricably bounded by a web of complex interdependence, with enforced cooperation having become a defining aspect of international political life as states and peoples are increasingly connected through relations of risk and harm. It is this language of both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ interdependence that has come to parallel reinvigorated debates over global governance in the post-Cold War era, with state, non-state and transnational actors – through participation in a host of international institutions and steering mechanisms – assuming the responsibility of managing international affairs amidst conditions of anarchy and emerging non-traditional security challenges.

To illustrate the ubiquity of notions of responsibility in world politics, the aim of this chapter is to unpack the significance of ‘responsibility’ in the management of global affairs. It is divided into four parts. The first section outlines the concept of global governance as a framework for making sense of world politics. The second section then clarifies the key idea of responsibility as used in the study, vis-à-vis existing International Relations scholarship. The next section goes on to explain how the idea of responsibility matters to global governance. In particular, it elucidates the specific notion of the ‘responsibility of power’ as being a key normative idea underpinning governance architecture, together with the fundamental ideas of reciprocity and legitimacy. Following from this, the final section elaborates on processes of normative contestation that undergird the politics of responsibility, focusing on how they contribute to conceptions of political authority and expectations of legitimate action within the international realm.

**Global Governance: a framework for understanding world politics**

The question of how global governance is possible in the absence of an overarching government at the international level remains a fundamentally contentious one. In the words of one scholar, it constitutes ‘one of the most perennial and daunting challenges in world history’.\(^{88}\) As structural realists are inclined to argue, ‘In anarchy, there is no governance.’\(^{89}\) According to Kenneth Waltz, the anarchic nature of the international system creates a recurring situation where states, fearful for their survival, are in a constant struggle for power, leading international relations to become a realm where the logic of Realpolitik prevails.\(^{90}\) State interests are framed primarily in terms of security maximisation, with the pursuit of self-interests at the expense of others amounting to an expected outcome. Within this neorealist schema, there is no place for considerations of mutual gain or shared responsibility. Acting in line with the so-called ‘security motive’,\(^{91}\) however, does not automatically translate into greater security for states. To the contrary, doing so has the potential to exacerbate existing insecurities through the antagonisation of other

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actors, culminating in overlapping security dilemmas. Also, as explained earlier, many of the problems facing the world today exceed the capacity of any one state to handle, and as such, warrant concerted action from the international community. Accordingly, it is necessary to distinguish here between ‘global government’ and global governance. As argued by neoliberal institutionalists, cooperation is as much characteristic of the international system as conflict, with international institutions, together with the rules and norms that underpin them, playing a major role in regulating world affairs. Certainly, the value of a global governance perspective stems from how it appreciates the existence of institutions, systems of rule, and steering mechanisms which collectively work to mitigate the effects of international anarchy.\textsuperscript{92}

Global governance, in essence, signifies a purposive means to organising social life through a system of rule that is based as much on ‘intersubjective meanings as on formally sanctioned constitutions and charters’.\textsuperscript{93} The peculiarity of the international system lies precisely in how it lacks a centralised authority and is instead governed through various loci of authority represented by a myriad of state, non-state and transnational actors. Global governance, in this sense, additionally refers to the sum of socio-political processes involved in creating and strengthening the ‘authoritative capacities of governing agents worldwide’ to manage their common affairs.\textsuperscript{94} It represents, in the words of the Commission of Global Governance,

...a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and co-operative action taken. It includes formal institutions and regimes empowered to enforce compliance,

\textsuperscript{92} For an insightful discussion on these institutions, mechanisms and systems of rules, see James N. Rosenau, ‘Governance in the Twenty-first Century’. \textit{Global Governance} 1 (1995), pp. 13-43. Nevertheless, it deserves note that, at times, a global governance perspective has also been framed as a response to the failures of mainstream IR theories, including neoliberal institutionalism, to account for the rapid transformations occurring in a ‘decentralized’ world. As one observer comments, ‘At the international level ‘global governance’ can be traced to a growing dissatisfaction among students of international relations with...realist and liberal-institutionalist theories...these failed to capture adequately the vast increase, in both numbers and influence, of non-state actors and the implications of technology in an age of globalisation’. Thomas G. Weiss, ‘Governance, Good Governance and Global Governance: Conceptual and Actual Challenges’, \textit{Third World Quarterly} 21:5 (2000), p. 796.


as well as informal arrangements that people and institutions either have agreed to or perceive to be in their interest.\textsuperscript{95}

Historically, the notion of governance can be traced as far back as to the Council of Rome in 382 AD, which had used the term ‘governance’ broadly to denote ‘the command mechanism of a social system and its actions that endeavour to provide security, prosperity, coherence, order and continuity to the system’, arguing that ‘the concept of governance should not be restricted to the national and international systems but should [also] be used in relation to regional, provincial and local governments’.\textsuperscript{96} If one were to look back to the Congress of Vienna or the establishment of the League of Nations, it is possible to further discern variations on the notion of governance at the global level, with a focus on the roles and responsibilities of the Great Powers. It was in 1815 that the European powers successfully codified a diplomatic system which assigned Great Powers with the obligation of maintaining international security and the ‘functioning of orderly relations’ between states.\textsuperscript{97} This cuts to the heart of global governance, specifically the idea that the global commons, together with the challenges and problems that arise in relation to it, should be dealt with collectively by states.

Following the end of the First World War, however, this Great Power-centric understanding of responsibility gradually gave way to a more ‘inclusive’ outlook. While the importance of Great Powers to the success of governing institutions cannot be understated, there is mounting awareness that participation by other actors – from emerging, middle and developing powers to transnational and non-state actors – is now of equal importance. To attain a ‘global civic ethic’\textsuperscript{98} (as propounded in the 1995 Report of the Commission on Global Governance), this requires the concerted efforts


\textsuperscript{98} See Dingwerth and Pattberg, ‘Global Governance as a Perspective on World Politics’, p. 194.
of all members of the international community. As the proceedings of the 2010 Cancun summit on climate change aptly illustrate, emerging powers (epitomised in the BRICS) and the so-called 'Third World' do play significant roles in determining the course of negotiations.

Although the idea behind global governance can be found in political thought throughout the ages, its particular articulation as such constitutes a much more 'modern' invention. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, this marked a critical turning-point in international politics as an international system based on the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union came to an end, substituted instead by developments in collective security, as reflected in the establishment of the Commission on Global Governance in 1992 with the support of then UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.99

It was thus with the post-Cold War power vacuum, where memories of the insecurities of a bipolar world brought into question the ability of states to deliver the basic public goods of order, justice and human welfare,100 that new thinking on how world affairs ought to be managed arose. The result has been the emergence of a unique cast of international actors, coupled by the inception of a host of novel institutions and steering mechanisms. The growth of a global civil society, together with an ascendant global public sphere, underscores this (ongoing) normative transformation of international society. Multilateral and non-governmental organisations, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), the International Labor Organisation (ILO), the UN's International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), or the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), have not only acted as important organisational platforms where norm entrepreneurs come to contest and promote emergent or pre-existing global norms of conduct, but they also assume vital roles in coordinating responses and delegating responsibility to actors to address exigent issues of global concern.101

What this suggests is how these new forms of socio-political organisation are not necessarily directed at – nor do they always originate from – the nation-state. Put alternatively, both endogenous and exogenous factors, emanating from within and

99 This had been preceded a year earlier by the publication of the Stockholm Initiative's inception report entitled 'Common Responsibility in the 1990s: The Stockholm Initiative on Global Security and Governance'.
100 Franceschet, 'Ethics, Politics, and Global Governance', p. 8.
beyond the state, are integral to the dynamic processes of governance and institution-building. This has become especially pronounced with globalisation, as the national, regional and global are brought into closer contact. Interactions between these multilevel processes are, however, far from harmonious, being characterised more by tension and contention. Nowhere is this more evident than at the sites where differing levels of action intersect. As explored in Chapter 3, the case of water governance in the Mekong River Basin is illustrative of the contestation that arises when local interests diverge from national ones, and when state prerogatives are at odds with prevailing international norms.

A global governance perspective, in this regard, proves to be heuristically useful for capturing the interlocking and multilayered complexities of our contemporary world, in which a plethora of forms of social and political organisation coexist, and where the categorical separation of domestic matters from global ones has become difficult to sustain. As elaborated by David Held and Anthony McGrew,

Given the absence of world government, the concept of global governance provides a language for describing the nexus of systems or rule-making, political coordination and problem-solving which transcend states and societies...Theoretically, it is much more than simply a descriptive term: it constitutes a broad analytical approach to addressing the central questions of political life under conditions of globalisation...

When we speak of global governance, it is essential to emphasise that we are not so much referring to a static concept, but rather to ongoing – and oftentimes, contending – processes that are shaping and reshaping the contours of our currently globalising world. A proviso to bear in mind here is that the ‘world wide [sic] process of politically managing globalisation’ still remains ‘in its early stages’, with it being highly questionable as to whether one can feasibly view this process as ever reaching a definitive end.

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102 Broadly defined, globalisation is understood here as referring to ‘processes that potentially encompass the whole globe’, whilst in more specific terms, can be associated with processes of global integration which involve the blurring of economic, cultural and even territorial boundaries. See Aseem Prakash and Jeffrey A. Hart, ‘Globalization and governance: an introduction’, in Prakash and Hart (eds), Globalization and Governance (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 3.
103 Dingwerth and Pattberg, ‘Global Governance as a Perspective on World Politics’, p. 191.
105 Dingwerth and Pattberg, ‘Global Governance as a Perspective on World Politics’, p. 194.
That said, existing understandings on global governance continue to be undercut by a significant omission: that is, an appreciation of how notions of responsibility contribute to forming the socio-political bases for governance. Even though global governance literature recognises the importance of compliance behaviour in international relations, how responsibility features in governing arrangements remains relatively neglected by comparison. Given the amorphous nature of the idea of responsibility, particularly when contrasted with the more 'legalistic' concept of compliance, one can easily see why applying responsibility to the practical questions raised by a global governance perspective can potentially result in incongruities. My contention, however, is that this is not necessarily the case.

**The Idea of Responsibility**

Ideas matter. Not only do they constitute invisible threads that can bring together disparate states and peoples, creating space for shared understandings, but they are also capable of perpetuating differences and misunderstandings. They create the frames of reference that enable us to make sense of this prismatic world. Ideas thereby constitute an integral part of policy debates and discussions, since they are a condition for 'reasoned discourse'. Although the era of the Cold War may have highlighted the realities of power politics, its demise illustrated the potency of ideas in the practice of international relations. What followed was a resurgent interest in the realm of the *idealpolitik*, which can be evinced from the 'constructivist turn' in the study of International Relations. Questions addressing the normative structures underpinning the contemporary international system were given new life, while those pertaining to the role that ideas play in informing state identities and interests were brought to the fore.

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Although it has become somewhat commonplace to acknowledge that ideas do have an impact – whether directly or indirectly – on political outcomes, merely saying so neglects an equally important question of under what conditions do ideas actually matter. Changes in the use of ideas over time also signify changes in existing rules and norms. This is because most of the ideas we see circulating in the international sphere today (e.g. sovereignty, human rights, or the very idea of the nation-state) have, more or less, been integrated into existing norms and rules of the institutions undergirding an ascendant world society. In consequence, while ideas might have 'lasting influence on politics through their incorporation into the terms of political debate', the influence of any set of ideas tends to be 'mediated by the operation of institutions in which the ideas are embedded'.

Political institutions, as a result, act as mediators between ideas and policy outcomes. Once ideas have been institutionalized, having become embedded in rules and norms, their influence will be reflected in the interests and incentives of those involved in the institution. Yet at the same time, it is also the case that the institutionalisation process itself can come to reflect the power differentials of actors involved. As a result, the institutionalisation of an idea can be seen as both reflecting the power of that particular idea as well as the interests of the powerful. It is through the exertion of such influence that ideas come to constitute and constrain policy agendas.

This thesis asserts that the concept of responsibility constitutes a fundamental idea in international life. If the significance of the concept of responsibility was negligible before, this is certainly no longer the case. There is little, if any, doubt that the idea of responsibility – and that of the responsibility of power, more specifically – is one whose time has now come. Ever since the September 11 attacks and the United States' subsequent 'war on terror', the normative language of 'rightful conduct' and 'obligation' has become progressively pronounced, with power having been consistently projected in terms of values, as opposed to interests, in various parts of the world. Indeed, Ned Lebow’s remark that it is ‘impossible to formulate interests intelligently outside of some language of justice’ seems to ring truer now than ever.

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before.¹¹¹ In particular, the notion that power exacts responsibility, especially in the case of great and emerging powers, has gained much currency not only amongst practitioners, but also among students of international relations in recent years. This comes as major powers are being increasingly seen to occupy ‘a privileged position of governance over other states and over the system, legitimated by beliefs about their “right to rule”’¹¹².¹¹³

In the global realm, we tend to see or hear assertions of responsibility being expressed in variegated terms: (1) as indicating a form of action or behaviour; (2) as a constitutive part of an agent’s identity (used in an adjectival sense); (3) as a sentiment (i.e. that someone is sensible or rational); and (4) as designating duty, obligation or accountability. Based on this, it is also possible to make further distinctions between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ responsibility: that is, the appropriation of duty or obligations, or conversely, of accountability, guilt or blame. In international relations, this is achieved through such means as imposing social expectations onto actors, the projection of certain self-images, as well as through the use of common diplomatic practices of shaming, voicing ‘outrage’ or denunciating the actions of certain actors (a case in point here is the international condemnation of North Korea’s firing on the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong in November 2010).

But despite the extensive application of this idea to the realm of international relations, the concept of responsibility itself still remains an understudied one within mainstream IR literature, including English School scholarship, which has yet to produce an in-depth study that ties notions of responsibility with the workings of global governance and international society. This arguably speaks to a broader tendency in IR scholarship to take certain ideas for granted, which consequently points to the need for key ideas and concepts used in the discipline to be critically unpacked. The concept of responsibility constitutes one of these ‘apparently “obvious”’ ideas,¹¹⁴ frequently found floating around in discussions on global affairs, but which have yet to be fully developed conceptually. As such, the task here is to

critically re-evaluate the significance of this idea in international life, so as to arrive at a deeper appreciation of its role in informing the contours of world politics.115

**Interpreting responsibility**

‘Responsibility’ can, in essence, be understood as the notion that there is an obligation, need or imperative for agents to act in a certain way or be accountable for certain behaviour, often in response to particular events and sets of expectations. Being ‘responsive’ presupposes a readiness and willingness to act on what is necessary. Within this socio-political context, ‘responsible’ behaviour thereby denotes purposive action, indicating the need to respond to someone or something, for the sake of someone or some purpose. It is, however, important to note that the substantive content of ‘responsible behaviour’ inevitably varies under different circumstances. This bears similarity to Robert Jackson’s proviso that ‘Responsible choices are not to be confused with perfect choices...[but should be seen as] the best choices in the circumstances, or at least the most defensible choices’.116 One key argument sustained throughout this study is precisely that responsibility does not constitute an absolute principle in the society of states, but is rather an idea contingent upon the various contexts within which conceptions of it are articulated. It tends to be the case that, while the idea of responsibility generally points to the obligation to do something, what that ‘something’ refers to is not always immediately clear. It comes as no surprise then that multiple interpretations have abounded from attempts to define this amorphous concept.

It is imperative that we appreciate these variations in understanding, which tend to fall in line with cultural and historical specificities. Despite scholarly efforts to define responsibility, there remains the problem of these definitions being rooted mainly in Western political traditions, leading to the common complaint that Western-centric understandings are being conflated with ‘international’ ones. In Hedley Bull’s *The Anarchical Society*, for instance, although the focus was on the United States and

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115 It should be noted, however, that pioneering work on the nexus between responsibility (or compliance) and Chinese foreign-policy behaviour by such scholars as Rosemary Foot, Gerald Chan and Ann Kent have touched on this issue, with their studies serving as a useful starting-point for unraveling the analytical complexities of this concept. See Foot, ‘Chinese Power and the Idea of a Responsible State’, pp. 1–19; Chan, *China’s Compliance in Global Affairs*; and Ann Kent, *Beyond Compliance: China, International Organizations, and Global Security* (California: Stanford University Press, 2007).

the Soviet Union, his conception of the special rights and duties of Great Powers was also meant to apply to other states, including China. The presupposition here is that this particular conception of responsibility is one shared intersubjectively among the members of international society, for only then can it influence the actions of the Great Powers in question.

Yet given the cultural heterogeneity of the present international system, whereby cultural distinctiveness – as opposed to conformity – has been prized by non-Western powers like China and India, the intersubjectivity of such conceptions can no longer be perceived as a 'given'. That is to say, the extent to which the idea of responsibility evokes similar understandings among all states with different historical experiences and cultural traditions needs to be critically questioned. On this view, the process of interpreting responsibility would be better perceived as being both a subjective and intersubjective one, where the idea is likely to be understood and expressed variously in accordance with the specific context at hand. What this signifies, in effect, is that even if the idea of responsibility were to constitute a shared principle regulating state behaviour, it is still not immune to the dynamics of change and adaptation.

The idea of responsibility has also been prone to being interpreted as a normative concept, imbued with ethical overtones. But because of its normative connotations, this has led some to deny its place in a world presumably dominated by Realpolitik thinking. Here, there is a need to differentiate between the 'moral' and the 'normative', as understood in IR literature. Although there is a temptation to use the terms interchangeably – and indeed there is a close relationship between the two – they are not completely synonymous. Most moral claims in world affairs will tend to be normative, but not all normative considerations will, at least in theory, be necessarily considered as 'moral' (which is ethically subjective). Realists, in particular, have often cautioned against the unbridled pursuit of 'desirable moral goals' which, it is argued, can potentially risk turning into 'disastrous political results' (that is, a situation whereby a state foregoes its national interests for the sake of perceived moral imperatives dictated by the context at hand). To an extent, the U.S.

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117 Bull's focus on Russia and the U.S. is understandable given the fact that he was writing during the Cold War, when emerging powers like China were not as visible in the conduct of international politics.

‘war on terror’ in Iraq, along with the moralizing rhetoric that underpinned it, could be seen as an illustration of this.\textsuperscript{119} Here, a normative idea is essentially one which integrates a sense of what ‘ought’ to be done under certain circumstances. From this flow sets of expectations, especially with regard to legitimate conduct, that consequently get translated into the rules of engagement that shape relations between states.

Significantly, interpreting responsibility as a normative idea resonates across the various schools of International Relations thought, being particularly prominent in classical realism and the English School. Of note here is how Hans Morgenthau admits to political realism being ‘aware of the moral significance of political action’.\textsuperscript{120} ‘Prudence’ (i.e. weighing the consequences of alternative political decisions), in this regard, constitutes the ‘moral precept’ that should inform decision-making processes, as it compels actors to cultivate an awareness of the consequences of their actions.\textsuperscript{121} ‘Righteous realists’ like Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr and George Kennan understand that ‘responsible power call[s] for statesmanship [sic]’ and that it is exercised when pragmatic choices are made without ignoring the ethical implications of decisions.\textsuperscript{122} Observance of this principle can thereby lead one to refrain from explicitly discounting the significance of ethical norms and values in the conduct of external relations. In the words of Morgenthau,

...[the] admission [of one’s pursuit of power-based interests] is tantamount to flouting openly the universally accepted moral standards of the international community and would thereby put the particular nation in a position where it would be likely to pursue its foreign policy halfheartedly and with a bad conscience.\textsuperscript{123}

Underlying this statement is the presumption that states need to maintain some sense of legitimacy in order to successfully pursue their foreign policy objectives. And to garner legitimacy, the state is obligated to act in a way that meets the

\textsuperscript{119} Some might even point to the racial nationalism of Hitler’s Germany and the subsequent Jewish genocide as another extreme instance of how what is deemed to be ‘good’ or ‘morally justified’ is highly subjective and can have atrocious consequences.


\textsuperscript{121} According to Morgenthau, ‘There can be no political morality without prudence; that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action’. Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, p. 12.

\textsuperscript{122} Rosenthal, Righteous Realists, p. 49.

\textsuperscript{123} Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, p. 95.
expectations of others (i.e. by abiding to certain ‘universally accepted moral standards’ of the community). In effect, what we see here are implicit understandings of responsibility at two levels: first, ‘responsible’ or appropriate behaviour is seen as amounting to a state being compliant with certain standards held by the global community; second, and at a more fundamental level, ‘responsible’ behaviour entails that states should act prudently in a manner that will not harm their interests.

A similar logic pervades the writings of E.H. Carr. According to Carr, a ‘state which does not conform to certain standards of behaviour towards its own citizens and, more particularly, towards foreigners will be branded as ‘uncivilized’. Of importance here is the sense of responsibility tacitly suggested by Carr: that states have an obligation to act in a certain way towards its people and others, should it want to be considered as a ‘civilized’—or legitimate—member of the international community. It is in this respect that responsibility also becomes a source of legitimacy and authority. Being seen as a ‘responsible’ and ‘civilized’ power confers legitimate international status upon the state, which is useful because it reduces the likelihood of a state’s actions (presumably in pursuing its interests), being faced with much resistance from other actors.

For realists like Morgenthau and Carr then, their understanding of ‘responsibility’ remains mired in a statist preoccupation with preserving national interests, to the extent that the latter gains normative value. A state’s responsibility is conceived as being, first and foremost, to its citizens and ultimately to itself. Though classical realism’s narrow interpretation of responsibility has been subject to much contention, there is one valuable insight which their observations undeniably yield: that is, an emphasis on how conceptions of responsibility in the international realm are inevitably political.

This bears resemblance to Max Weber’s notion of there being both an ‘ethic of ultimate ends’ and an ‘ethic of responsibility’ to be found in the conduct of politics.


125 See Carr, The Twenty Years’ Crisis, pp. 95, 101.

126 A similar argument is notably forwarded by Robert Jackson, who observes how the idea of the national interest constitutes a ‘moral idea governing the conduct of statespeople: the idea that the nation and its population are a treasure which they have the responsibility to safeguard in the conduct of their foreign relations’. Jackson, The Global Covenant, p. 21.
The Weberian conception of political responsibility entails the behaviour of actors to be judged along a normative continuum, whereby the degree to which they could be held accountable for their practices, together with the ensuing consequences, varies. These are actors whose ‘actions are their own’ (i.e. they are not simply following orders), but who ‘are not straightforwardly liable for everything they do’. Accordingly, the responsibilities allocated to political agents need to be understood in light of overarching political constraints. And as will soon become apparent, I focus on the notion of the ‘responsibility of power’ precisely because it prevents the discussion from becoming a purely philosophical exercise mired in abstractions. By including considerations of political power, it becomes more grounded in the ‘real’, convoluted nature of global politics and governance. Any attempt to make sense of the idea of responsibility will first need to appreciate its ‘boundedness’ by recognising the inherent imperfections that inevitably occur in actual state practices.

To expect a state’s foreign policy to be totally divorced from its interests is therefore not entirely reasonable. Even in the hypothetical situation of a state behaving out of altruism and ‘good’ intentions, one could still argue that its actions remain ultimately informed by a certain conception of interest – albeit a less ‘inward-looking’ one – to contribute to the collective good for a more secure world. In a similar vein, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1954 that ‘The irony of our situation lies in the fact that we could not be virtuous [in the sense of practicing the virtues which are implicit in meeting our vast world responsibilities] if we are really as innocent as we pretend to be’. Otherwise stated, if states (and decision-makers) were truly innocent, they would not have to make the hard choices that the dictates of ‘responsible power’ currently demand of them. It is possible to talk about ‘responsible power’ in the first place precisely because it is situated within a morally-imperfect political domain, where irresponsible and responsible behaviour co-exist.

There are, however, considerable limitations to the realist insight. Not only does it fail to explicitly recognize the significance of responsibility in international life, but

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127 David Runciman, ‘Moral Responsibility and the Problem of Representing the State’, in Erskine, *Can Institutions have Responsibility?*, p. 44.
130 Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*, p. 64.
it also underplays the social dimensions of this idea. As posited by neoliberal institutionalists like Robert Keohane, cooperation based on the existence of mutual interests and the logic of reciprocity is as likely a scenario as the narrow pursuit of self-interests among states. In a similar vein, one can find both statist conceptions of responsibility as well as sentiments of ‘global’ responsibility being articulated by various actors in international relations. And it is these sentiments of common or collective responsibility which have been better appreciated in the works of the English School.

Unlike the realists, English School scholars have dealt with the question of responsibility in the international domain more explicitly, focusing specifically on the relationship between responsibility and Great Power-often. The works of Hedley Bull and Martin Wight, in particular, are illustrative of the attempt to integrate a conception of ‘Great Power responsibility’ into the social and normative fabric of international society. In a seminal pamphlet, Wight outlines how ‘power politics’ was not to be understood in terms of realpolitik or machtpolitik, but rather as referring to ‘the relations between independent Powers’. Due to the hierarchical nature of the international order originating from the unequal distribution of insecurity amongst powers, this ultimately results in the unequal distribution of responsibility. Great Powers, as such, are obliged to pursue ‘world-wide interests’ and shoulder greater responsibilities precisely because they can afford to do so. In his discussion of the League of Nations, Wight touches on this notion as he explains how part of the League’s purpose was to impose a stronger sense of responsibility onto the Great Powers of the day:

For since Great Powers have wider interests and greater resources than Small Powers, the main duty of dealing with international problems must fall upon them; and it was hoped that they would

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133 As Wight remarks, ‘morality in international politics is not simply a matter of civilized tradition, but is equally the result of security.’ Wight, Power Politics, p. 64.

134 Wight, Power Politics, p. 18.
develop as it has been said from Great Powers into Great Responsibilities.\textsuperscript{135}

It is equally notable how he characterised the prevention of anarchy as a ‘collective responsibility’ to be enforced by the League.\textsuperscript{136} Yet to add to Wight’s insights, Great powers have great responsibilities not only because they are in a relatively more secure position vis-à-vis Small Powers, but arguably because legitimate Great-Power status, along with the influence it carries, has to be earned by the state.\textsuperscript{137} While ‘special duties’ can be imposed by others or self-imposed, ‘special rights’ to act can only be conferred upon an actor by other members of the Society. In Bull’s words,

The concept of a great power has always had normative as well as positive connotations. To say that a state is a great power is to say not merely that it is a member of the club of powers that are in the front rank in terms of military strength, but also that it \textit{regards itself, and is regarded by other members} of the society of states, as having \textit{special rights and duties}.\textsuperscript{138}

Acting responsibly, so as to gain positive recognition from other members of the Society, thus constitutes one means of achieving this legitimacy. As such, the concept of Great Power responsibility is seen to exert regulative power over states in their external conduct, with a Great Power’s ‘freedom to manoeuvre’ being necessarily ‘circumscribed by “responsibility”’.\textsuperscript{139} Although Bull does not provide an explicit definition of the term ‘responsibility’, Great Power responsibility does, so it seems, relate to certain ‘special rights and duties’ of the Great Powers to maintain international order through fundamental social institutions, such as the balance of power, international law and diplomacy, as well as by defining their interests ‘widely enough to encompass the preservation of an international system in which the bulk of member states regard themselves as having a stake’.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{135} Wight, \textit{Power Politics}, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{136} Wight, \textit{Power Politics}, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{137} Having said this, there is still the issue of how domestic pressures (e.g. public opinion), and how a state responds to them, might factor in the granting of ‘responsible power’ status and legitimacy onto the state by other members of the international community – that is, the extent to which domestic political legitimacy can be perceived as being fairly coterminous with international legitimacy.
\textsuperscript{139} Bull, \textit{The Anarchical Society}, p. 222.
\textsuperscript{140} Bull, ‘The great irresponsibles?’, p. 438.
thus refers to a state’s obligation to its own well-being as well as to the collective good.\footnote{Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p. 67.}

As social actors, states cannot escape the ‘binding’ effect that social and political relations have on their behaviour through conceptions of ‘interactional’ responsibilities towards others (i.e. the responsibilities that come with being in social relationships). Expectations are of particular importance in this regard, as they tend to be bound up in the normative language of common obligations to ‘make the world more secure’. And because of this quality, they also become closely linked to the socio-political processes of defining and delegating responsibility. When the United States ‘expects’ China to adhere to international norms and ratify arms conventions, it is tacitly imposing an inherent sense of responsibility onto Beijing by prompting it into taking a particular course of action for a certain reason and purpose.

The social face of responsibility is, perhaps, best summed up by Richard Niebuhr when he proffers his readers the following observation:

> The idea or pattern of responsibility...may summarily and abstractly be defined as the idea of an agent’s action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this is in a continuing community of agents.\footnote{H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 65.}

It needs to be noted, nonetheless, that there are several problems with the English School conception of responsibility as well. First, what is meant by ‘order’ remains unclear. Considering the contextual contingencies of ‘order’, it would not be surprising to find different interpretations of the concept. In Imperial China, for example, even though political order was also conceived of as hierarchical, it differed from Western conceptions in that it was predicated not so much on the maintenance of stable relations between states, but was instead seen as emanating from the conduct of statecraft in keeping with the ‘Mandate of Heaven’ (*tianming*). And with the will of Heaven being synonymous with justice, the Chinese saw justice and order as
intrinsically connected, but with the former ostensibly favoured over the latter in practice.\textsuperscript{143}

Second, Bull provides a brief treatment of the notion of Great Power responsibility only near the end of The Anarchical Society’s chapter on the role of Great Power management in international society, while Wight mentions it simply in passing. As a consequence, the English School’s conception of responsibility remains underdeveloped, as it does not really identify the specific functions of this idea within international society (i.e. is it a norm, rule or value?), nor what it signifies more precisely. The difficulty in categorising the notion of responsibility largely lies in the fact that assertions of responsibility seem to be made in reference to both codified and uncodified norms. Surmising from what Bull has written, it seems to constitute an informal rule that serves as an impetus underlying the primary institution of Great Power management. Even so, this remains, at best, a highly simplified and basic understanding. The extent to which the idea of responsibility potentially impinges on other social institutions and processes of international society, for instance, has been left virtually unexamined.

Third, in view of contemporary developments that have witnessed the gradual corrosion of national boundaries and the emergence of a diverse set of global actors, the state-centric nature of Bull’s understanding of Great Power responsibility becomes markedly problematic.\textsuperscript{144} For one, his conception overlooks the underlying tensions found between a state’s domestic responsibility and its responsibility towards others, epitomised in such newly-emergent ideas as humanitarianism or environmentalism. When Bull talks about the ‘rules of coexistence’ (e.g. state sovereignty and territoriality, the principle of national self-determination, and non-interference),\textsuperscript{145} these are rules that fit more with a world of states rather than the current one where state, transnational and non-state actors inevitably engage one another.

Traditional concepts advocating the ‘sanctity of sovereignty’ or non-interference are now being challenged and renegotiated on the basis of more collective, human-centred considerations, prompting discussions on such issues as

\textsuperscript{143} Whether or not this was the case in the actual practice of Ancient China is still subject to debate. Nonetheless, for one study that looks at the primacy of political order in the process of state formation in Ancient China, see Victoria Tin-bor Hui, War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

\textsuperscript{144} His state-centric bias is, nevertheless, understandable given that he was writing during the Cold War.

\textsuperscript{145} Bull, The Anarchical Society, pp. 68-69, 71.
‘responsible sovereignty’, ‘human security’, and the ‘responsibility to protect’ in an emergent global public sphere. The emphasis here is on the maintenance of ‘world’ – as opposed to ‘international’ – order, where the importance of peoples is highlighted and where the divide between domestic political issues and global ones become progressively blurred. The fact that we have moved beyond a world made up merely of states and Great Powers, and are now arguably part of an emergent world society, raises yet another problem with existing English School scholarship: its ‘Great Power-centrism’. Especially with China’s re-emergence in the international system, an English School framework, as propounded by Bull or Wight, faces major difficulties in explaining the rise of a power that is neither completely ‘great’ nor ‘peripheral’. That Beijing’s elites continue to pursue an ‘in-between’ identity for the People’s Republic – of it being both a ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ state – only adds to the complexity of determining how its responsibilities are then to be conceived vis-à-vis its multiple and overlapping roles in global affairs. It is in view of these ongoing political transformations that a reconsideration of how the idea of responsibility features in international relations is warranted.

How responsibility matters to global governance

Since the post-Napoleonic era, global governance has been conceived largely as a ‘project of reforming the international system so as to prevent violent conflict and war among states’; or otherwise stated, as a means to delimit the material and political power of states. In more recent years, with the emergence of ‘fragmenting countries, troubled economies, fragile polities, and restless publics’, the purpose of global governance has gradually shifted towards the question of how to render the existent, many-layered governance system ‘more effective, more just, and more responsive to the changing international system’. The challenge now facing actors

146 Franceschet, ‘Ethics, Politics, and Global Governance’, p. 4. Indeed, if we were to look to the Preamble of the United Nations Charter, drafted following the end of the Second World War, it begins with the following proclamation: ‘We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind...’


— especially states, being those with the greatest capacity to act — is how to best cope with these ‘unfamiliar’ normative problems that have ‘arisen in the widening space of the domestic-foreign Frontier’, characterised by centralised power and decentralised authority.\textsuperscript{149} But whilst states cannot be reasonably expected to be able to resolve every issue, they are tasked with the duty to respond to such matters of collective concern. This has effectively placed pressure on them to renegotiate their interests vis-à-vis growing expectations for them to carry greater ‘civic responsibilities’\textsuperscript{150} to both their respective domestic societies as well as the international community. Shared interests, as such, come with shared responsibilities.

\textbf{The Responsibility of Power}\textsuperscript{151}

Just as it is not possible to take power out of governance, one cannot divorce responsibility from power. Power constitutes a key constituent of responsible agency and is, by extension, central to processes of institutionalising ‘responsible governance’ in the international realm. Historically, the notion that power necessarily exacts responsibility has enjoyed much resonance in social and political thought. In 1908, Theodore Roosevelt reportedly made the following comment in a letter: ‘I believe in power; but I believe that responsibility should go with power.’\textsuperscript{152} One of his later successors, Franklin Roosevelt, would also make a similar remark in his 1945 State of the Union address, noting how ‘In a democratic world, as in a democratic Nation, power must be linked with responsibility’.\textsuperscript{153} Alfred Zimmern, in articulating his vision of the post-war order following the destructive First World War, emphasised not only how the Great Powers should become the ‘Great Responsibilities’ (as opposed to merely being ‘Great Indispensables’),\textsuperscript{154} but equally the necessity of instituting ‘responsibility politics’, a concept which had presumably served as the basis for the Covenant of the League of Nations. Zimmern’s memorable words are worth quoting here, the Covenant ‘presupposes a transformation of Power-politics into Responsibility-politics, or, at the very least, a sincere and consistent effort on the

\textsuperscript{149} Rosenau, \textit{Along the Domestic-Foreign Frontier}, p. 175.
\textsuperscript{150} Rosenau, \textit{Along the Domestic-Foreign Frontier}, p. 175.
\textsuperscript{151} For the sake of clarity, it needs to be noted that references to ‘responsibility’ in this thesis are made with the specific idea of the responsibility of power in mind, unless otherwise stated.
\textsuperscript{153} Henry Steele Commager (ed.), \textit{Living Ideas in America} (Harper & Brothers, 1951), p. 703.
part of the Great Powers to begin to face the innumerable tasks of adjustment which such a transformation would carry with it'.

Ever since its inception after the end of the Second World War, the United Nations has continued to carry on this liberal tradition, having as its underlying principle the idea that 'international responsibility must be commensurate with national power'. In more concrete terms, the responsibility of great power has been enshrined in Chapter VII and, more specifically, Article 24 of the UN Charter, where the authority and 'special' obligation to safeguard international peace and security is deemed to lie primarily with the 'Big Five' of the Security Council.

If one were to look even further back into Western political thought to the ancient Greeks, it is worth mentioning how Socrates' notion of 'rule worthy of might'

155 This transition from 'Power-politics' to 'Responsibility-politics' has generally been understood in terms of a shift from conflict to international cooperation. Zimmern also went on to observe how such a transformation further involved 'the inauguration of a real Society of States in place of the anti-social traditions and policies of the pre-war era. And it tacitly admits that, failing the adoption of such a new attitude, the new machinery not only cannot by itself bring about the passing of Power-politics, but may even provide a new and more sensational and even dangerous arena for its exercise'. Zimmern, The League of Nations, p. 291 [emphasis added].

At the crux of Zimmern's perspective on international relations was the (idealist) assumption that there was nothing inherent in the international system that vindicated what he referred to as the 'wicked theory of the mutual incompatibility of nations' (as advocated by the realists at the time) — that is, the notion that there is necessarily a natural conflict of interests between states (see Zimmern, 'The Future of Civilization', p. 226; see also Ian Clark, Reform and Resistance in the International Order (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 35). Power politics, to Zimmern, was not an inevitable condition of world politics; if anything, it was the 'needs of [moral] progress' that would prove to be so (see Hedley Bull, 'The Theory of International Politics 1919-1969', in Brian Porter (ed.), The Aberystwyth Papers: International Politics 1919-1969 (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 35).

It is, moreover, interesting to note that in his book, The League of Nations and the Rule of Law, Zimmern further identified 'five strands' (i.e. 'elements') prevalent in the Covenant, which included one on the establishment of an 'improved and enlarged Concert of the Powers, using the method of regular Conference' (that is, an improved version of the Concert of Europe) and another on the 'Hue and Cry' principle — seen by Zimmern to be a 'guarantee of peace' — that required all states to share 'in the task of ensuring peace and restraining resort to violence'. This was phrased in terms of a 'universal concern', with the act of war consequently perceived as amounting to a 'crime against the world community'. (That said, Zimmern was under no illusion as to the considerable practical flaws and limitations of the League's Covenant, which became all the more apparent following the League's inability to forestall neither the Manchurian crisis, nor the Abyssinian crisis.)


156 Jackson, The Global Covenant, p. 18.

was founded upon Xenophon’s proposition that the ability to rule must depend above all on one’s ability to convince others that one is worthy of ruling. How this was to be achieved proves to be a matter of debate, though what is indisputable is how these notions convey the sense that power is immanently bounded by normative expectations of its proper use and necessary purpose. In the works of Plato and Aristotle, sentiments of responsibility or ‘purpose’ tend to be juxtaposed with the rudimentary realities of power.158 Plato would talk about the inseparable union of power and purpose, even going as far as to propose the notion that ‘moral’ purpose constitutes the purpose that is a necessary ingredient of power.159 His conception of moral purpose was further linked to a particular conception of ‘the good’ as the ‘juncture of real self-interest, knowledge, justice, and honor’.160 Power thus existed ‘only in the realization of the good’.161

This tradition of thought on the relationship between power and responsibility is not unique to the West.162 Patterns of authority in Northeast and Southeast Asia speak to this fact. Although a distinction can be made between Confucian ideals in Northeast Asian societies and altered forms of Hinduism mixed with Brahmanism in local understandings of authority within Southeast Asian societies, there still remain important similarities. Significantly, the structure of power relations is generally associated with an hierarchic conception of actors’ roles and responsibilities. In the case of China, this was embodied in the historical notion of there being a ‘Son of Heaven’ (tianzi), whose authority and legitimacy emanated from the ‘Mandate of Heaven’ (tianming).163 In the ancient Southeast Asian cultures of Angkor, Ayutthaya or Srivijaya, the ideal of rulership was attached to the existence of a god-king, whose power was deemed sacred with the purpose of upholding the cosmic order of things. This worldview was also extended to individuals in society. As Lucian Pye observes, ‘Power as ritual endured in large part because it was harmonized with a view of the

162 The historic traditions of such thought in a non-Western, specifically Chinese, context are explored in greater depth in Chapter 2.
163 The Chinese case is elaborated upon in greater detail later in Chapter 2.
social order in which every person had his or her ordained role.\textsuperscript{164} And with these 'ordained' roles came certain responsibilities that the individual had to others, to his or her incumbent ruler, and to society and the social order.

Being based on political relations of power, such responsibilities can flow either from the ‘top-down’ or from the ‘bottom-up’. The responsibilities one had to one’s superiors in status, for example, is illustrated in such Confucian ideals as embodied in the notion of the Three Bonds and Five Relationships, whilst the responsibilities one had to one’s subordinates within the hierarchic order is exemplified through the practice of paternalistic authority, as was the case in ancient Sukhothai society, where the king had the duty to act as a ‘father’ to his people. Even today, variations of this hierarchical conception of power – and the responsibilities that come with it – persist in East Asian societies. In Southeast Asia, it has become institutionalised in patron-client relationships within businesses and government bureaucracies, whereas in a country like Japan, the observance of reciprocal on-giri (恩義理) ties – that is, personal relationships of unspoken obligations (giri) based on sentiments of indebtedness (on) – remain central to maintaining good social relations today.

These articulations on the ‘responsibility of power’ essentially point to what the political philosopher Leonard Krieger has referred to as the ‘real problem of power’. According to Krieger, this problem is not a ‘simple conflict between power and ethics’ but fundamentally concerns the question of how to meaningfully relate power to ethics. The idea of the responsibility of power provides us with a way into unravelling this problem, as it constitutes a normative idea which reconciles the two main features of political life. Just by nature of the term itself, it already preconditions us to consider the notion of responsibility in tandem with that of power. So how does one relate the language of power to the language of responsibility?

I should note here that by ‘power’, I am not referring to material capabilities or force per se, but rather to the concept of political power. Having its etymological roots in the Anglo-Norman French poeir that stems from the Latin posse, meaning ‘to be able’, power can be understood to signify not only an act with certain consequences, but also ‘the capacity for such acts and effects’.\textsuperscript{165} This, however,


raises a problem: when power is thought of in terms of capacity, there is a proclivity, especially in IR literature, to view it only in terms of the instrumental ability of an actor to ‘exert control’ over others – a perspective which also (unnecessarily) attaches negative connotations to the use of power. Needless to say, there is a need to go beyond such narrow interpretations.

As one influential scholar of International Relations has noted, ‘there is nothing inherently evil in political power’. In fact, I posit that the recognition of capacity – or potentiality – as a quality of political power is significant, not least because it underscores how the exercise of power necessarily incorporates a certain normative purpose for doing so. Power, in this regard, constitutes a means, rather than merely an end in itself. It is through the possession of power that actors gain the capacity to act politically, as well as the right to act socially. Here, a conceptual shift away from a sole emphasis upon the capacity of an empowered actor to an equal emphasis upon the purported outcomes, whether intended or unintended, of their actions, is required for a more nuanced understanding of what political power denotes.

It is precisely in this respect that the idea of responsibility – whose etymology can be traced back to the Latin respondeo, meaning ‘to respond’ – emerges as being especially significant. The act of providing a response to someone or something first entails the ability to do so; it also involves a consideration of both the purposes and consequences of such responses. It follows that in asking whether power is being exercised responsibly or irresponsibly, there is a need to ‘ascertain whether the appropriate judgement of any act of power is upon its responsibility or irresponsibility in view of an acknowledged end or upon the fitness [i.e. suitability] of a particular kind of responsible power to a particular situation’. Power, as such, comes necessarily bounded with the burden of responsibility.

To think about the responsibility of power is, therefore, not to simply refer to the capacity to act, but equally to the legitimacy of that act, as based on considerations of an actor’s rights and interests, together with the purpose and effects of its actions. Whilst power endows states – or in this case, China – with the capacity

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166 Zimmern, The League of Nations, p. 83. Notably, Zimmern also argued that, by extension, there is equally nothing inherently ‘evil’ in an ‘international system the constituent units of which are “Powers”’. This is based on a rather ‘realist’ ontology of human nature, whereby he posits that ‘Human activities, whether international or domestic, can never be organised or controlled by purely spiritual agencies’.


to respond, whether it be to the actions of another actor or to pressing global issues, responsibility likewise fulfils the purposive nature of power, serving to delineate the parameters of 'appropriate' political activity and acting as a normative restraint. Accordingly, responsible behaviour refers to political actions that have been socially endorsed and deemed legitimate in relation to both a 'logic of appropriateness' based on conceptions of what ought to be done and a 'logic of consequences'. Role expectations, in particular, are often found to channel this dynamic relationship, urging actors to exercise power for socially-sanctioned purposes (obligation) and to be answerable for the consequences of their actions (accountability). The following diagram expresses, albeit in simplification, the interconnectedness of these variables.

Figure 1. The power-responsibility nexus

In light of these observations, the idea of the responsibility of power proves to be analytically useful for three main reasons. First, as elucidated above, it speaks directly to the political and social dimensions of responsibility. It recognises the ubiquity of power in political life and acknowledges that any understanding of responsibility within the political sphere cannot be effectively divorced from power considerations. But neither can it be separated from ideational considerations of perception and recognition – both of which constitute inherently politicised processes. It is only within the context of socially-embedded power relations that assertions of responsibility gain significance and political resonance. This complements the study’s contention that a 'politics of responsibility' (discussed later on) fundamentally underlies the conduct of international relations and, more specifically, China's engagement with global governance.
Second, the idea of the responsibility of power is flexible enough to account for the various types of states prevalent in the international system today. Unlike the notion of the ‘special responsibilities’ of Great Power, the responsibility of power is conceptualised in broader terms. It can be understood to apply not only to Great Powers, but can also relate to the roles and responsibilities of emerging powers like China, whose present identity is problematically situated between that of a major global power and that of a developing state. It opens up space for us to consider how, more generally, variations in power and status come to be reflected in variations on how responsibility is understood. Every global actor bears the mantle of responsibility; it is more the case that the substantive nature of their respective responsibilities will not always be uniform, but more varied. As such, it is arguably not a matter of there being certain ‘special’ responsibilities per se, but rather of there being multiple conceptions of responsibility that correspond to an actor’s role conceptions, its presumed capacity to act, and the expectations placed upon it.

Third, in view of its conceptual flexibility, the responsibility of power is also capable of subsuming the many renditions of responsibility found within the international sphere into one parsimonious, albeit prismatic, concept: from historical, retrospective and causal understandings of responsibility, to interactional, prospective and more legalistic conceptions of the idea. But perhaps more importantly, it enables us to transcend the conventionally imposed distinction between state responsibility and international responsibility, allowing for both inward- and outward-looking interpretations of an actor’s obligations. This, of course, better fits with the notion of global governance, which is frequently described as a ‘two-level game’ where the national and the global meet.

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169 Retrospective responsibility is concerned with ex post facto questions on how an actor behaved in a certain situation, why it acted the way it did, and how its subsequent practices then exact accountability and specific (historical) responsibilities. Such retrospective conceptions of responsibility offer a judgment of ‘a particular event or set of circumstances for which the agent’s acts of commission or omission are such that the agent is deemed deserving of praise or blame’. Causal responsibility, on the other hand, focuses on the consequences of an actor’s behaviour, looking at whether they constitute sufficiently ‘responsible’ outcomes that can justify the actor’s prior actions. Legalistic conceptions of responsibility refer to issues to do with compliance and legal liabilities (e.g. legal obligations for a state to account for the effects of transboundary environmental harm, which originate from within its territory, on a neighbouring state), whereas prospective conceptions of responsibility involve ex ante assessments of what tasks an actor should perform within given circumstances, as pertaining to a particular logic of appropriateness. As Erskine explains, ‘claims to prospective responsibility imply that the agent to whom a duty is being assigned is a legitimate object of moral evaluation at some future point with regard to the degree to which this duty is fulfilled or abrogated’. Erskine, ‘Introduction: Making Sense of ‘Responsibility’, p. 8.
A Triptych of Global Governance

As referred to earlier, responsibility matters to global governance as both a fundamental normative idea that undergirds extant governance arrangements, and one which works to constitute and regulate the practices of actors through processes of normative contestation. This closely corresponds to Ian Clark’s observation that the notion of obligation ‘lies at the heart of international society’, 170 with the latter imposing certain moral, psychological and legal obligations upon its members. 171 If one were to look at the United Nations’ Millennium Declaration, for instance, the exaction of ‘responsibility’ from states emerges as a unifying thread throughout the document, as the following passage lucidly conveys:

[Under the heading of ‘Values and Principles’] We recognize that, in addition to our separate responsibilities to our individual societies, we have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level. As leaders we have a duty therefore to all the world’s people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs. 172

While the 1990s spoke of ‘our global neighbourhood’, the twenty-first century has seen a shift towards the language of ‘our shared responsibility’ occurring within an embryonic global public sphere. 173 Debates over the management of the world’s affairs inevitably come with a certain preconception of the ends which global actors are obligated to achieve.

Some scholars have, however, argued that such expectations eventually lead to a ‘responsibility paradox’, 174 a situation where an actor is expected to behave

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172 See ‘United Nations Millennium Declaration’.
‘autonomously’ in fulfilling certain responsibilities, yet its capacity to act is constrained by those very duties and obligations.\textsuperscript{175} This notion evidently speaks to the bigger problem of agency within the social – or international – realm, where ‘intentionality’ is checked by the frequent occurrence of unintended outcomes, and where the exercise of ‘free will’ by international actors is circumscribed by the material and ideational structures of the international system. But rather than viewing this as a ‘paradox’, I would contend that this situation is better conceived in terms of the dynamic of mutual constitution: that is, where agents necessarily act within social constraints, as defined by prevailing normative expectations, but where their practices also come to recursively constitute and perpetuate these expectations and constraints.\textsuperscript{176}

More importantly, what this directs our attention to is the inherent regulative and constitutive ‘power’ of responsibility. Just as the concept of global governance was originally devised to constrain the growing power of the state and harness it for the common good, so does the idea of responsibility exert influence over how states wield that power. Characterised by interlocking political relations of authority, the realm of global governance is perpetuated by social expectations and the corresponding bonds of obligation between actors. Participating in governance institutions demonstrates a willingness on the part of the actor to be bound by the norms and values that make up governance architecture.\textsuperscript{177} And undergirding these norms and values one finds the idea of responsibility, which leads actors to become bounded socially in the first place due to a sense of necessary obligation. It is through the expression of expectations and commitments that notions of responsibility find their articulation in the public domain. Social expectations are particularly important here, as they compel actors into behaving in a certain manner for a certain purpose. For institutions, this involves dictating the extent of their political mandates, whereas

\textsuperscript{175} The notion of ‘responsibility paradox’ was originally applied to public administrative governance and ethics. For an in-depth discussion of this paradox, see Michael Harmon, Responsibility as Paradox: A Critique of Rational Discourse on Government (California: Sage Publications, 1995); and for a critique of Harmon’s argument, see Terry L. Cooper, ‘The Paradox of Responsibility: An Enigma’, Public Administration Review 56:6 (1996), pp. 599-604.


\textsuperscript{177} See Clark, Legitimacy in International Society, p. 24.
in the case of states, incentivising them to take a particular course of action rests on the (re)negotiation of their identities and corresponding interests.

Consequently, notions of responsibility are integral to both an actor’s socially binding relationships with others, as well as the normative underpinnings of governance mechanisms within the broader institutional architecture. Indeed, where the term responsibility is mentioned in global discourses, it is often used in conjunction with the notion that there exists ‘standards of conduct’ against which the performances of international actors can be judged. To quote Paul Schroeder, who was commenting on the relative stability of the post-1815 era, such stability was in large part due to the ‘acceptance of mutual rules and restraints, common responsibility to certain standards of conduct’.\(^{178}\) By establishing the basic rules of conduct through the prescription or proscription of certain behaviours, the regulative role of responsibility also becomes notably infused with an inherent prescriptive and evaluative function. The onus of responsibility becomes tied to the corollary principles of accountability, reciprocity, and legitimacy, which together work to constrain the freedom to manoeuvre of actors.

Aside from the regulatory function of responsibility, this idea contains an equally important constitutive – or enabling – element, whereby it designates the parameters of agential action. In terms of the implementation of governance measures, the idea of responsibility belongs to the ‘first-order’ category of principles informing practice, as opposed to ‘second-order’ activities that involve such second-order norms and rules as the non-use of force or non-intervention. The distinction is essentially based on those ideas which are fundamentally necessary to the existence of a society of states (or in this case, an emergent world society) – and by implication global governance – and ‘what its practices subsequently permit’.\(^{179}\) Rather than trying to understand responsibility in a similar vein to compliance, for instance, and characterise it as a somewhat codified rule in international life, it is better seen as a fundamental idea which underpins compliance.

The specific conception of ‘shared responsibility’ is regularly used to convey a common understanding that action needs to be taken in order to ensure a more secure world. As suggested by one passage in the UN Millennium Declaration,


\(^{179}\) Clark, *Legitimacy in International Society*, pp. 24-25.
'Responsibility for managing worldwide economic and social development, as well as threats to international peace and security, must be shared among the nations of the world and should be exercised multilaterally'.

In this respect, responsibility effectively serves as the basis for 'building institutions of common understanding' and enables 'practices supported by sovereign entities below the level of world government'.

Being a first-order concept, it constitutes the very norms and values that underpin governance at the global level, as is evident from the animated policy and scholarly debates over the 'ethics of responsible governance'.

This feeds into Messner and Nuscheler's view that a global rule of law, coupled with a 'global ethic', are the prerequisites for any functioning global governance system. This system is, in turn, defined in terms of 'the creation of networks, from the local to the global level, based on a shared problem-solving orientation, a fair balance of interests and a workable canon of shared norms and values as a basis for institutional structures for the handling of problems and conflicts'.

In this respect, responsibility comes together with the interrelated principles of reciprocity and legitimacy to form a 'triptych' of global governance, with each constituting a constitutive concept that fundamentally underpins the normative bases of governance. These are concepts which inform the implicit and explicit norms, rules and principles that make up international institutions, and which can, by extension, impinge upon actors' identities, expectations, interests, and actions. The principle of reciprocity, according to Robert Keohane, is central to international cooperation (especially trade negotiations), as it governs the processes of institutional rule-making and regulates state conduct in relation to institutions. Reciprocity is generally understood to refer to a form of social exchange, involving 'mutual concessions within the context of shared commitments and values', with multilateralism — along with the implementation of international treaties and conventions (e.g.

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181 Wapner, 'Governance in Global Civil Society', p. 82.


185 Multilateralism here is conceived as cooperation between three or more parties based on reciprocally, binding rules of conduct.
agreements on extradition and mutual concessions in tariff rates)—being practical examples that underscore its significance in the conduct of global affairs.

But while this principle can take the form of technical *quid pro quo* exchanges (specific reciprocity), it also has deeper normative roots in international society. Of interest here is the potential for ‘norms of obligation’ to become a form of inter-state relations based upon the principle of ‘diffuse reciprocity’. In terms of contemporary global governance, it is this latter understanding of reciprocity that becomes especially important. What this notion essentially alludes to is the deeply social quality of inter-state relations and the corresponding imperative for state actors to conform to existent rules of engagement or ‘generally accepted standards of behavior’. The dynamics of reciprocity are, in effect, manifest not only in concrete institutional outcomes. They can also be observed, more fundamentally, at the level of institution-building and institutionalisation through norms of obligation and broader accompanying conceptions of responsibility, which in turn work to constitute the wider processes of global governance. As such, the idea and practice of reciprocity in international relations comes to be reflected not only in issue-specific, international regimes, but equally in the constitutional structure and fundamental institutions of the Society, as evinced from the practice of mutual recognition of sovereign statehood or the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* found in diplomacy and international law.

International legitimacy, on the other hand, constitutes a concept that bears considerable resemblance to responsibility in that it is both contextually contingent and an intrinsically social idea. It is understood as being comprised of the ‘norms of a specific cultural system at any given time’, with such norms being largely defined in terms of rightful membership in the society of states and rightful conduct— or more broadly, the right to rule or to govern. The right to govern or act, in turn, depends on prior intersubjective recognition of that right. As posited by Christian Reus-Smit,

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186 See Keohane, ‘Reciprocity in International Relations’, p. 4.
187 Keohane, ‘Reciprocity in International Relations’, p. 4
‘An actor can be said to command legitimacy...when its decisions and actions (and I would contend identities and interests) are socially sanctioned’.  

This requirement of social sanction brings to the fore the recurring issue of the relationship between power and ethics. Similar to discussions about responsibility, the notion of legitimacy also tends to be discussed in relation to power in existing IR scholarship. Due to this intrinsic relationship between the two, legitimacy is often misconstrued as merely being a veil for power. Yet, although power can influence the substance of legitimacy (i.e. its principles), it is unlikely that it would emerge from the process unaffected or unchanged as well. Being a deeply social concept, which gains meaning only within the context of political interaction, power is inevitably bound by social norms and expectations. The effectual exercise of power relies on agents to provide normative justifications to render it socially ‘appropriate’ or acceptable. Indeed, not only would the unbridled use of power prove unpalatable to most, but it would also be ultimately untenable. As the U.S.’s unilateral intervention in Iraq demonstrated, ‘might doesn’t make right’: legitimacy does. Here, the idea of legitimacy becomes a locus of ‘normative power’ (i.e. authority), imbuing agents with the right to act and compelling them to do so in a responsible manner. Indeed, this nexus between responsibility and legitimacy is most evident during periods of international ‘legitimacy crises’. When there is a lack of actors who exercise the right to govern, questions of legitimacy immediately become linked to questions of ascribing responsibility to agents (i.e. whose responsibility is it to rule?). In Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s words, ‘The strongest man is never strong enough to be master all the time, unless he transforms force into right and obedience into duty’.  

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193 According to Wight, ‘The fundamental problem of politics is the justification of power...Power.....must be justified by reference to some source outside or beyond itself, and thus be transformed into “authority”’. Wight, International Theory, p. 99.
194 Crises of legitimacy occur when the ‘level of social recognition’ of an agent’s identity, interests, values, or practices as rightful and proper ‘declines to the point where the actor or institution must either adapt (by reconstituting the social bases of its legitimacy, or by investing more heavily in material practices of coercion or bribery) or face disempowerment’. Reus-Smit, ‘International Crises of Legitimacy’, p. 158.
Figure 2. The triptych of global governance

Of significance here is how these three concepts of *reciprocity, responsibility* and *legitimacy* effectively constitute the crux of global governance. Not only are they mutually reinforcing and self-perpetuating, but they also underlie cooperative behaviour seen today, being especially pervasive in institutional settings. In global governance, we can discern between reciprocity as setting the requirement for actors to act in a certain way in response to something; responsibility as adding ‘purpose’ to this requirement, thereby turning it into a *need* to act or govern, whilst legitimacy – or rather, the process of legitimation – renders this ‘need’ into a *right* to act or govern through the normative mechanisms of social sanction (i.e. by reference to particular norms and values). Indeed, the notion that actors have shared responsibilities serves as the basis for conceptions of ‘shared rights’ in the collective management of world affairs. And as shown in the later chapters of this study, these shared rights and responsibilities are particularly relevant to ongoing debates on how to best govern nature and the environment as a common public good.

Equally important, moreover, is the fact that this triptych of global governance provides international actors with a frame of reference for political action. Taken together, the ideas of responsibility, reciprocity and legitimacy contribute to shaping the rules of conduct and terms of engagement in the international political sphere, thereby laying the groundwork for the development of shared norms and values, as
well as common expectations, among the heterogeneous members of an emergent world society.

The Politics of Responsibility

Responsibility plays a constitutive role not only at the level of institution-building or institutionalisation, but also at the level of the state, notably through processes of identity-building. Social expectations – whether self-imposed or externally imposed – feed directly into actors’ identities which are constructed through social interaction and ultimately bounded by recognition. For though it is certainly possible for a state to declare itself as responsible, this would be meaningless without some sort of acknowledgement from others. Such recognition can be both positive and negative – that is, it could result either in acceptance and endorsement of the self-image, or contestation and disagreement over it. Only once some form of recognition has been made will an actor’s identity then come to exercise a greater influence on how it subsequently conceives of its interests and how to behave.

Apart from expectations, being identified as a responsible power also comes with a certain set of values and political interests. Should an actor fail to fulfil these, they will likely be faced with a volley of criticisms or sanctions, or may even be ostracized from the rest of the international community. The case of ‘failed’ or ‘pariah’ states is illustrative of this, though the admonitions levelled at China following its crackdown on the Tibetan protests in March 2008 also constitutes yet another example. China’s ratification of a number of major human rights instruments, including the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1988) or the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (2001), makes it all the more difficult for Beijing to evade international censure on its failure to attune its practices to existing human rights norms, given that it has already enmeshed itself in such language by officially subscribing to the norms and values in question. In this light, responsible behaviour calls for states to deeply embed themselves in the social fabric of international life, and as such, renders their actions susceptible to external scrutiny.

How the identity of ‘responsible power’ is defined is thus of primary importance, since it will determine how actors come to publicly justify their priorities and legitimize their practices. Political rhetoric and discourses are essential to these
processes of definition, identity-building and recognition, though it is important to
bear in mind that the idea of responsibility is not simply a social artefact, serving only
a declaratory function for states. In the international political realm, the articulation of
responsibility (i.e. ‘responsibility claims’) effectively amounts to a communicative
form of action, otherwise known as a politicised speech act. And so, to think about
responsibility is not to just think about policy statements or foreign policy rhetoric,
but is also to reflect on the underlying dynamics involved in constructing such
discourses, in fashioning the rules of engagement, in determining what interests are to
be pursued, and in the actual demonstration of responsible behaviour.

Not only are these congruent with broader governance questions of who rules,
in whose interests, by what mechanisms and for what purpose,¹⁹⁶ but as shown in the
next section, the declaratory processes engendered from the practical application of
notions of responsibility are also significant for what they tell us about the ‘politics of
responsibility’ – that is, how state actions and interactions come to be informed by the
socio-political processes of defining, designating and demonstrating responsibility. It
is in this sense that the responsibility of power gains an added dimension, referring to
both the responsible exercise of power as well as the power relations that undergird
practices of normative contestation.

Locating normative contestation in global governance

Political processes are as important as the outcomes to which they give rise. A key
contention of this study is that the political and social import of any understanding of
responsibility rests, in large part, on processes of normative contestation occurring
within the international realm. Conceptions of responsibility, along with their
accompanying norms and discourses, are rarely articulated in a normative vacuum.
Rather, the political sphere within which they emerge is likely to be permeated by
pre-existing ideas and varying perspectives. In making responsibility claims, actors
are therefore compelled into engaging with extant operative norms and knowledge
structures. That is to say, their claims can only gain legitimacy if they come to be
recognised as such by others, or in broader terms, if they resonate with the ideational
structures that undergird prevailing systems of global governance.

¹⁹⁶ Held and McGrew, Governing Globalisation, p. 8 [emphases added].
Processes of contestation are, in effect, characterised by agents seeking to justify their identities, interests, values, or institutional designs (often in relation to others), or alternatively, by those seeking to ascribe certain roles, norms or values to other actors. From this we witness the renegotiation and reconstitution of the political bases of responsibility within given socio-cultural and historical contexts. Manifest in the appropriation of praise or blame, an evaluative component also tends to be integrated into these processes, as actors’ practices are assessed in light of contending normative claims. On this view, it becomes a task of the diverse actors operating within this contested space to promote their respective norms and values, to the extent that these become intersubjectively shared by the rest of the global community. Possible outcomes can range from the effectuation of positive social and political change (should these ‘new’ norms become generally accepted), to the instigation of disagreements and even disputes (should they come into conflict with pre-existing ideas). It is these very processes of normative contestation that underlie the politics of responsibility elucidated below.

Figure 3. Normative contestation and the politics of responsibility
Defining responsibility

As stressed throughout the chapter, conceptions of responsibility can be multifarious, which often renders its normative content difficult to ascertain definitively. Due to its fluid and adaptable nature, specifying the substance of responsibility cannot be achieved in isolation from the context within which the idea is situated. By the same token, interpretations of responsibility also depend considerably on how the concept is apportioned and consequently acted upon by actors. Social and political conditions matter here as they influence how actors come to articulate notions of responsibility by informing the purpose of 'responsible' behaviour (against which the conduct of actors can further be judged). In particular, how an actor's duties and obligations are perceived rests largely with the issue being raised. With respect to the issue-area of humanitarian assistance, for example, the primary obligation of states is frequently framed as being to peoples in need, with the purpose of political action being to improve human security. This imperative is commonly voiced in terms of the responsibility to protect. Yet as regards the problem of climate change, we tend to refer more to the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities', where the focus is not simply on human security but equally on environmental sustainability. Although both conceptions fundamentally hark back to notion of there being an obligation to act for the sake of a given purpose, the specific nature of this obligation is subject to variation on a case-by-case basis.

For this reason, the idea of responsibility cannot be treated as if it were comprised of a set of absolute criteria or principles, detached from time and place. Different periods will be invariably animated by a different cast of actors, whose actions are likely to underlie varying interpretations of responsibility. In the period following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, for example, the European Great Powers were the major actors, even though their roles had yet to be formally institutionalised. Their concerns centred primarily on the maximisation of national interests and material power, with any sense of responsibility being conceived either in statist terms or in terms of international stability. Needless to say, such a view stands somewhat at odds with the operative norms and political values touted today, which have come to place greater importance (at least in rhetoric, if not always in practice) on the pursuit of collective interests and the creation of a more 'egalitarian' international society.
In like fashion, the degree of urgency of a situation can also impinge on how responsibility comes to be conceived. For crisis situations, such as the onset of a natural disaster, the obligations placed on governments would be exigent, as they are expected to provide immediate and competent responses. Failure on the part of the Burmese government to relieve the suffering of disaster-stricken communities in the wake of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, for instance, became a subject of much international outcry (still heard years later), as the regime’s legitimacy was seriously called into question. A similar (though not as extreme) scenario also surfaced with the Bush administration’s delayed and inadequate response to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that devastated New Orleans in August 2005. In essence, what can be surmised from these examples is that the more urgent the matter, the stronger the sentiment or expectation of responsibility.

Another important aspect of defining responsibility involves the identification of what norms and values should inhere to this concept and, more broadly, to relevant governing institutions. Needless to say, this constitutes yet another contentious process, as questions surrounding humanitarian intervention commonly reveal. Should humanitarianism come before the deeply embedded principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention? Would intervening in another country’s affairs for humanitarian purposes constitute a responsible course of action? The international response to Libya’s mass uprisings serves as an apt manifestation of such normative dilemmas, with ongoing debates on the issue generally focused on the perennial question of ‘values versus interests’ in foreign policy.\(^{197}\) What these policy and scholarly debates effectively underscore is how a single, common set of principles (i.e. those based on humanitarianism and conceptions of ‘common security’\(^ {198}\)) cannot

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\(^{197}\) I would, however, contend that such a distinction between ‘values’ and ‘interests’ is an artificial one. For an excellent assessment of this debate, and one which appreciates the necessary intersections between values and interests, see Anne-Marie Slaughter, ‘Interests vs. Values? Misunderstanding Obama’s Libya Strategy’, *The New York Review of Books*, 30 March 2011. [On-line] Available at: http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/mar/30/interests-values-obamas-libya-strategy/ (accessed 30 March 2011).

\(^{198}\) Obama elaborated on these principles in a recent speech to the National Defense University on the government’s stance towards intervention in Libya. The following remarks are of particular interest and worth quoting at length, as the argument for intervention becomes defined in terms of both the U.S.’s interests and global responsibilities:

...It’s true that America cannot use our military wherever repression occurs. And give the costs and risks of intervention, we must always measure our interests against the need for action. But that cannot be an argument for never acting on behalf of what’s right. In this particular country – Libya – at this particular moment, we were faced with the prospect of violence on a horrific scale. We had a
fully capture the complexities of the problem, proving inadequate for the purposes of making hard political decisions required under such situations of social unrest.

It is, moreover, the case that the responses one provides to these questions will be predicated on the level of analysis taken. Whether a problem is viewed as a national, regional or global issue can have notable implications on how responsibility is consequently interpreted, since this would presumably lead to the identification of different priorities and practices appropriate to the stipulated level of action. As evinced from the case of water governance, by emphasising the transboundary implications of international rivers, this attaches an additional layer of complexity to the issue involving upstream-downstream rights and responsibilities, whereas were one to focus only on the domestic domain, these dynamics could be easily overlooked. In this regard, where the processes of contestation are playing out (e.g. through in-triteel discussions, debates in the news media, institutional and organisational platforms, or debates within an embryonic global public sphere) proves to be especially important in colouring the contours of the politics of responsibility.

For the purposes of this project, I afford analytical priority to the discussions on foreign policy, governance and responsibility that occur within China’s elite circles and the mass media (bearing in mind that the Chinese news media, more often than not, mirrors elite discourses). This is in consideration of how Chinese foreign policy continues to be devised and implemented in a largely top-down fashion, despite some emerging signs of increasing pluralism. Furthermore, given that I focus on the thematic cases of disaster and water resources governance, discussions of

unique ability to stop that violence: an international mandate for action, a broad coalition prepared to join us, the support of Arab countries, and a plea for help from the Libyan people themselves. [...] To brush aside America’s responsibility as a leader and – more profoundly – our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are….as President, I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action. [...] Moreover, America has an important strategic interest in preventing Qaddafi from overrunning those who oppose him. A massacre would have driven thousands of additional refugees across Libya’s borders, putting enormous strains on the peaceful – yet fragile – transitions in Egypt and Tunisia. [...] The writ of the United Nations Security Council would have been shown to be little more than empty words, crippling that institution’s future credibility to uphold global peace and security…So while I will never minimize the costs involved in military action, I am convinced that a failure to act in Libya would have carried a far greater price for America [emphasis added].

responsibility featured in the latter part of this study will be primarily located within the issue-area of ecological governance.

**Designating responsibility**

The process of designating responsibility primarily involves the appropriation of responsibility to agents, together with the delineation of the subjects or objects of responsibility. The relationship between agent and subject is a reciprocal one. If we were to consider this relationship from an Aristotelian perspective of power relations, these constitute agents which have the capacity to effect change in ‘patients’ and patients which are capable of change when so affected.\(^{199}\) The process of contestation effectively centres on the questions of who exactly has the responsibility to govern (and consequently can be held accountable),\(^{200}\) and in whose interests one exercises this right.

However in the international sphere, agents of responsibility are not limited to states. International institutions, as well as norms and political values, can also be ascribed the quality of responsibility or irresponsibility. The failure of the United Nations to identify the genocide in Rwanda as such and act upon it accordingly is a well-known case of ‘responsibility failure’ on the UN’s part. Its failure to fulfil the roles expected of it and the norms to which it has subscribed renders the UN’s lapse of responsibility all the more detrimental to its international reputation.

The role conceptions or self-images held by actors are also crucial to the process of designating responsibility, as specific role conceptions almost always come with in-built conceptions of what the actor’s rights and obligations are deemed to be. The definition of an actor’s roles can either be self-designated or designated by others, and is often either norm-referential or made in opposition to existing norms and values (as is the case with revisionist powers). By implication, the responsibilities that actors shoulder can also be self-imposed or externally designated in relation to certain values. China’s self-identification as a revolutionary (or revisionist) power during the Maoist years greatly informed its foreign policy of exporting revolution and of developing a united front with the Third World, as well as its sense of

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\(^{200}\) Based on an Aristotelian conception of ‘moral responsibility’, the agent is seen as ‘responsible’ and the ‘fit subject of praise and blame, so far as the source of his particular act lies within himself, *i.e.* so far as it is done from deliberate decision’. Mure, *Aristotle*, pp. 145-146, 127-162, for a more general discussion of morality and practical wisdom.
obligation to counter ‘big-power’ chauvinism and to vow to never become a ‘hegemonic’ power itself.

In interrogating how China has sought to situate itself as a responsible actor, it is possible to identify several referents of responsibility at the local, national, regional, and global levels. These range from the world community, other neighbouring and developing countries, and international institutions to the natural environment and local ecological biospheres, vulnerable communities, as well as the Chinese people. What this, in effect, points to is the potential existence of multiple, overlapping and oftentimes contending responsibilities on China’s part. Yet relations between the agents and subjects of responsibility are by no means static or one-way; to the contrary, they are dynamic and naturally cross-cutting, such that it would be more accurate to speak of ‘webs of responsibility’ than disaggregated relationships.

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Figure 4. Complex webs of responsibility

- ↔ = bonds of obligation
- C = communities
- IO = international organisations
- INGO = international NGOs
Demonstrating responsibility

Essentially speaking to the requirement for designated agents to act on their obligations, the process of demonstrating responsibility is one which tends to receive most attention from existing scholarship on the responsibility of China’s foreign policy. However, to make sense of the motives behind Chinese foreign-policy behaviour, one cannot focus solely on how the PRC goes about meeting its responsibilities without considering how it arrived at such notions of responsibility in the first place. This is because the process of demonstrating responsibility forms part of a mutually-constitutive dynamic, being inextricably linked to the other two processes of definition and designation.

To merely self-identify as a responsible power in name is not always enough to garner legitimacy from others, especially given how the international realm is rife with competing normative claims. As previously suggested, for certain assertions of responsibility to be strengthened vis-à-vis others within the global public sphere, they need to be substantiated by ‘responsible’ practices. I explained at the outset of the thesis the importance of rhetorical entrapment here, having posited that in employing normative language, actors invariably circumscribe their parameters of legitimate action. While it can be assumed that demonstrations of responsibility will be, to a considerable extent, prompted by this dialogic phenomenon, much still depends on the degree of commitment shown by an actor to fulfilling its stipulated duties and obligations. The force of a state’s responsibility claims, in other words, rests on the level of compliance it exhibits.

Due to its tendency to become politicised, it is arguably in the process of demonstrating responsibility that we can, at times, witness some of the most intense contestation taking place. The problem largely centres on how one is to recognise responsible behaviour when one sees it and how that judgement is to be passed. In particular, this raises important questions concerning how actors ought to act out their responsibilities, and in terms of global governance, what types of institutional mechanisms should be appointed to channel such action. In adjudicating between contending responsibility claims in international relations, it is necessary to take note of two considerations: first, the extent to which these claims are deemed to be valid by other members of the global community; and second, the degree to which agents manage to accomplish context-specific imperatives linked to responsible behaviour.
Were the subjects of responsibility to be, for example, the citizens of a country, with the government acting as the primary agent of responsibility, the conduct of the government would have to be first evaluated in light of prevailing international expectations, upon which its practices can then be assessed in relation to the welfare of its people.

It is worth reiterating here the difficulties involved in making clear-cut distinctions between responsible and irresponsible behaviours, given how the conduct of states will often reveal elements of both, depending on the requirements dictated by the situation at hand. Bearing in mind that these serve more as ideal-types, it is also possible to delineate several variations of responsible behaviour, which can include such practices as the derogation, deflection or abstention of responsibility. Even in cases which seem to exhibit a degree of responsibility acceptance among stakeholders, it tends to be that discrepancies between actual practices and the normative commitments made by states will persist. As such, I would argue that an acceptance of responsibility can already be said to exist when actors demonstrate a certain degree of consistency in their compliance with prevailing international norms and expectations. This can be evinced from the responsibility-sharing arrangements prevalent in global governance today, where actors cooperate on the basis of positive reciprocity (i.e. mutual gain) to meet common challenges that threaten the collective good.

Both of the thematic cases examined in the latter part of this study draw on the politics of responsibility as an analytical framework to shed light on how China

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201 Note here that by ‘subjects’ of responsibility, I am referring to those entities which constitute the ‘recipients’ of responsible conduct. These referents are restricted not only to state actors but also include non-state actors, such as international organisations, local communities or the natural environment.

202 Deflection of responsibility supposedly takes place when an actor attempts to transfer the onus of responsibility onto another actor. In some cases, actors may deflect responsibility simply on the grounds that it lacks the capacity to perform the roles expected of it. A derogation of responsibility transpires when an actor makes recourse to ‘more exigent’ social, political or economic imperatives so as to derogate or escape from the duties and obligations imposed onto it. Finally, an abstention of responsibility occurs when an actor elects to remain ‘silent’ in the face of responsibility expectations. Here, the actor might actually be cognisant of the validity of the normative claims forwarded by others, but prefers not to take explicit action. As seen from cases where China has chosen to abstain from UN Security Council voting, this policy option could be read as a passive attempt to ‘pass the buck’.

203 The notion of responsibility-sharing stands in direct contrast with the practice of burden-sharing, which refers more to the sharing of culpability or accountability on the basis of negative reciprocity. Here, even though actors might recognise the need to cooperate, the motives and justifications for action tend to be cast more in oppositional or adversarial terms (as was evident during the Copenhagen UN Climate Change conference where developing states bandwagoned against the developed powers), with expectations of responsibility being forcibly imposed onto relevant actors through coercion or censure by others.
understands and acts upon notions of responsibility within the realm of global governance. I posit that through a consideration of these multilayered processes of defining, designating and demonstrating responsibility, we can arrive at a better understanding of the motivations behind China's actions, and by extension, the role played by notions of responsibility in constituting and regulating Chinese foreign policy.

**Conclusion: Responsible governance in international relations**

States – as the primary actors in global politics – are also the primary agents of responsibility. This chapter has illustrated how reflecting on global governance invariably leads one to touch on broader notions of responsibility. This happens as calls for an 'obligation to cooperate' have become coloured by expectations for states to *respond* to common problems in a way that satisfies the diverse interests of stakeholders. The notion of 'responsible governance' is that which underpins this imperative to respond – whether on one's own or collectively – to the novel challenges presently facing states, peoples, and the world society as a whole. As previously discussed, in dealing with pressing global problems, one frequently sees the allocation of duty and blame *by* and *to* a variety of actors, whether they be states, international institutions, or transnational actors as in civil society movements and multinational corporations. Here, assertions of responsibility are employed to 'justify censure and sanction, punishment and retribution, and, all too easily, the resort to force', ultimately creating the frames of reference for 'appropriate' conduct.

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204 This is, of course, implicitly based on a rationalist assumption that being social actors, they are capable of forming intentions, shaping their conduct to conform to certain rules and norms, exercising some form of self-restraint, as well as appreciating the significance of their actions for others and, by the same token, capable of recognising the significance of other actors' practices for themselves. See Connolly, 'The Politics of Discourse', p. 156. Nevertheless, the degree to which states are able to successfully exercise this reasoning capacity will admittedly vary according to the context at hand, given considerations of 'bounded rationality', as borrowed from Herbert Simon who put forward this notion in relation to agents operating within organisational decision-making contexts. The logic behind this concept is that the rationality of individuals is inevitably limited by their lack of cognitive capacity as well as information and time resources. That is, individuals are not able to make decisions based on a conception of 'the optimal choice', but can only hope to make 'rational' decisions within the contextual constraints placed upon them. See Simon, 'Bounded Rationality and Organisational Learning', *Organisation Science* 2: 1 (1991), pp. 125-134.

Accordingly, it is through the definition of what responsibility means, the delegation of the referents of responsibility, and the demonstration of responsible behaviour within a given context, that the idea of responsibility comes to exert both constitutive and regulative ‘power’ over the political activity of agents by delineating the parameters of legitimate action. To paraphrase Bull’s observation on ‘just cause’, a state which alleges responsibility is, at the very least, acknowledging that it owes other states an explanation of its conduct in view of the extant rules that apply. And in so doing, states implicitly submit to circumscribing the range of choices available to them by providing ‘pretexts’ in terms of such choices. Articulations of responsibility thus amount to more than mere discourses, as they come to embody the complex processes of normative contestation.

Before proceeding on to the thesis’ thematic cases, an appreciation of how the notion of responsible governance has been debated and how it has historically featured within the Chinese socio-political context needs to first be established for a deeper understanding of how the idea of the ‘responsibility of power’ has evolved and influenced political behaviour within China. Hence, it is to the question of how China has interpreted the idea of responsibility alongside historic conceptions of statecraft and more modern concerns over global governance that the next two chapters turn.

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Bull’s original observation is phrased as follows: ‘The state which alleges a just cause, even one it does not itself believe in, is at least acknowledging that it owes other states an explanation of its conduct, in terms of rules that they accept. There are, of course, differences of opinion as to the interpretation of the rules and their application to concrete situations; but such rules are not infinitely malleable and do circumscribe the range of choice for states which seek to give pretexts in terms of them’. Bull, The Anarchical Society, p. 43.
CHAPTER TWO

The Historic Legacy of ‘Responsibility’ in Chinese Political Thought: from Late Imperial China to the Present

Hence the wise invent the standards by which the foolish are curbed; the worthy reform the rites by which the inadequate are constrained.

Shang Yang, The Book of Lord Shang 《商君书》

He who delights in Heaven will continue to enjoy the possession of the Empire while he who is in awe of heaven will continue to enjoy the possession of his own state.

Mencius, The Works of Mengzi 《孟子》

On 25 October 1971, China’s seat in the United Nations and its permanent membership of the UN Security Council was officially transferred from the Republic of China (ROC) to the People’s Republic. Contrary to the then ROC Ambassador to the UN Liu Chieh’s bleak vision of ‘Peiping’s’ admission – which was dramatically depicted as ‘the beginning of the end for the world organization as an instrument of international cooperation based on law and


209 Approval came in the form of Resolution 2758, passed by the General Assembly, which withdrew legal recognition from the ROC and instead granted UN membership to the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China.

210 The Nationalist Guomindang (GMD) government changed the name of the city from Beijing (Peking) to Beijing (Peiping) in 1928, a decision which came as the capital was moved to Nanjing instead. It would only be in 1949 with the Communist victory that the city’s name was reverted back to Beijing and its status as the country’s capital restored.
justice⁴¹ – the PRC’s entry symbolised communist China’s formal accession into the ‘comity of nations’⁴² and marked the beginnings of what has subsequently proven to be its indispensable involvement in the politics of global governance.

As a state actor, the People’s Republic has been both an agent and subject of governance processes. On the one hand, it has constantly found itself at the receiving end of the global governance agenda forwarded by other (international and non-state) actors. The UN, for instance, expects ‘China’ to actively participate in peacekeeping missions, whereas INGOs like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch call upon the ‘Chinese government’ to become more transparent and accountable for its practices in accordance with global human rights norms. Yet on the other hand, Beijing has managed to successfully project some of its own concerns and interests onto the global agenda, as evinced from its successful push for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to allocate greater voting rights to emerging states,⁴³ or its call for ‘rich nations’ to take more initiative in cutting carbon emissions and providing financial assistance to developing states to fund mitigation efforts.⁴⁴ It is in light of the PRC’s inextricable engagement with the dynamics of global governance that renders an examination of how this rising power perceives its international responsibilities all the more pertinent. How China has interpreted and acted upon historical notions of ‘responsible statecraft’ and more modern derivations of ‘responsible governance’ thus constitutes this chapter’s guiding problématique. Here,

⁴² It deserves note that communist China’s success in regaining UN membership was, to a considerable degree, attributable to the newly independent countries that had joined the UN during the 1960s. Collectively labeled as the Third World, these states were primarily responsible for shifting the power balance within the General Assembly in favour of the People’s Republic, as they generally harboured deep-seated animosity towards the ‘imperialist’ West, and were consequently ‘sympathetic’ to the PRC’s plight as a ‘fellow’ developing nation, sharing a common history of Western subjugation.
change is situated amidst historical continuity, as linkages are drawn between China’s past and its present.

In discerning the antecedents of Chinese responsible governance, it is important that we do not succumb to a narrow inside-out perspective, but appreciate the fact that Chinese conceptions and practices of responsibility have been equally informed by exogenous factors. That is to say, its evolution has been exposed to a complex interplay between locally and globally-derived understandings. In advancing this argument, the chapter proceeds in two sections. The first takes a broad look at Chinese perspectives on global governance. The second then traces how Chinese practices and thinking on ‘responsibility’ and, more specifically, ‘international responsibility’ have evolved. Classical images of responsible statecraft are juxtaposed with those that became prevalent during the late-Qing/early-Republican and Maoist eras, in order to uncover continuities and discontinuities in political thought. Attention is then directed to conceptions of responsible governance in the contemporary period, where emergent discourses on a Chinese style of global governance through ‘self-governance’ are analysed in tandem with Hu Jintao’s rhetoric of constructing a ‘harmonious world’.

**Chinese Perspectives on Global Governance**

In 1922 Bertrand Russell, in a book entitled *The Problem of China*, made the following highly-prescient observation:

> Chinese problems, even if they affected no one outside China, would be of vast importance, since the Chinese are estimated to constitute about a quarter of the human race. In fact...all of the world will be vitally affected by the development of Chinese affairs, which may well prove a decisive factor, for good or evil, during the next two centuries.²¹⁵


It has, however, taken less than a century for the ‘development of Chinese affairs’ to feature prominently as a ‘decisive factor’ affecting the conduct of contemporary world affairs. As both an agent and a subject of governance, the PRC’s involvement in existing global governance arrangements has proven crucial to both its
own interests as well as to those of the international community. Being the world’s second-largest economy and, as noted above, having more than a quarter of the world’s population within its borders, lack of Chinese support and participation would putatively undercut the effectiveness of any international treaty or institution, in a way reminiscent of how the U.S.’s failure to join the League of Nations inevitably signalled the latter’s eventual demise. One is reminded here, in particular, of the recent climate change negotiations, where attempts at formulating a legally-binding treaty with concrete targets to curb national carbon emissions were viewed by many as having been frustrated by Chinese — and to a lesser degree, American — reticence. It goes without saying that had China reacted any differently to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, or any slower to the SARS outbreak in 2003,216 these events would have undoubtedly unfolded with far more serious repercussions for the rest of the world. Ensuring Chinese participation in the governance of such shared challenges has, in short, become vital to global order. In the apt words of Professor Pang Zhongying of Renmin University, global governance without Chinese participation is not truly ‘global governance’, and a world without China cannot be rightfully called a ‘globalised’ world.217

At the same time, it deserves note that, as repeatedly stressed by China’s public intellectuals and policy-makers, the maintenance of a stable and secure international environment also constitutes a prerequisite for China’s own peaceful development at home and abroad. In fact, the country’s development is often phrased in official rhetoric as being inextricably tied to that of the world — a point which even the Constitution of the People’s Republic duly acknowledges. As iterated in the Constitution, ‘China’s future is the world’s future, both are closely linked together’ (中国的前途是同世界的前途紧密地联系在一起的). Notably following from this

216 As is repeatedly noted by Chinese scholars and officials, China had acted ‘responsibly’ during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis by choosing not to devalue its yuan, which contributed to stabilising the region’s currency market, and contributing to the rescue packages provided to the affected economies. This stands somewhat in contrast to the Chinese government’s handling of the SARS outbreak, when Chinese government officials only informed the WHO of the epidemic several months after its outbreak in southern China. China has since apologized for its delayed response, but of course, had the PRC failed to do so entirely, then surely the epidemic would have claimed many more lives worldwide.

statement is further affirmation of how China will adhere to the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’ in its diplomatic relations, as it strives to ‘safeguard world peace and promote human progress’. Needless to say, this mirrors a long-standing Chinese concern centred on the preservation of world order or social ‘harmony’ which, as I explain in greater detail later on, constituted one of the Chinese emperor’s primary imperial duties. For this reason, although popularised claims of the PRC being a revisionist power bent on challenging the international order appear to resonate strongly with Maoist China’s revolutionary zeal, they fail to capture the political and ideological complexity of China today. The PRC is neither in singular terms a rule-maker nor a rule-taker; it is both. Rather than electing for drastic changes to the international system, China has arguably come to advocate a ‘gradualist’ approach that favours incremental reforms and, above all, the pursuit of global order and stability, if not the maintenance of the status quo itself.

I should note here, however, that the idea of ‘global governance’ is far from uncontested in the Chinese context. This is, in part, due to the fact that the actual term itself remains relatively ‘new’, having entered mainstream Chinese discourses only within the past decade. And just as certain Western scholars have come to bemoan how ‘global governance’ appears to be virtually anything, so have some Chinese

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218 The Five Principles are mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. These principles were advanced by then Premier Zhou Enlai in December 1953 when he met with an official Indian delegation in Beijing to negotiate relations between the two countries vis-à-vis the Tibet region. The Five Principles were further expounded at the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, and has since been put forth by the Chinese government as an alternative foreign-policy framework for the conduct of international relations, which is seen to have long been ‘dominated’ by the logic of ‘power politics’. See the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ official website on ‘China’s Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence’ (17 November 2000). [On-line] Available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/ziliao/3602/3604/18053.htm (accessed 9 June 2011).


220 Having said this, whether China constitutes a revolutionary revisionist or status quo power remains heavily debated even now. Scepticism persists as to whether a rising power like China, not to mention one controlled by a socialist authoritarian government, can satisfactorily be socialised into the existing international order. Critics continue to spotlight the PRC’s human rights transgressions, its questionable support for unsavoury regimes in North Korea, Myanmar and Sudan, as well as its intractable stance when it comes to sovereignty and territorial issues (one is reminded of the Taiwan problem here). The limitations of Chinese responsibility are elucidated in the concluding section of this chapter. For further discussion on this point, see also Zhou Fangyin, ‘Zhongguo de shijie zhixu linian yu guoji zeren’ [China’s understanding of world order and international responsibility], Guoji Jingji Pinglun [International Economic Review] 3 (2011), pp. 36-51; and Alastair Iain Johnston, ‘Is China a Status Quo Power?’, International Security 27:4 (2003), pp. 5-56.

221 See Chan, Lee, and Chan, ‘Rethinking global governance’, p. 4.

scholars and practitioners remained wary of the variegated meanings and implications of this essentially ‘foreign’ idea. This is the case for two main reasons. First, lingering suspicions persist as to whether the ongoing ‘global governance project’ would merely turn into another means for the West (namely the United States) to pressure China into conforming to the pre-existing (Western-dominated) rules of engagement. More specifically, realist-inclined scholars are sceptical as to whether the norms and values promoted by global governance merely serve as a veil for the vested interests of the ‘powers that be’, with the idea of global governance amounting to an elusive ideal rendered improbable by the logic of Realpolitik underlying the international system. In effect, at issue are unresolved questions to do with global governance by whom, for whom, and in accordance with whose standards. While heated debates over these issues are by no means confined to China (as elucidated in Chapter 1), it is within the Chinese context that the normative import of these unresolved questions becomes markedly salient to the conduct of contemporary international relations.

To be sure, the Chinese penchant to justify its non-compliance or derogation of responsibility by making recourse to the ‘injustices’ brought about by the imposition of Western neoliberal values masquerading as ‘international’ norms reflects this mentality. Not only do these norms purportedly discriminate against developing, non-Western powers like China, but they also work to impede the development of a truly ‘global’ system of governance – one representative of the cultural heterogeneity and diversity in interests of members of an evolving international society. Others, in like fashion, have voiced concern over how China constitutes a ‘latecomer’ to global governance, beleaguered by the unfamiliar and rapidly changing ‘rules of the game’ and uncertain of its actual ‘place’ in the system. From this perspective, China is perceived to be fundamentally at a disadvantage and, as a consequence, is understandably reticent to entirely commit itself to such a system. In fact, some

scholars have proposed that instead of ‘global governance’, the PRC should continue to adhere to its original principles of peaceful coexistence.\textsuperscript{225}

Especially when it comes to problems that impinge on sovereignty and territorial rights, the PRC’s unyielding stance becomes all the more apparent, as the intense contestation surrounding the legitimacy of humanitarian interventions frequently reveals. That China, unlike the Western powers, will never seek hegemony, nor will it seek to ‘dominate’ other peoples, continues to be a pledge iterated by the Chinese leadership today. This, in turn, feeds into prevailing assumptions that any progress or development will necessarily have to be internally-driven, as opposed to externally imposed.\textsuperscript{226} As such, China, or so the argument goes, will strive towards maintaining ‘win-win’ equations in its foreign relations, in keeping with the principles of ‘mutual respect’ and ‘mutual benefit’. As Professor Pan Wei of Peking University puts it, ‘I can only wish that Europeans could see that this approach [i.e. of conducting foreign policy on the basis of mutual respect and gains] offer [sic] a chance to achieve real progress rather than presenting the West with a crisis of “global governance”.’\textsuperscript{227} Given their attachment to these traditional security and sovereignty issues, it seems Chinese leaders – much like their Western counterparts – have yet to fully grasp the nuanced differences between ‘global’ (in the sense of ‘globalised’ and ‘beyond borders’) on the one hand, and ‘international’ on the other. To the Chinese audience, these are exceedingly important questions that have yet to be satisfactorily addressed. Accordingly, any ‘legitimate’ claim to global governance will first have to clarify the problems associated with the opaqueness of this concept.

Second, China has long been known for its inclination towards ‘risk-aversion’ and its preference for so-called ‘low-key’ diplomacy as founded upon Deng Xiaoping’s oft-cited dictum of \textit{tao guang yang hui} (‘bide our time and build our capabilities’), of which the notion of ‘not seeking leadership’ (\textit{bu dang tou}) proves to


be particularly noteworthy. At times characterised as ‘reluctant’, ‘fragile’ or ‘conflicted’, Beijing is prone to sending mixed signals in its international engagement. This largely stems from the fundamental tensions that continue to hamper China’s socio-economic development, of which the ongoing disparities between its rural and urban areas serve as the most striking reminders. How the country’s average GDP per capita remains comparatively low, despite its rapid GDP growth overall, is still an oft-cited fact amongst Chinese pundits. To call China a fully-fledged ‘great power’ would, thus, be somewhat misleading in this regard. Interestingly, the implications of this underlying foreign-policy discourse have been such that China, in contrast to the historical proclivity of Great Powers to overestimate their capabilities, tends to be overly aware of its limitations and cautious of making ‘onerous’ international commitments that may inadvertently jeopardise its sovereign ‘rights’ and integrity.

Such an attitude, however, stands starkly at odds with more recent discourses that advocate a ‘globalist’ approach to the conduct of China’s foreign relations. This comes amidst an emerging consensus that the PRC can no longer afford to stand idly by on the sidelines of world politics, with attention being increasingly directed to the question of China’s present and prospective roles within the broader global governance architecture. Simply put, the reasoning behind ‘globalism’ (guanqiu...

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228 The literal translation of taoqiang yanghui would actually be: ‘conceal brightness and nourish obscurity’. In full, Deng’s dictum would be: taoqiang yanghui, bu dang tou, youshuo zuowei (‘hide our time, build our capabilities, do not take lead, but still take some action’).


230 Interview with Dr. Xu Xiujuan, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China (2009). This contrast tends to be made with reference to how, by 2007, their country’s GDP growth had already surpassed Germany (effectively becoming then the world’s third largest economy), and yet, its GDP per capita remained 1/16 of that of the United States.

231 See Cai Tuo, ‘Chinese perspectives and practices’.

zhuyi) is normally arrived at through the following logic: having ‘stood up’ (zhanli qilai) in 1949 as a reinvented nation-state, the PRC has undergone significant transformations and has since been ‘growing and prospering’ (fuqiang qilai) at an unparalleled pace. The resultant growth in both its global political influence and economic competitiveness, specifically within the past decade, has consequently led China to gain ‘many of the special characteristics’ of a Great Power.\textsuperscript{233} And by virtue of the special rights and duties that come bounded with great power-hood, the People’s Republic now invariably finds itself obliged to assume a greater role in the management of world affairs.

Although China’s latent recognition of its newly-emerging global role can be traced back to the mid-1990s when the notion of ‘managing relations among great powers’ (chuli daguo guanxi) first appeared officially as part of a diplomatic strategy at the 16\textsuperscript{th} Party Congress,\textsuperscript{234} it was with Beijing’s successful hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games, in particular, that the language of globalism and globalisation came to garner even greater currency amongst Chinese intellectual and policy elites, with the Games being viewed as an important milestone (often set alongside Chinese admission into the WTO in 2001) vis-à-vis the nation’s ‘socialisation’ into a nascent world society.\textsuperscript{235} Based on this perspective, there are those within China who have argued that now is the most opportune time for their country to learn how to become a moderate ‘hegemon’ (that is, one different from the U.S.), or in other variations, a

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\textsuperscript{234} Shihi, ‘Breeding a reluctant dragon’, p. 755. We can also see a cognitive shift here: that Beijing’s elites should now use and interpret the term daguo as referring to ‘great power’ or ‘major power’ (positive connotation), as opposed to ‘big power’ (negative; mainly employed during the Maoist years), is revealing of how China now perceives its roles and ‘place’ in the world.


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'non-hegemonic' global leader.\textsuperscript{236} Not that one should expect the PRC to readily adopt leadership in world affairs post-haste – to do so undeniably constitutes a major long-term challenge – but the sentiment here is that the PRC should, at the very least, be aspiring to do so. It needs to pursue a role that goes beyond its traditional, inward-looking perspective.

China, in this respect, has no other alternative but to acknowledge itself as part of a ‘global’ system, characterised by a multipolar order and coloured by diversity. A point consistently made in official rhetoric (if not always in practice), multilateralism emerges as the favoured channel for Chinese diplomacy, with Beijing explicitly advancing its greater preference for building a ‘global partnership’, as opposed to the (controversial) institutionalisation of a ‘G-2’ mechanism, which is seen to function merely as a narrow model of ‘co-governance’ by China and the United States.\textsuperscript{237} According to Wang Yizhou, who is often referred to as a key intellectual in spearheading the use of ‘global governance’ in the study of international relations within China, the guiding concept for the Chinese leadership in the contemporary era has necessarily become one which merges the traditional Chinese axiom (still popularly used today in relation to the CCP’s ‘socialist’ ideology) of ‘giving priority to humans’ with that of ‘giving diplomacy priority’ (\textit{yi ren wei ben, yi waijiao wei ben}).\textsuperscript{238}

Significantly, dialogue between these two rival perspectives has since given rise to the equivocal identity of China as a ‘developing great power’ (\textit{fazhan zhong daguo}),\textsuperscript{239} whereby its ‘rising great power’ (\textit{xinxing daguo}) status is tempered by the state’s limited capabilities and resources, as well as its limited ‘skill’ in managing

\textsuperscript{236} Interview with Professor Yu Wanli, School of International Studies, Peking University, Beijing, China (14 December 2009).
\textsuperscript{237} Interview with Professor Pang Zhongying, Renmin University, Beijing, China (14 December 2009). See also Jianjun Dang, ‘China Says “No” to G-2’, \textit{Asia Times} (29 May 2009). [On-line] Available at: http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/KE29Ad01.html (accessed 20 August 2010). In practice, a mixture of both multilateral participation and bilateralism is much more commonly found in Chinese foreign-policy practices. On a separate note, as will be discussed in subsequent sections, the notion of ‘global partnership’ will also come up again in China’s contemporary discourses on global environmental governance.


\textsuperscript{239} This has also been alternatively termed as ‘big developing country’ (\textit{da fazhan zhong guojia}).
leadership. This is frequently expressed through the notion that China is ‘big but not strong’ (da er bu qiang), derived from Deng Xiaoping’s remark in the early 1980s that ‘China is a big country...[but] in practical terms, [it] is a small country, an undeveloped country, or [otherwise] called a developing country’ (‘中国是个大国，...另一方面实际上是小国，是不发达国家，或叫发展中国家’). Nowhere is the paradoxical duality of China’s identity more apparent than in the fact that it is, at once, both a recipient and provider of international aid.

By the same token, contemporary Chinese scholars have remarked on how an increase in power does not necessarily translate into better international standing or greater political influence. Ardent calls for improving China’s international identity and ‘comprehensive national power’, which includes the implementation of soft power strategies, accompany this growing awareness. Attempts at maintaining a low-profile have, thus, come to rest uneasily with an internal push for the PRC to embrace deeper engagement with global governance institutions and mechanisms. Here, emphasis is placed on the need for the international community to allow China some time to undergo its own processes of learning and adaptation to these novel global structures. At the same time, apart from serving as a means to reconcile the paradoxes inherent in China’s foreign policy, the construction of a ‘developing great power’ identity also serves, in part, as a response to the continuing popularity of the ‘China Threat’ thesis still prominent today. Strategically, the Chinese leadership projects the image of a developing power to assuage fears of an expanding sphere of Chinese ‘hegemonic influence’, and shift attention to the notion that China’s rise constitutes, first and foremost, a ‘restoration of fairness’ through the regaining of its ‘lost international status’, rather than a means of ‘gaining advantages over others’.

240 Interview with Professor Zhang Haibin, School of International Studies, Peking University, Beijing, China (16 December 2009).
241 Deng Xiaoping, ‘Geming he jianshe dou yao zou ziji de lu’ [Revolution and development all have to proceed on their own paths], in Deng Xiaoping Wensuan [Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping], Vol. III (Beijing: Renmin Press, 1994), p. 94.
242 As demonstrated in Chapter 3, China’s involvement in the emergent climate change regime has likewise been riddled by tensions stemming from this immanent duality, as its participation remains tempered by an adherence to its right to develop as an industrialising country.
243 See Xu Bu et al, ‘Ruhe kan Zhongguo guoji diwei xinbianhua’ [How to view new changes in China’s international status], Shishi Baogao [Current Affairs Report] 1 (2009), p. 64.
244 Yan Xuetong, ‘The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes’, Journal of Contemporary China 10:26 (2001), p. 34. ‘Lost international status’ implicitly refers to the ‘one hundred years of national humiliation’ (bainian guochi), when China was ‘carved up’ and subjugated by foreign powers. Interestingly enough, it had apparently taken the CCP six years to officially frame China’s growth in terms of the ‘peaceful rise’ (later ‘development’) rhetoric. See Zheng Bijian, ‘China’s “Peaceful Rise” to Great-Power
Crucially, following such attempts to balance between globalist and more conservative attitudes in its international dealings, Chinese foreign policy has come to embody what can be termed ‘中西马’ (Zhong-Xi-Ma) – or ‘Chinese-Western-Marxist’ – thought, which essentially represents the confluence of traditional Chinese values with Western technology and modes of management (guanli), as well as enduring remnants of socialist thinking.245 One only needs to look to official discourses on ‘constructing a harmonious world’ through ‘sustainable development’, based on the classic principles of ‘justice’ and ‘egalitarianism’, to appreciate how these elements of continuity and change have coalesced. Another noteworthy consequence has also been attempts to frame the PRC’s image primarily in terms of it being a major regional power within East Asia. Seen as a strategic ‘compromise’ between its two conflicting identities, most Chinese commentators laud this role conception as being better attuned to the country’s realities as a major developing state.246 This is, of course, not to mention the concept’s wider historical resonance with China’s revolutionary legacy as a ‘leader’ of the Third World during the Maoist years.

Reflecting on this, it is possible to discern a gradual shift in attitude, from a traditional aversion to taking the lead to one which sees China reprising its identity as a global power and shouldering the responsibilities that come with this status. No longer the ‘Sick Man of Asia’ (Dongya bingfu), nor the revisionist power that ‘exports revolution’, the People’s Republic has arguably entered a new phase in its foreign relations where active involvement in world affairs is rendered a necessity. Whether it be to negate ‘moral attacks’ from the United States, to guarantee its representation in global decision-making processes, or merely to act as a counterweight to the U.S.’s political clout,247 Chinese academic and practitioners alike have increasingly come to acknowledge China’s imperative to adjust its existing strategies and policies to better suit shifting international terrain. This has even led some scholars to remark that it is


245 Interview with Professor Wang Yizhou, School of International Studies, Peking University, Beijing, China (4 December 2009). It should be noted, however, that some scholars have argued that this concept is now rather ‘outdated’ in conceptual terms, especially with regard to the waning influence of Marxist thought in Chinese society today. That said, they do recognise that the case can still be justifiably made in favour of its usefulness in explaining aspects of contemporary Chinese foreign-policy discourses.

246 Interview, Beijing, China (15 December 2009).

not the notion of ‘global governance’ *per se* that is ‘new’ to China, but rather it is the novel tasks that China faces as a re-emerging world power – responsibilities that Beijing can no longer afford to sidestep or simply ignore.

**Reinterpreting ‘Responsibility’ through Chinese Eyes**

Corresponding to these noteworthy developments in Chinese thinking on global engagement, Chinese scholars have come to write avidly on the so-called ‘China responsibility’ thesis (*Zhongguo zerenlun*), as they seek to present it as an alternative to the prevalent ‘China threat’ and ‘China collapse’ theses.\(^{248}\) At least since 2001, Chinese scholars have commented extensively on the prospective need for China, as a UNSC member and nuclear power, to rethink its national interests in line with the heavier international responsibilities and expectations it will be impelled to meet. Constructive engagement in such issues as curbing carbon emissions, participating in global climate change dialogues, conducting joint ocean explorations, and safeguarding ‘peace and stability’ in the Asia-Pacific region, are now recognised as an avenue for ‘showcasing’ the benign intentions of Chinese long-term diplomacy, as well as the significant strides the country has taken in advancing its social, technological, economic, and political modernisation.\(^{249}\) Whilst it is no longer a case of arguing whether China is or is not responsible *per se*, vigorous policy debates have persisted as to ‘how much’ responsibility China ought to carry – or more precisely,

\(^{248}\) At one point, the China responsibility thesis was deemed to be more favorable (when compared to the China threat thesis), as it ostensibly allowed for international scrutiny without significantly jeopardising China’s right to peaceful rise. Further elaboration on this new strand of thought will be featured later on. I should also note here that this ‘thesis’ is more popularly rendered into English in the Chinese-language literature as ‘China responsibility theory’.

the question of under what circumstances China is deemed to incur certain duties and obligations. This, again, harks back to the question posed earlier on the extent to which China actually subscribes to the notion that it has certain special responsibilities.

Debates over China’s responsibility have largely been congruent with broader discussions on its roles and contributions to global governance. This is because, apart from being derivative of bigger issues to do with the politics of identity, normative assertions concerning how China ought to be acting globally are also visibly imbued with conceptions of political purpose. Following on from this, Chinese thinking on responsibility can be distinguished into four camps: (1) those who believe China needs to embrace its international responsibilities as both a global and regional power; (2) those who claim that the fulfilment of China’s domestic responsibilities need to come before its external duties and commitments, given its identity as a major developing country; (3) those who perceive the PRC as having historical responsibilities only to the global South, especially Africa, in terms of encouraging south-south cooperation and development – a discourse reminiscent of Chinese diplomacy during the 1950s-60s; and (4) those who view the idea of responsibility with distrust and see it as an offshoot of China threat discourses meant to hinder China’s development by over-burdening it with unwarranted obligations, which may include those that certain countries (i.e. the U.S.) seek to exculpate.

Taking these into consideration, it is important to highlight again how – varied interpretations notwithstanding – Chinese scholars and policy-makers have yet to fundamentally contest the idea of ‘responsibility’ itself: that is, the notion that China

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250 See Zhu Liqun, ‘China’s Foreign Policy Debates’, Chaillot Papers (September 2010), pp. 43-44.
has an imperative and obligation to act or respond, specifically in a way that corresponds to its status. As Wang Gonglong concedes, ‘International responsibility is a derivative attribute of a member state of international society. Countries, big or small, should bear certain international responsibilities’. Even critics of concepts like ‘responsible stakeholder’ and ‘responsible sovereignty’ (seen as part of a Western diplomatic campaign to discredit China by portraying it as an irresponsible power, shirking its duties) do not dispute the fact that the PRC has certain responsibilities. Rather, they merely contend that China needs to avoid undertaking ‘superfluous’ international responsibilities that work to inhibit its own security and development.

Once again, the logic of taoguang yanghui is invoked, with a similar attitude also found permeating alternative perspectives that stress the primacy of the PRC’s domestic responsibilities over international ones. It also underscores implicit recognition on the part of China of the paradoxical implications of applying a language of responsibility to its practices, whereby references to responsibility can, at once, enable Chinese actions by legitimating them and undermine Chinese power by delimiting the PRC’s freedom to manoeuvre.

The normative ambiguity surrounding Chinese views on responsibility, moreover, cuts to the heart of perennial problems associated with navigating a global public sphere rife with rival ideologies and normative claims. Morgenthau’s remark nearly five decades earlier remains pertinent today, granted how the world’s major powers frequently come into friction with one another, as each claims ‘to provide universal moral and political standards which all the other nations ought to accept’. But although it might be the case that a dominant state can end up ‘flinging’ the challenge of its claim ‘into the face of another’, who then ‘reciprocates in kind’, their divergent claims can still be perceived as equally valid. In terms of interpreting

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253 See Li Jie, ‘Cong zerenlun tousy guoji tixi zhuaxing’ [On the transformation of the international system from the perspective of the responsibility theory], Guoji Wenti Yanjiu [International Studies] 1 (2008), pp. 36-47.

responsibility, these differences are better understood as competing conceptions over wherein responsibility lies.\textsuperscript{255}

Flowing on from this are prevailing concerns to do with the commensurability of responsibility in relation to power. Underlying the majority of analyses on China’s (international) responsibility is the notion that a state’s responsibility should be proportionate to its power, defined mainly in terms of political influence, practical capabilities, and national conditions. It is with these considerations in mind that Chinese calls for the allocation of shared, but not equal, responsibilities at the global level have been made. Here, the PRC is essentially deemed to have an overarching obligation to secure stability and order within the international system, but different priorities and prerogatives from a ‘conventional’ great power due to its status as a developing economy. An example of this attitude can also be found in Xiao Huanrong’s work, who proposes a trichotomy of ‘powers’, based on their differing levels of influence, within the international system: general powers \textit{(yiban daguo)}, regional powers \textit{(diqu daguo)}, and super powers \textit{(chaoji daguo)}. These are, in turn, matched by three distinct levels of responsibility – ‘local responsibility’ \textit{(benshi zeren)}, ‘regional responsibility’ \textit{(diqu zeren)}, and ‘global responsibility’ \textit{(quangiu zeren)} – with the realisation of these responsibilities depending on the soft and hard power endowments of the state in question. For super powers, their local (or domestic) responsibility is to \textit{consolidate} security and wealth; their regional responsibility is centred on acquiring ‘spheres of influence’; and their global responsibility is to take charge of the international order.\textsuperscript{256}

While this particular rendition of the three-tiered nature of state responsibilities might sound rather outdated (ostensibly founded on a Cold War mentality), it does underscore an important trait of Chinese thinking on responsibility, which sees the idea conventionally being broken up in relation to local, regional and international levels of understanding. As will be explained shortly, the Chinese vision of ‘self-governance’ constitutes one potent manifestation of this perspective. To the Chinese mind, creating such categories is a matter of both ‘common sense’ and necessity, given how the rights and responsibilities – whether personal or official – of an individual in traditional Chinese society were normally accorded in view of the social position held. This feeds into the Confucian idea of ‘positioning’ \textit{(dingwei)}, whereby


\textsuperscript{256} Xiao Huanrong, ‘China’s duty as a big power’, p. 48.
one’s social position within the moral hierarchical order is deemed to be a determinant of one’s behaviour. Transposing this idea onto the global realm has notably given rise to the corollary concept of China’s ‘international responsibility positioning’ (guoji zeren dingwei) which speaks directly to how intersections between power and responsibility should impinge upon Chinese understandings of its ‘proper’ roles in world society, and vice versa. Rightful entitlement, in this regard, becomes integral to the ethical exercise of power.257

I should note, however, that this is by no means a unique contribution on China’s part. Exemplified by ideas such as the noblesse oblige of the nineteenth-century Great powers, the modern-day principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ in global climate governance, or the aforementioned fact that the early foundations of the UN were based on the appropriation of special rights and responsibilities to the Security Council, just as asymmetries in power constitute an institutionalised dimension of international life, so are asymmetries in responsibility common to the global realm. Only once such discrimination has been made can the process of defining and designating responsibility then be justifiably undertaken. And it is from these different conceptions of responsibility based on varying conceptions of Chinese power that the historical evolution of this idea becomes all the more evident.

In consequence, while recent allusions to responsibility in Chinese foreign-policy discourses have undeniably been influenced by prevailing international rhetoric, to posit that this idea has been solely imposed exogenously would be a gross misconception. Indeed, a major problem inherent in existing literature on responsibility and Chinese foreign policy is their proclivity to treat Chinese references to responsibility as being a purely modern-day phenomenon, driven exclusively by external pressure and discursively influenced by Western political traditions. As pointed out earlier in the Introduction, official recognition of the PRC’s responsibilities as a major power had been made by Jiang Zemin since 1997 – almost a decade prior to Robert Zoellick’s ‘responsible stakeholder’ speech.258 The cumulative effect of Zoellick’s speech, as such, was more to rekindle meaningful debates over this idea than instigate a ‘new’ concept altogether. One Chinese analyst

257 See Chan, China’s Compliance in Global Affairs, pp. 15-16; and Xiao Huanrong, ‘China’s duty as a big power’, pp.48-49.
258 Do note that Jiang’s remark coincides more with William Perry’s and Stanley Roth’s speeches (delivered in 1995 and 1997 respectively) mentioned earlier in the Introduction (see p. 4, fn. 9).
has even suggested that it was initially the case in China that, instead of interpreting Zoellick’s statement negatively in the sense that ‘China should become more responsible’, his statement was putatively taken as a recognition of how ‘China is already a responsible stakeholder’.²⁵⁹ Chinese commentators had apparently made the mistake of presuming that their country’s self-image was a patently obvious one.

The fact that the idea of responsibility has gained such wide resonance in Chinese foreign-policy circles already seems to imply that there is more to be found here than ‘meets the eye’. Indeed, a key contention sustained throughout this thesis is that, as the PRC becomes increasingly integrated into the multilayered institutions and mechanisms that make up the global architecture of governance, it eventually takes on the identities of both a socializee and a socializer (or, in this case, rule-taker and rule-maker). Within a constructivist framework, this is commonly referred to as the mutually constitutive dynamic of norms and state interests, which points to how China is simultaneously influencing and being influenced by such ideas. Accordingly, the process in which China comes to appropriate ideas pertaining to responsibility and global governance in its foreign policy is one informed by the complex interplay between ‘indigenous’ understandings, derived from its historical and cultural traditions, and more contemporary, ‘internationalised’ discourses that can be seen permeating the global public sphere.

Contending Chinese images of responsible governance

The Chinese have, of course, a well-known proclivity to link history to policy. In the words of social historian Wang Gungwu, ‘they have always been keen to use historical analogies in their policy analyses, irrespective of how far back in time they elect to go to draw those lessons...Chinese practice shows that their ‘timeless’ approach, which sought the most helpful and relevant examples to support their current cause or guide their choice of policy, has been used with care, and often with

²⁵⁹ Interview with Professor Zhang Qingmin, School of International Studies, Peking University, Beijing, China (15 December 2009). Additionally, some scholars have made further claims that discussions concerning China’s identity as a responsible great power actually date back to the foreign-policy debates of the 1980s. Presumably, this coincides with Deng’s reform and opening up period and (then) ongoing attempts to normalize Chinese relations with the rest of the world community.
practiced skill'\textsuperscript{260} In analysing contemporary Chinese foreign policy, it is therefore necessary to situate references to responsibility within a broader historical continuum of thought. This idea – as reflective of a sense of obligation and purpose – is one that resonates strongly in both Chinese society and political culture, having animated much of traditional Chinese statecraft. Centring on the interrelationships between legitimacy, power and authority, issues relating to the proper fulfilment of one's obligations (zhize) and responsibilities have posed a recurring challenge to the resilience of the Chinese civilisational state throughout its five thousand years of history. That multifarious interpretations abound when one traces its evolution over time only serves to underscore the idea's contextual flexibility and conceptual richness.

**Historic legacies of responsible statecraft**

Chinese literature and philosophy are replete with allusions to state and personal responsibilities. Delving into the literary realm of Chinese chengyu (idioms), we are greeted by such proverbs as 責无旁贷 (ze wu pang dai), meaning 'one should face one's responsibilities', and 責有攸归 (ze you you gui), referring to the sentiment that 'one's responsibility is solely one's burden to carry', with both having been used in the works of such notable Qing scholar-officials as Lin Zexu (1785-1850) and Liu Kunyi (1830-1902). Certainly, what is meant by the idea of responsibility often comes naturally to most of us as individuals living within a society bounded by norms, values and mores, despite the fact that what is exactly being signified by the term is habitually left unspoken. To behave 'responsibly' involves acting in accordance with the formal and informal rules governing society and its institutions, whilst compliance with certain norms and values conversely amounts to an observable outcome of responsible behaviour.

Ancient Chinese society was permeated by complex webs of interpersonal responsibility. Much like the ancient Greeks, the Chinese legacy of statecraft (jingshi) also incorporated a form of 'soulcraft', founded on the belief that success in governing a state naturally stemmed from success in governing oneself.\textsuperscript{261} Adherence


to the idea of *li* (rules of propriety), together with corresponding Confucian doctrines that dictated how the social order was to be governed, constituted an irrefutable duty of societal members. Hierarchical relationships, as summed up in the ‘Three Bonds and Five Relationships’, deeply permeated all aspects of social life, including the primary institution of the Chinese family, with the strict observance of the codes of filial piety (*xiao*) amounting to expected behaviour or, in certain cases, even as the ‘root of virtue’ itself. Deemed to be an obligation on the part of younger generations, as well as a mark of a ‘superior’ individual (or the Confucian ‘gentleman’) and a respectable household, the breaking of any of these norms would lead to grave consequences for both the individual and the family unit, including disownment and disinheritance, social ostracism and ridicule, or in extreme instances, legal punishment. During the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC), for example, the concept of ‘group responsibility’ was enforced to the effect that were an individual to commit any wrongdoing, their family or the family unit to which they belonged (which could be units comprised of five or ten families) would all have to be held accountable by guilt of association. Apart from aiming to deter individuals from committing crimes, this legal code was also meant to enhance obedience to the state by effectively undermining group loyalties. However, not only was conformity to these ceremonial rules of propriety seen to be a prerequisite for inclusion and acceptance, but the guarantee of social peace and harmony also rested on members assuming their proper roles and maintaining appropriate relationships within society. It became, in other words, as much of a personal responsibility as a collective one.

More specifically, at the crux of traditional Confucian culture was the aforementioned idea of positioning, of which Confucius’ dictum of ‘Let the ruler rule as he should and the minister be a minister as he should. Let the father act as a father should and the son act as a son should’ constitutes one oft-quoted expression of this perspective. Derived from Chinese philosophical thought, this concept has its roots in the ‘School of Names’ (*Ming jia*), which is known for its preoccupation with interrogating the relationship between ‘actualities’

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262 The Three Bonds and Five Relationships involved regulating the relations of benevolence and obedience between fathers and sons, husbands and wives, sovereigns and ministers, elder brothers and younger brothers, and between friends.
263 This notion can be found in the Classic of Filial Piety (*Xiaojing*). See *Xiaojing baihua zhuyi [Doctrines of the Classic of Filial Piety]* (Taipei: Guanzhong yan xie he, 1959), p. 2.
(shi) and their corresponding names (ming), as well as the old Confucian doctrine regarding the ‘rectification of names’ (zhengming). Despite the School of Names being normally associated with highly abstract ruminations like ‘a white horse is not a horse’ (bai ma fei ma), it was in fact an objective of Gongsun Long’s (one of the school’s best-known representatives) to ‘extend this kind of argument to rectify the relationship between names and facts in order to transform the world’ (欲推是辩，以正名实，而化天下焉).265 As elaborated by the distinguished Chinese philosopher Fung Yu-lan, ‘We have seen in our world today how every statesman [sic] says his country wants only peace, but in fact, when he is talking about peace, he is often preparing for war. Here, then, there is a wrong relationship between names and facts’.266 Equally, the notion of zhengming was advocated by Confucius as a means toward instituting ‘correct government’ and, by implication, responsible statecraft. Within the Chinese schema, public life was largely conceived as being analogous to family life – essentially seen as its extension – with political ‘order’ (zhì) also becoming coterminous with social order. Expectations regarding rightful conduct as ascribed to the individual was, therefore, equally applicable to a minister, ruler, or king.267 Every ‘name’ implied a certain responsibility that must be fulfilled. Only then can a well-ordered society and a healthy system of government be possible.

It was, moreover, the case that as one progressed up the social ladder, one’s rights increased alongside one’s duties and obligations. In fact, to ensure that names were rectified and that disorder (luan) was contained was recognised as a key task of the ruler (junzi). Failure to do so would significantly jeopardise the moral authority of the ruler, as well as the legitimacy of the dynasty. As remarked by John K. Fairbank, ‘so great was the dynasty’s dependence on its moral prestige that its loss of ‘face’ in certain instances might set in motion a process whereby the ideology, as it were, turned against the regimes and hastened its downfall’.268 Interestingly, even though being of Confucian origin, the Legalists had also sought to integrate this idea into their methods of statecraft, epitomised in the principle of shu (that is, the art of

265 Taken from the ‘Storehouse of Remnants’ (Jifu) chapter of the Book of Gongsun Long (Gongsun Longzi); quoted in Fung Yu-lan, A Short History of Chinese Philosophy, trans. Zhao Xiasan (Tianjin: Tianjin Social Sciences Press, 2007), p. 16.

266 Fung Yu-lan, A Short History, p. 16. According to the traditional Chinese dictum of ‘ming zheng yan shu’ (名正言顺), only if one’s name is correct and accords with reason, will one’s words and actions be rendered righteous and justifiable.

267 It should be borne in mind, however, that this code of conduct did not really apply to the common people, but was more geared towards the elites.

handling men). This became known as the doctrine of ‘holding actualities responsible to their names’ (xun ming ze shi). According to Han Fei Zi, it is a ruler’s duty to confer a given office upon a given person. And while the ruler is not held directly accountable for how that official performs, it is their task to distribute rewards and punishments accordingly. Such practices both made up and reinforced the ruler’s authority (quan shi).

In contrast with the ‘realist’ art of governing propounded by Legalism, those belonging to the Confucian tradition saw personal virtues, rather than penal law, as the driving force behind human agency. From this perspective, for any individual ‘in a position of responsibility’, they must first learn to speak with moral authority before they were ‘qualified to speak with political authority’. This was also echoed in Mencius’ philosophy, which built upon this vision of ‘good governance’ through his emphasis on the ‘kingly way’ (wang dao), where a distinction was drawn between the ‘sage-king’ and legitimate rulership on the one hand, and the military lord who relied on rule by force on the other. In eschewing the latter, the conduct of politics was conceived as being intrinsically connected to morality (de), with the government ideally having ‘no interests or practical responsibilities beyond those associated with behaving as the exemplary and benevolent defender of harmony’.

Responsible statecraft, in effect, emanated from the ruler who was perceived to be acting on behalf of Heaven (tian) and who was consequently expected to behave in line with the divine will. The distinguishing trait of a ruler was their ability to cultivate power and influence over the people through rightful conduct and government by example. Central to this, in particular, were the ethical precepts of ren zheng (benevolent government) and ren yi (righteousness), both of which were developed further by Mencius in response to the Mohist and early Daoist challenges to orthodox Confucianism during his time. When applied to politics, these principles exemplify its embedded normative purpose. In the time-worn words of the sage, ‘By benevolence is meant [the distinguishing characteristic of] man [sic]. When

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269 This idiom is still in use today.
271 Wood, Limits to Autocracy, p. 136.
272 Pye, Asian Power and Politics, p. 64.
273 He lived around the fourth to third centuries BC. For more detailed discussions on Mencius’ works, see John C. Ferguson, The Confucian Renaissance in the Sung Dynasty (Shanghai: [unpublished dissertation], 1902), pp. 9-10; and Arthur B. Hutchinson (trans.), The Mind of Mencius, or Political Economy Founded upon Moral Philosophy (Tokyo: Kelly & Walsh, 1897).
it is embodied in man’s conduct, we have what we call the path [of duty].\textsuperscript{274} In practical terms, this took the form of providing for the people’s spiritual and material welfare. How well a ruler was able to cater to the interests of the people, in other words, became a tangible measure of a ruler’s legitimacy, with the building of society’s material foundations equally proving to be of importance in this regard.\textsuperscript{275} As rehearsed by Ban Gu in the ‘Treatise on Foods and Commodities’ of the Han Shu, for a ruler to keep watch over his subjects, cultivate society’s members, and yield to heaven’s morality, these are essential to government for the sake of bringing peace to the people (帝王所以聚人守位，養成群生，奉順天德，治國安民之本也).\textsuperscript{276}

Moving from the domestic to the external sphere, similar modes of thought also animated Imperial China’s relations with the outside world, furnishing Chinese elites with a social paradigm whereby the Chinese people at large became ‘bound to the world beyond’ through a ‘network of proper behaviour’.\textsuperscript{277} Assuming its position as the Middle Kingdom, China’s centrality to the world order was deemed to be a practical ‘function’ of both its civilisation and its immanent virtues, whilst the Chinese cultural system was believed to be materially, aesthetically, as well as morally superior to those of the ‘uncivilised’ foreigners.\textsuperscript{278} Political leadership as such was a natural consequence. It was undoubtedly a curious trait of the imperial Chinese tribute system that, though a financial burden in economic terms, it continued to receive official support as a more literal manifestation of the empire’s normative suasion. Even in the wake of Qing China’s tumultuous encounter with European international society during the nineteenth century, Chinese political and intellectual elites continued to adhere to three vital assumptions that had, until then, served as the cornerstones of the traditional Sinocentric world order:


\textsuperscript{275} In one of Mencius’ famous remarks, he contends that ‘The people are the most important element in a country; the Spirits of the land and grain are the next; the ruler is the lightest’ (民为贵，社稷次之，君为轻). Legge, The Chinese Classics, p. 371.


[firstly] that China possessed a universally valid system of beliefs which were ethically right and ought to be followed by all people; [secondly] that China had a special role in the world as the guardian of these values, and [thirdly] that, although they could not be imposed on other peoples, China must herself live up to them and set an example by which others could learn how to follow the right path.\footnote{279}

The legitimacy of the Chinese empire thus rested on the universal kingship of the Son of Heaven which was, in turn, predicated upon expectations of ‘rational reciprocity’\footnote{280} – that is, the Confucian idea of ‘do not to others what you would not want others to do unto you’ – and an inalienable responsibility to uphold the cosmic order. Governing the world, therefore, became synonymous with sustaining ‘the Great Harmony under Heaven’ (Tianxia Datong). The poem below, composed by the Qianlong Emperor of the early Qing dynasty upon Lord Macartney’s diplomatic mission in 1793, luridly expresses this worldview:

Formerly Portugal presented tribute;
Now England is paying homage.
They have out-travelled Shu-hai and Heng-chang;
My ancestor’s merit and virtue must have reached their distant shores.
Though their tribute is commonplace, my heart approves sincerely.
Curios and the boasted ingenuity of their device I prize not.
Though what they bring is meagre, yet,
In my kindness to men from afar I make generous return,
Wanting to preserve my good health and power.\footnote{281}

\footnote{280} These sentiments are also patriotically reflected in the following statement made by a Chinese official in 1847:

It is the great size and wealth and the numerous population of our country; still more in its excellent institutions, which may contain some imperfections, but which after all are immeasurably superior to the odd confused rules by which these barbarians are governed, but above all, in its glorious literature, which contains every noble, elegant, and in particular, every profound idea; everything, in short, from which true civilization can spring, that we found our claim to national superiority.

\footnote{281} Quoted in J. L. Cranmer-Byng (ed.), An Embassy to China: Lord Macartney’s Journal 1793-1794 (London: Longmans, 1963), p. x. The ‘Macartney Mission’ was Great Britain’s first attempt at establishing diplomatic contact with China.
As was the case for statecraft within its borders, employing ethical policies and enhancing moral suasion, rather than the use of force or coercion, were heralded as the primary means to develop a country’s political power, which not only served to complement its military strength and secure national prosperity, but was also necessary for maintaining good relations with other states. Mencius’ severe critique of those who claim the relevance of waging ‘just wars’ serves as an illustrative example of this attitude: ‘There are people who say, ‘I am expert at military formations; I am expert at waging war.’ This is a grave crime. If the ruler of a state is drawn to benevolence he will have no match in the Empire.’

The philosopher Xun Zi – a contemporary of Mencius – likewise posited that ‘One who uses the state to establish justice will be king; one who establishes trust will be a lord-protector; and one who establishes a record of expediency and opportunism will perish’. Obviously, the task here was to seek the way of the ‘True King’ through responsible behaviour, and to avoid at all costs the path of self-destruction. Might, in this sense, certainly did not make right.

That said, it does warrant note that actual practices tended to deviate from these philosophical ruminations. Contention between the Confucian and Legalist schools of thought remained a recurring theme throughout Chinese history. In most cases, even if Confucianism were to be lauded as the dynasty’s dominant ethos, rulers often fell short of their ethical ideals, ultimately governing their countries through a fusion of Confucian and Legalist thought and a reliance on the political instruments of both law and ethics. It has, in fact, been posited that the Chinese idiom of ‘Confucian in appearance, Legalist in substance’ (ru biao fa li) better reflects the realities of the times, especially in view of the intense struggle for power that became commonplace after the demise of the Qin and the founding of the Han dynasty in 206 BC. One is particularly reminded of such historical figures as Liu Bei and Cao Cao, military warlords who lived during the Warring States period (220-280 BC). Political rhetoric,

282 Lau, Mencius, pp. 194-195.
in this respect, became highly significant. Rulers were expected, at the very least, to publicly acknowledge these considerations of responsible statecraft within and beyond their respective territories through consistent iteration in state policies — a practice which has evidently continued into the present-day.

Nevertheless, these ‘responsibility claims’ were not all without basis. One major strength of the Confucian government of the (early) Qing dynasty (1644-1911), for instance, lay in its constant attention to public approbation. Meant as a manifestation of the ruler’s virtue, activities aimed at improving the people’s well-being were undertaken to garner loyalty to the regime (which had originally been labelled as a ‘foreign invader’ due to its Manchu roots).\(^{284}\) Disaster relief, in particular, often became the regime’s litmus test. Falling within the purview of imperial administrators, efforts at flood control by initiating water conservancy and hydro-engineering projects — most notably the building of dikes and irrigation systems — together with famine relief by maintaining regular granary supplies and providing grain loans, were all intended as demonstrations of the state’s responsibility.

**Nationalist and socialist visions of the responsible state**

Curiously reminiscent of the intellectual discourses of Socrates and Plato, Mencius averred that should a ruler fail to govern his people responsibly or should he prove to be corrupt, they had the ‘right of revolution’ (geming quanli) — that is, to overthrow and kill a ruler without being guilty of the crime of regicide. Though considerably influenced by modern democratic and scientific ideals borrowed from Western learning, popular sentiments that emerged in 1911 up until the May Fourth Movement (1919) had also been, in part, undergirded by this indigenously-derived idea. Failure to contain the threats of European imperialism on the one hand, and the socially-degenerating effects of opium addiction among the masses on the other, had severely discounted the Qing’s ruling legitimacy, putting in motion the arduous process of decline and rendering inevitable the dynasty’s ultimate collapse. Natural portents, such as the massive flooding of the Yangzi River in 1911, further convinced onlookers that the Manchu dynasty had irrevocably lost its Mandate of Heaven.\(^{285}\)

No longer solely a ‘right’, anti-Qing protesters had effectively come to conceive of fomenting revolution as their paramount ‘responsibility’. It was their manifest duty

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\(^{285}\) The significance of natural portents and calamities is elaborated in the next chapter.
to effect socio-political change and to rid China of its imperial shackles and ‘national humiliation’ (guochi). This was a sentiment most passionately articulated by Chinese youths who collectively made up the New Culture Movement (Xin Wenhua Yundong). Consider, for example, the following excerpt from an article entitled ‘Call to Youth’ written by Chen Duxiu, the founding editor of the then highly influential Youth Magazine (later renamed New Youth):

...is the society of our nation flourishing, or is it about to perish? I cannot bear to answer. [...] I merely, with tears, place my plea before the fresh and vital youth, in the hope that they will achieve self-awareness, and begin to struggle. What is this self-awareness? It is to be conscious of the value and responsibility of one’s young life and vitality, to maintain one’s self-respect, which should not be lowered. What is the struggle? It is to exert one’s intellect, discard resolutely the old and the rotten, regard them as enemies and as a flood or savage beasts...

Critics of early reform and Westernisation like Ye Dehui, who argued that ‘the upholding of Confucianism leads to good government while the adoption of foreignism leads to disorder’ and that ‘if so far as there is morality, there must be Confucianism’, had not only alerted this new generation of Chinese youths to the close association between stagnant conservatism, Confucianism and the status quo, but had also revealed to them the need to eradicate all Confucian remnants for the old dynastic order to be successfully overthrown. Nevertheless, although by promoting ‘Mr. Science’ and ‘Mr. Democracy’ in the stead of ‘Mr. Confucius’, Chen along with his supporters were advocating a much more drastic break with China’s traditional past than the Self-Strengtheners of the late nineteenth century (who had then encouraged the amalgamation of classical Chinese traditions with Western ideas and technology), these two movements still retained some important similarities. Fully


[287] Ye also went on to posit that: ‘...If one keeps to kingly rule, there will be order; if one follows the way of the overlord [relying on power], there will be disorder’.

aware of the implications of the Western-imposed concept of ‘sovereign equality’ and China’s status as the ‘Sick Man’, both had attempted to popularise new visions of China’s place within European international society and, by extension, a novel understanding of its responsibilities.

Notably, in forwarding a slate of comprehensive reforms, Li Hongzhang and Zeng Guofan – two major figures during the Self-Strengthening movement – recognised how China was no longer insulated from the outside world, and that their country’s ‘outdated’ practices of statecraft now had to be renegotiated in view of a changing and highly treacherous international environment. Responsible statecraft, in this respect, required the Chinese state to undergo significant modernisation in socio-political, industrial and military terms, while at the same time necessitating its elites to incorporate a stronger sense of Realpolitik pragmatism. It is, indeed, noteworthy that despite having been condemned as a ‘traitor’ at the time by certain quarters of Chinese society (and also posthumously by the Communists), Li Hongzhang with his adept diplomatic skills, his role in quelling the Taiping Rebellion, and his ardent support for the country’s political transformation, was extolled in the West as an exemplar of the ‘responsible statesman’.

For the Self-Strengtheners and the New Culture generation alike, the ‘responsible state’ was not one that obstinately adhered to the ‘idealistic’ teachings of Confucius, Mencius or even the Legalist Shang Yang, but was one capable of regaining China’s lost prestige and acting pragmatically in its dealings with the foreign powers so as to safeguard national interests. Here, we saw Chinese political and intellectual elites moving from introverted conceptions of responsible statecraft of the imperial period, to more outward-looking understandings of state responsibility that anticipated greater Chinese engagement with the extant international order. Interest-laden pragmatism, as opposed to high-sounding moralising, explicitly became the basis of ‘responsible’ state conduct. Particularly in the aftermath of the First

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289 Following the signing of the Treaty of Tianjin in 1861, China was forced into recognising Great Britain’s sovereign equality with China, with the Xianfeng Emperor decreeing, ‘England is an independent sovereign state, let it have equal status’. Zhong Shuhe, Zouxiang Shijie [Towards the World] (Beijing: Zhonghua Press, 1985), p. 78; quoted in Zhang Yongjin, China in the International System, 1918-20: The Middle Kingdom at the Periphery (Hong Kong: St. Antony’s/Macmillan, 1991), p. 17.

290 It deserves note, though, that the Self-Strengthening Movement did not meet with much success. Egregious contempt for foreigners, coupled with quickly spreading xenophobia, soon rendered their efforts to introduce Western ‘instruments’ and ‘methods’ to traditional Chinese thought futile.

291 I am grateful to Dr. Richard Rigby for alerting me to this point.
World War, where Chinese interests had been blatantly disregarded at Versailles despite its participation on the side of the Allies, the need for China to be recognised as a legitimate member of the comity of nations became all the more pressing. These sentiments would resurface again later in the 1990s as part of a patriotic movement led by Chinese intellectuals in an attempt to reclaim their country’s historic grandeur. The movement was essentially founded on the belief that China’s increased participation in world affairs would constitute an important contribution to the peace and stability of the international system and that, as such, China should strive towards achieving its long-awaited ‘great power dream’ (*qianguo meng*).  

What these instances reveal is how indigenous understandings coalesced with foreign ideals to create novel perspectives on China’s roles and responsibilities, which have since shaped the course of modern Chinese history. Arguably, the new Chinese Republic that emerged from the rubble of Imperial China was constructed as much from the legacies of its past as from the new ideas that came with close foreign contact. Crucially, this was also the case in the prelude to the founding of the People’s Republic in October 1949. In a similar vein to the normative climate of the late-Qing/early-Republican period, China under Chairman Mao did not deny outright the basic rationale behind responsibility itself, but was instead resistant to particular interpretations of the concept that were seen to be based firmly within liberal democratic traditions. Indeed, at the height of the PRC’s ‘revisionist’ foreign policy, bolstering Communist revolutionary zeal at home and abroad was couched considerably in terms of ‘responsibility’, whilst prior to 1949 the expulsion of Japanese and European presence, together with the rectification of China’s humiliation, likewise served as the focal point for nationalistic rhetoric and accompanying conceptions of national responsibility.

Framed in terms of a ‘sacred duty’ (*shensheng zhize*), the purpose of such efforts were purportedly to rejuvenate and protect the ‘motherland’ (*zuguo*) against both foreign and feudal influences (see the illustrations below). On a personal level,

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292 I should note that, literally translated, *qianguo meng* would be ‘strong country dream’. For more on the legacy of this discourse within China, see Suisheng Zhao, ‘Chinese Intellectuals’ Quest for National Greatness and Nationalistic Writing in the 1990s’, *The China Quarterly* 152 (1997), pp. 725-745.
Illustration 1. Propaganda poster at the Northeast New China Bookstore, Mukden (1950). Artist: Ku Yuan. The captions read: ‘Through work characterized by daring and diligence, create our own civilization and happiness’ (above); and, ‘If our predecessors and we ourselves have been able to get through long and extremely difficult years and months, and have conquered strong internal and external reactionaries, why can we not, following the victory, establish a glorious and prosperous nation? – Chairman Mao Zedong’ (below).

Source: Taken from Richard L. Walker, China under Communism: The First Five Years (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950).

Source: Adapted from Walker, China under Communism.
historical stories like that of King Goujian of Yue enjoyed special prominence in popular narratives of resistance. Following in the patriotic culture of the late-Qing and Republican eras, King Goujian became a model for emulation, with the image of ‘tasting gall and sleeping on brushwood’ (woxin changdan) portraying a responsibility ascribed to every Chinese revolutionary and citizen. The expunction of national humiliation, together with such themes as ‘self-reliance’ (zili gengsheng) and ‘working hard to strengthen the country’ (safen tuqiang), became a leitmotiv in Chinese newspapers and magazines at the time, while leading literary figures like Cao Yu further assimilated them into dramatic plays that attracted much interest among the theatre-going public. As a result, not only did these ideas serve to complement the prevailing rhetoric of the CCP’s central leadership, but their circulation also contributed in a way to the political mobilisation of the Chinese people for the Communist cause.

Samuel Kim aptly writes that ‘if the traditional Chinese image of world order was an extension of the Confucian moral order, so was the Maoist image of world order an extension of revolutionary order and justice at home’. Having inherited the legacy of the New Culture Movement and its aspirations to rebuild the Chinese state, the communists essentially sought to reassert China’s pivotal role in ordering the world. Through the prism of Marxist-Leninist thought, they forwarded the vision of an international order undergirded by the values of populist revolution. Effecting change to the existing order was tantamount to Maoist China’s primary responsibility not only to itself, but equally to the rest of the developing world. To oppose ‘big-power’ chauvinism and the hegemonism of the West, along with promoting the liberation struggles of exploited peoples in the Third World, became the archetypal

293 In short, the story of Goujian proceeded as follows: During the Spring and Autumn period, Goujian, King of Yue, was defeated by his nemesis, the King of Wu, at Mount Kuaiji and was forced into servitude. After three years, Goujian was released. Fearing that his feelings of bitterness and humiliation would fade away as time passed, Goujian took precautionary measures to ensure that his memory would remain intact upon his return to Yue. He exchanged his soft silk-padded bedding for a pile of brushwood and hung a gall bladder from his ceiling so that every time he raised his head he would be reminded of bitterness. It was said that Goujian even built a new city at Mount Kuaiji and moved his capital there as a permanent reminder of Yue’s humiliating defeat. The moral of the story, however, was that through these and other measures, Goujian was eventually able to rebuild Yue and ultimately conquer the state of Wu, thus rectifying his humiliation. Adapted from Paul A. Cohen, ‘Remembering and forgetting national humiliation in twentieth-century China’, in Cohen, China Unbound: Evolving perspectives on the Chinese past (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p. 149.


rallying cries that were featured extensively in official discourses. Chapter I of the CCP's 1973 Constitution, for instance, states that:

[the CCP] upholds proletarian internationalism and opposes great-power chauvinism; it firmly unites with...the proletariat, the oppressed people and nations of the whole world and fights together with them to oppose the hegemonism of the two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union – to overthrow imperialism, modern revisionism...and to abolish the system of exploitation...so that all mankind will be emancipated.\(^{296}\)

Echoing the normative language of Imperial China, the PRC's foreign policy was also situated within a language of justice and morality, to the effect that the idea of social justice became an intrinsic component of national power.\(^{297}\) Interestingly, even Mao himself drew parallels between China's past and its situation then. 'The Chinese nation is known through the world not only for its industriousness and stamina,' so the Chairman tells us, 'but also for its ardent love of freedom and its rich revolutionary traditions. The Han People for instance, demonstrates that the Chinese never submit to tyrannical rule but invariably use revolutionary means to overthrow or change it.'\(^{298}\) Coinciding with the ideological fervour of the Cultural Revolution, this discourse became markedly powerful during the 1960s and 1970s, especially with the publication of Lin Biao's *Long Live the Victory of the People's War* in 1965. These sentiments were subsequently matched by Zhou Enlai's declaration in 1967, amid North Vietnam's armed struggle against American intervention, that 'The Chinese people...have further strengthened their sense of duty to [proletariat] internationalism and will certainly render still more effective aid to the Vietnamese people...thus contributing to the revolutionary cause'.\(^{299}\)

Viewed in this light, promoting 'people's revolution' was not at odds with 'peace among states'; rather, it was the latter's *sine qua non*.\(^{300}\) Although the PRC's policy of providing 'no strings attached' assistance and low or zero interest loans to


\(^{297}\) Kim, *China, the United Nations, and World Order*, p. 88.


developing states was far from palatable to the United States and its allies, from the perspective of the weaker states that had just emerged from protracted anti-colonial struggles, Chinese aid and support (even if only verbal) seemed to be within 'the bounds of appropriate behaviour'.\textsuperscript{301} In addition, this is further compounded by the fact that, as Rosemary Foot points out, claims of China failing to observe the principles of the UN Charter had been considerably undermined by the ambiguities in international law on the subject of the non-use of force with respect to national liberation movements.\textsuperscript{302} Should global governance be broadly interpreted in line with the management of the international system, then the PRC certainly carved out a unique role for itself, as it sought to reform the system for the sake of a more 'just' order.

Ultimately, what is evident from Chinese foreign policy during these turbulent years is the simple fact that as China came into closer contact with international society, it also became more deeply involved in the politics of responsibility. In its efforts to occupy both the moral and strategic high ground, the process by which the People's Republic came to identify itself vis-à-vis others became invariably tied to the processes of defining and delegating ethical obligations (positive responsibility) to itself, as well as blame (negative responsibility) to the developed world. Domestic understandings of personal and state responsibilities effectively spilled over into the international realm, becoming tied to the PRC's outward role conceptions. As a consequence, whilst cognisant of how assertions of responsibility can act as a constraint on a state's power, both implicit and explicit use of a language of responsibility during the Maoist era served more of a constitutive function, working to justify Chinese activities and its position within international society.

By portraying itself as both a victim of Western exploitation and a \textit{de facto} 'leader' of the Third World, it was able to reinforce the distinction between China as a 'responsible power' and the 'big powers' as the 'great irresponsibles' in the eyes of the developing states, which were deemed to be the most important politically to the PRC's legitimation as a rightful member of international society (especially vis-à-vis Taiwan). It comes as no surprise that one of China's key narratives during this period had been formed around its status as the only developing country with a veto power in the UN. Unlike its peers in the Security Council, China was depicted as constantly

\textsuperscript{301} Foot, 'Chinese Power', p. 7.
\textsuperscript{302} Foot, 'Chinese Power', p. 7.
striving to ensure that marginalised voices were adequately represented, and was thereby seen to be actively engaged in speaking responsibility to the embedded power structures of existent global governance arrangements. Nonetheless, in what can only be construed as illustrating the multivocal nature of responsibility, just as the Chinese accused the West — or more precisely the U.S. and the Soviet Union — as being ‘irresponsible’ and ‘revisionist’, so was a similar language of irresponsibility applied to China by the very actors whom it sought to shame.

As elucidated in the ensuing section, certain of these dominant ideas and themes from China’s imperial and post-colonial past remain as latent motifs in contemporary Chinese conceptions of responsible governance in both the domestic and international realms, illustrating how indigenous interpretations of responsibility have coexisted alongside those derived from external sources.

**Rethinking China’s Global Responsibilities**

In the previous chapter, I examined at length Hedley Bull’s notion that Great Powers have certain rights and obligations that consequently work to delineate their parameters of legitimate action. As a developing great power, this effectively begs the question of whether similar responsibilities also apply to China, working to constrain its capacity to act. In light of the preceding discussion on global governance, this further raises questions with regard to the extent to which China’s culturally and historically contingent experiences will influence how it approaches such ideas as global governance and responsibility, as well as whether this will lead China to assume more of a ‘rule-taker’ or ‘rule-maker’ role in world politics.

Given its function as a fundamental idea underlying the normative basis of global governance architecture, the concept of responsibility proves to be of particular importance when analysing Chinese engagement with the rest of the world. Prompted, in part, by the international scrutiny being cast on its ‘rise’ and the corresponding imperatives for it to project a positive image onto the world stage, China has perceptibly undergone a shift towards a more explicit language of responsibility in recent years.303 Compared to when it joined the UN Security Council in the 1970s,

303 See Zheng Yongnian, ‘Zhongguo: daguo siwei yu daguo zeren’ [China: Great Power thought and Great Power responsibility], Tongzhou Gongji 8 (2008); and Pan Zhongqi and Zheng Li, ‘Zhongguo
which saw the PRC remaining fairly aloof from its duties as a Permanent Five member.\textsuperscript{304} China has progressively come to demonstrate a greater willingness, especially within the past decade, to participate constructively in UN decision-making processes. Having since gone on to sign two key international covenants on human rights in 1997 and 1998 (i.e. the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights), not to mention other milestone agreements, including the Non-Proliferation Treaty and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1992 and 1996 respectively, the PRC has noticeably begun to move away from its original inclination to maintain a ‘passive’ stance in such procedures toward more extensive cooperation.\textsuperscript{305} In more recent years, China has taken a number of notable strides, of which its decision to endorse some of the UN’s proposed sanctions against the Qaddafi regime in Libya,\textsuperscript{306} and its support for the ‘responsibility to protect’ as a ‘guiding principle’ at the 2005 UN World Summit serve as instructive examples.

These examples aside, Beijing has also been keen to highlight China’s considerable contributions to such areas as anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden, where a Chinese Naval Task Force was deployed to join the international naval expedition in operation there, with a mandate to patrol the surrounding waters as well as escort commercial convoys and vessels transporting humanitarian supplies that traverse this sea lane; international disaster relief, with the Chinese government having provided financial and technical assistance to affected countries in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the 2010 Pakistan Floods, and most recently the

\textsuperscript{304} Foot, ‘Chinese Power’, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{305} Foot, ‘Chinese Power’, pp.17, 8.

\textsuperscript{306} On a related note, China (along with four other countries, including Russia) opted to abstain from voting on UNSC Resolution 1973, having been reluctant to endorse the imposition of a ‘no-fly zone’ over Libya. By implication, this move enabled the Security Council to go ahead with the measure. While it is debatable as to what extent this represents ‘responsible behaviour’ on China’s part, the fact that the PRC abstained, instead of exercising its veto, has been interpreted by some as signaling a gradual shift in Chinese diplomacy (presumably, that the Arab League supported the resolution, with the African Union also strongly condemning the human rights violations in Libya, made it all the more difficult for China to oppose mainstream sentiments on the issue for fear of risking its international reputation).


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2011 Tōhoku Earthquake; as well as UN peacekeeping operations, where more than 2,000 Chinese peacekeeping personnel have been dispatched to eleven of the UN’s nineteen missions currently taking place. Chinese pundits are likewise eager to stress their country’s successful attempts at spearheading multilateral and regional initiatives like the Six-Party Talks or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which have helped to forge deeper regional ties and promote a shared sense of collective security.

Significantly, Chinese involvement in each of these issue-areas has been framed in highly normative and ethical terms, where China is depicted as rightfully shouldering its global responsibilities and meeting with international expectations as a ‘legitimate’ great power. At the 8th Shangri-La Dialogue back in May 2009, for instance, Deputy Chief of the General Staff Ma Xiaotian commented on how ‘China upholds independence, but at the same time undertakes its share of international obligations...[as] a responsible major power.’\textsuperscript{307} Regardless of whether such claims are made with or without strategic considerations in mind, they remain inherently normative, not only denoting the fact that this is what China is doing, but equally expressing the sentiment that it is what China ought to be doing.

In the case of the People’s Liberation Army Navy’s (PLAN) excursion into Somali waters, the high-profile public relations campaigns that surfaced in the lead-up to Beijing’s official announcement of the deployment of its three-ship fleet\textsuperscript{308} to combat rampant piracy (and which also followed thereafter) was carefully framed – largely in an attempt to forestall any international censure of its perceived ‘assertiveness’ – not only with reference to UNSC resolutions and international maritime security, but also in terms of China’s benign intentions as a responsible power.\textsuperscript{309} Marking the first time Chinese warships have patrolled outside Chinese territorial waters, naval action in this issue was portrayed as a ‘strong political message to the international community’ that ‘a China with its improved economic and military strength is willing to play a larger role in maintaining world peace and


\textsuperscript{308} Two destroyers – the Haikou and the Wuhan – along with a supply vessel, the Weishanhu, were sent on the mission.

security'. It was also lauded by Chinese analysts as a major shift in the country’s strategic mindset and threat perception, with the unprecedented naval deployment signalling a move away from the priority of traditional security concerns to an emphasis on non-conventional security challenges that originate from within and beyond Chinese borders.

Assertions of responsibility are also abundantly found in relation to the PRC’s well-documented participation in UNPKOs. Aimed at ‘demonstrating China’s sentiments of responsibility [zeren gan] as a great power’, Chinese involvement in PKOs has undoubtedly garnered the PRC much praise from the international community, effectively boosting its image as a legitimate member of the world society (that is, as opposed to a ‘peripheral’ one, as was the case during the Maoist period). As observed by one Chinese scholar, being a UNSC member, China has ‘important responsibilities towards maintaining world peace and security’, with participation in peacekeeping missions constituting a necessary responsibility that China ‘ought to shoulder as a great power’. Closely echoing this view, a Chinese news piece reporting on Premier Wen Jiabao’s announcement of China’s decision to send a peacekeeping force to Lebanon in late 2006, concluded with the following words: ‘China, in safeguarding world peace and promoting common development, is playing an increasingly important role, while also showing to the world [the image of] China steadfastly and consistently pursuing a peaceful development path’.

The practical import of these statements becomes especially remarkable when one considers the PRC’s historical recalcitrance towards peacekeeping operations and the broader idea of humanitarianism, which were suspected to be a façade for Western attempts at interference into the affairs of the developing world. This was especially the case in the years prior to China’s ascension to the UNSC seat that had been

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313 In Chinese, the original statement was phrased in the following terms: ‘中国在维护世界和平与促进共同发展中正发挥着越来越重要的作用，也让世界看到了中国坚持走和平发展道路的国家形象.’ See ‘Actively participating in safeguarding world peace’.
characterised by the government’s strong opposition to the very notion of states having an external obligation to international peacekeeping. It has in fact taken only a matter of decades – starting from the late 1980s onwards, when China first articulated an interest to contribute to peacekeeping and subsequently joined the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (despite harbouring some reservations given its continuing adherence to non-interventionism)\textsuperscript{314} – for the People’s Republic to open up to more flexible interpretations of state sovereignty, and to increasingly embrace an ethic of humanitarian responsibility, as enshrined in the notion of human security (rendered into Chinese as \textit{ren de anquan}) and the R2P principle (\textit{baohu de zeren}). To date, China constitutes the world’s 14\textsuperscript{th} largest contributor of personnel to UNPKOs, and is first among the other four Security Council members.\textsuperscript{315}

What these examples reveal is how the PRC’s obligation to ‘carry out responsibility’ (\textit{chengdan de zeren}) has habitually been made in relation to non-traditional security concerns that can range from environmental and public health-related issues to matters concerning the global economic order, illegal migration, and transnational crime. This narrative formally entered Chinese political discourses through the government’s issuing of a ‘Position Paper on Enhanced Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues’ in the lead-up to the 2002 ASEAN Regional Forum.\textsuperscript{316} Crucially, the paper acknowledged the intrinsic connection between these assorted challenges and China’s role as a responsible power as follows:


\textsuperscript{316} Contrary to widely-held beliefs that the 1997 New Security Concept had predated the usage of the term ‘non-traditional security’ (\textit{fei chuantong anquan}), a number of Chinese scholars now contend that the notion of non-traditional security had actually preceded that of the New Security Concept, having first appeared in a paper by Peking University-based scholar Wang Yong as early as 1994, although it would be some time before the term became mainstreamed in Chinese IR circles.

As a responsible member of the international community, China stands ready to develop coordination and cooperation with other countries in the field of non-traditional security issues and encourage ARF to have further non-traditional security dialogue and cooperation so as to make positive contribution [sic] to the maintenance of regional peace and stability.\(^{317}\)

Consistent with the central themes postulated here, the CCP’s 16\(^{th}\) Party Congress report went on to further recognise the ‘intertwined’ nature of traditional and non-traditional security issues in its ‘blueprint’ for the country’s socialist modernization and development, with the State Council’s National Defense White Paper published shortly thereafter similarly identifying these issues as collectively representing a key task for national defense.\(^{318}\)

To cope with these unavoidably transnational problems that exceed the capabilities of any one state to mitigate and which threaten both international stability and China’s own public security, this has led some scholars to significantly spotlight the need for Chinese conceptions of responsibility to similarly ‘know no limits’ and ‘know no boundaries’.\(^{319}\) That is to say, they accentuate the need for collective responses and a shared sense of responsibility at the global level. In this light, ‘security’ becomes a public good to which China has an imperative to contribute.\(^{320}\) This falls in line with official Chinese discourses on the New Security Concept (xīn ànquān guān) which have, since 1996, endorsed the cultivation of ‘common security’ to be one of its main foreign-policy objectives. Deepening relations of state interdependence are stressed as an inevitable fact of contemporary international life in an effort to promote the spread of common interests and social progress, with equal emphasis also placed upon the long-held Chinese principles of ‘mutual trust, mutual benefit and mutual respect’ as a means to facilitate cooperation and governance on the basis of cultural diversity and political difference between members of the global


\(^{318}\) For the full text of the white paper, see State Council, China’s National Defense in 2002. [On-line] Available at: http://www.nit.org/db/china/eng/docs/whpandef_2002.htm (accessed 10 August 2011). Interestingly, even ‘cooperation for the development of the Mekong River valley’ was mentioned at one point in the text as constituting an example of China’s initiative to tackle such issues.

\(^{319}\) According to Zhang Haibin, ‘Responsibility knows no boundaries. Every country should do more for the world’s interests. There is only one world, and China is also a member of it’. Interview with Prof. Zhang Haibin, School of International Studies, Peking University, Beijing, China (16 December 2009).

\(^{320}\) See Yu and Li, ‘Non-traditional security’.\(^{\text{121}}\)
community. It is, essentially, in this sense that the PRC’s fulfillment of its international responsibilities has become inextricably linked to both its external and internal security. And it is also within this context that recognition of China’s status and obligations as a global power have come to be shaped as much by external factors as by domestic ones.

Indeed, the notion that China is shouldering a dual burden of responsibility is one which resonates most strongly with the modern-day Chinese experience. Apart from precipitating the PRC’s re-emergence as a major player within the contemporary international system, Deng Xiaoping’s ‘reform and opening up’ campaign (gaige kaifang) had further instigated a political roadmap of modernisation and development. Central to this roadmap was the notion of the ‘strong state’, one capable of handling the country’s unprecedented economic growth and managing social stability on the one hand, whilst balancing the country’s mounting international and domestic responsibilities on the other. It has become increasingly evident that the CCP’s ruling legitimacy hinges upon both its capacity to deliver well-being and prosperity to the Chinese people, as well as its ability to respond to external pressures to become a constructive participant in existing global institutional structures. It is this confronting challenge that the Chinese leadership assiduously strives to surmount, and one which has come to define the country’s long march toward achieving its ‘great power dream’.

Of particular interest here is how the multifaceted nature of Chinese responsibilities have further prompted the emergence of two varying conceptions of Chinese responsible governance: one grounded in the idea of self-governance and the other based on the political discourse of constructing a harmonious world. Both have been advanced by Chinese intellectuals and policy-makers as ‘complementary alternatives’ to existing (Western) modes of global governance – models which should be similarly adopted by other countries.

Self-governance as global governance?
In February 2009, Vice-President Xi Jinping made the following rebuttal in response to international criticism of Chinese behaviour overseas: ‘China does not export

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revolution, for one. China does not export poverty or hunger, for two. And, China
does not fool around [bu zhe teng] with you, for three. What else need be added?" The
import of this statement lies in how it reveals China’s introspective sense of duty in
global affairs. When asked to elaborate on what responsibility means to China, the
majority of scholars I interviewed found it necessary to sharply differentiate
between the PRC’s international and domestic responsibilities, with the latter seen to
take precedence over the former. This mindset mirrors that of the policy elites who,
like Xi Jinping, are wary of ‘overburdening’ China with international commitments at
the risk of neglecting duties within its own borders. Reluctant to assume global
leadership, Beijing is prone to prioritising internal development and stability above all
else, claiming that this in itself constitutes an important contribution to the world at
large. The reasoning behind this is a deceptively simple one: given its position as the
world’s most populous country, ensuring the security and well-being of the Chinese
people, along with the stability of the country, already constitutes an act of global
governance. As one Chinese scholar puts it, ‘This is not merely a domestic affair, but
also one of international significance. It is the greatest contribution that China makes
to humankind by working out solutions to internal problems such as development and
stability’.

Based on this, the fulfilment of these state-level responsibilities in accordance
with national interests becomes a foremost imperative for the Chinese state. While
such an assertion might sound like a return to ‘states’ rights’ discourses, it does reach
beyond conventional statist interpretations of responsibility. There is no denying the
fact that China constitutes one of the world’s major developing powers and that, as a
consequence, it is invariably placed in a unique yet fragile position. Here, domestic
goals like poverty eradication understandably remain of paramount importance to the
Chinese leadership, being crucial to its credibility both at home and abroad. There is
also no denying how the PRC’s internal problems tend to have repercussions beyond
its territorial borders. Discussed at greater length in the next chapter, the

322 ‘Xi Jinping qiaozhe taguo gui hua shiwu zhishouhuajiao’ [Xi Jinping skillfully scolds other countries’
finger-pointing at Chinese affairs], Wenweipo (13 February 2009), p. 4; quoted in Shih, ‘A Responsible
324 Ren Xiao, ‘Yanjui he lijie Zhongguo de guoji zeren’ [Studies and understandings of China’s
Liqun, ‘China’s Foreign Policy Debates’, p. 42; see also Hu Jian, ‘Zhongguo zeren yu heping fazhan
daolu’ [China’s responsibility and peaceful development path], Xiandai Guoji Guanxi [Contemporary
transboundary nature of many of China’s ongoing environmental challenges serves as an apt illustration of this ‘spill over’ effect.

From this perspective, some scholars have argued that the relevance of ‘self-governance’ is confined not just to the Chinese case, but that it is equally applicable to other (developing) countries. In fact, part of the discourse surrounding Hu Jintao’s concept of ‘Harmonious World’ centres on this very idea that every state should strive towards building its own ‘harmonious society’ by enhancing the material prosperity and spiritual well-being of its people.325 This also falls in line with Jiang Zemin’s proposed concepts of (socialist) ‘spiritual civilisation’ (jingshen wenming) and ‘political civilisation’ (zhengzhì wenming), where achieving ‘all-round progress’ (quannian jinbu) and adhering to the so-called ‘Three Represents’ (sāngé daibiao) were claimed to be the ultimate tasks facing the responsible state.326 Self-governance, in effect, constitutes a legitimate mode of global governance insofar as it responds to global concerns through the fulfilment of a common obligation to address internal problems with the interests of the people in mind and without ‘exporting’ them to others – an idea which notably resonates with former British Foreign Secretary David Miliband’s concept of responsible sovereignty.327 Additionally related to this is the argument that by ensuring ‘good practices’ within, this further serves to minimise the need for outside interference in the domestic affairs of individual states, thereby helping to prevent the ‘abuse’ of global governance discourses.328

Not surprisingly, the notion of self-governance as global governance also has its historical precedents. Looking back to the varied Chinese images of responsible statecraft, one is undoubtedly struck by the confluence of the domestic and international realms. Certainly, the idea that internal stability amounts to external stability not only parallels long-standing Chinese concerns over the maintenance of social and political ‘harmony’, but it also bears much semblance to historical perspectives where the public was deemed to be a logical extension of the private, and

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326 Discussed further in the next chapter, the idea of ‘ecological civilisation’ (shengtai wenming) builds on Jiang’s ‘civilisational’ concepts, having consequently become increasingly central to contemporary Chinese political thought as well.
327 See Miliband, ‘Responsible sovereignty’; and Miliband, ‘Conflict and responsible sovereignty’.
where disorder at home was equated with disorder under heaven. As seen in one of Jiang Zemin’s speeches, ‘rule by law’ (fazhi) and ‘rule by virtue’ (dezhi) continue to be identified as necessities for social development and good government, if not always in practice then at least in rhetoric.\textsuperscript{329} This, of course, closely mirrors both Legalist and Confucian variations on responsible statecraft.

**Towards a Harmonious World under Heaven?**

Hu Jintao first advanced the idea of Harmonious World at the 60\textsuperscript{th} session of the UN’s High-level Plenary Meeting in September 2005. Since then, the term has effectively come to define the Hu leadership, whilst marking the return of Confucian culture to Chinese political thought. Analogous to the government’s ‘peaceful development’ rhetoric, it is a concept that speaks directly to the aforementioned ideas of

![Photograph 1. Sign in Jilin Province: ‘Building a Harmonious Society’ (jian hexie shehui)](http://www.flickr.com/photos/8524717@N04/3589010797/sizes/m/in/photostream/)

preserving the 'Great Harmony' (datong) and 'peace under Heaven' (Tianxia ping’an). The significance of this ‘harmonious world’ discourse thus lies in how it captures the essence of the Chinese vision of global governance – one grounded in a pluralistic, albeit hierarchical, understanding of world order. The central task of global governance as such becomes one of uncovering common ground amid difference. Supposedly extricated from the grips of Realpolitik, bringing about a harmonious world entails, namely, the creation of a multipolar system (duojihuа), adherence to multilateral governance, as well as the ‘democratic’ delegation of responsibilities.\textsuperscript{330}

Responsibility-sharing, based upon a general consensus, is emphasised on as integral to legitimate governance and positive engagement, where common responsibilities are seen to be ‘fairly’ divided among members of the world society, in proportion to their respective national capabilities. Again, the idea of ‘responsibility commensurate to power’ resurfaces here. This point was likewise stressed by President Hu, who in his 2005 speech commented on how:

The developed countries should shoulder greater responsibility for a universal, coordinated and balanced development in the world with further opening of their markets, more technology transfer, increased aid and greater debt forgiveness to the developing countries...The developing countries should make a fuller use of their own advantages to develop themselves, expand South-South cooperation and promote across-the-board progress in their own society.\textsuperscript{331}

From this remark, we are also reminded once more of the internal/external duality of responsibility: to maintain world order on the one hand, and ensure domestic development for the sake of a ‘prosperous and powerful’ country (fu guo qiang bing) on the other. As explored in greater depth in the ensuing chapter, it was this understanding of global responsibility-sharing dynamics that informed the Chinese and, more broadly, the BRIC countries’ positions on historical climate responsibilities at both the Copenhagen and Cancun summits. To somewhat


paraphrase the well-articulated idea of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’, the Chinese image of a harmonious world is essentially one which sees the attainment of common security through differentiated responsibilities.

At the intellectual level, Chinese scholars, most notably Zhao Tingyang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), have forwarded the corollary concept of a ‘Tianxia system’ (*Tianxia tixi*). In a similar vein to its historical usage, *tianxia* is understood to represent both the ‘world’ as a whole and ‘the greatest and highest’ form of order. Going a step further than the state’s ‘harmonious world’ policy, Zhao envisages the re-inauguration of a *Tianxia* system as having at its core the sense of ‘all-inclusive humanity’. Reminiscent of the classic Confucian notion that ‘within the four seas, all men are brothers’ (*si hai zhi nei, jie xiong di ye*), the idea of *tianxia* is meant to denote how the world constitutes ‘one family’. Viewed in this light, China’s responsibility logically translates into a global responsibility, just as Chinese problems invariably amount to world problems. For China to truly become a responsible power, it thus needs to be ‘responsible’ not only in a material (i.e. economic or military) sense, but equally in political and ideational terms. In Zhao’s words,

*Bearing responsibility for the world, and not just for one’s own country, this is China’s philosophical perspective. In practice it provides totally new possibilities, especially if we use ‘tianxia’ as the primary analytical unit for understanding political/economic benefits. When we use tianxia to understand the world, then we can use the ‘the world’ to analyse problems, and transcend the Western mode of thought that relies on nation/state, and then we will be able to take responsibility for the world as our own responsibility, and thus create new world concepts and new world structures.*

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332 Zhao’s book had actually preceded Hu’s 2005 speech at the UN by only five months. For more on Zhao’s works, see Zhao Tingyang, ‘Guanyu hexie shijie de sikao’ [On the harmonious world thought], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World Economy and Politics] 9 (2006), p. 1; Zhao, ‘Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept “All-under-Heaven” (*Tianxia*)’, *Social Identities* 12:1 (2006), pp. 29-41; and Zhao, ‘A Political World Philosophy in terms of All-under-heap (Tian-xia)’, *Diogenes* 221 (2009), pp. 5-18.


334 This has also been rendered as ‘*si hai yi jia*’ (within the four seas, [we are] one family). See also Shan Chun, ‘On Chinese Cosmopolitanism (Tian Xia)’, *Culture Mandala: Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural & Economic Studies* 8:2 (2009), pp. 20-29.

Clearly, the *tianxia* concept, much like the notion of self-governance, is inherently introspective and primarily concerned with managing order. It is, therefore, important for us to bear in mind that although these visions of global governance ‘with Chinese characteristics’ might be interpreted by some as a challenge to the status quo, their underlying rationale actually works to the contrary. While both advocate ‘reform’ of the existent system, this does not necessarily amount to an attempt to overturn the present order, especially considering how stability and order are identified as the very values that these models of responsible governance seek to uphold. It is in this sense that in spite of how these conceptions of global governance are being forwarded as potential alternatives to ‘Western-dominated’ modes of governance, they nonetheless share more in common with prevailing international norms and values than is often recognised in existing accounts.

**Conclusion: Limits to responsibility**

Given the current climate of ideas, for a state to derogate its responsibilities is no longer a politically or ethically viable option. It has undeniably become the case that a state’s international standing and its political suasion have become inextricably intertwined with the normative purposes of its practices. This is more so the case for China, as this chapter has illustrated.

In the spirit of Chinese exceptionalism, former Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress Qiao Shi exclaimed in 1993 that ‘we ourselves are a world and not a small one’.336 China’s unprecedented rise as a global actor, coupled with its recent discourses on becoming a responsible power, have rendered an investigation of how the People’s Republic conceives of ‘global governance’, as well as its roles in the conduct of world affairs, all the more exigent. Assurances of responsible behaviour and peaceful development, however, need to be substantiated by actual practice, which means that mere references to historical events - such as the ‘peaceful’ and ‘non-imperialistic’ voyages of the Ming eunuch Zheng He that have been extolled by the Chinese leadership – are far from satisfactory. Interestingly enough, one Chinese scholar has noted how the aforementioned idea of ‘Confucian without, but Legalist within’ remains pertinent to Chinese foreign policy.

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in the contemporary era. This, of course, foreshadows a perennial problem with regard to the ingenuousness of responsibility claims: to what extent are such assertions and pledges concealing more pragmatic and mixed motives?

In Chapter 1, I explained how it is implausible to try and separate politics from responsibility and that, in effect, the responsibility claims made by states are invariably political, oftentimes coloured by pragmatic thinking and informed by less-than-altruistic intentions, but that this should in no way detract from the normativity of such claims. However, in making this point, I am not attempting to deny the fact that China’s ‘responsible’ foreign policy suffers from a number of imperfections and paradoxes, for it does. Continuing attachment to the inviolability of state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference – though arguably feeding into statist conceptions of national responsibility – remain as impediments to Chinese contributions to international humanitarian efforts, as well as to the political openness of Chinese society. Unresolved problems in Tibet and Xinjiang, together with the recent controversy surrounding the awarding of imprisoned activist Liu Xiaobo with the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize and artist-cum-dissident Ai Weiwei’s detainment, continue to feature prominently in Western criticisms of the PRC’s human rights record, casting a doubtful shadow over the international community’s ability to bring an authoritarian China into its normative folds. At the same time, the PRC’s reticence to accept ideas dubbed as ‘Western’ further complicates matters, placing considerable constraints on Beijing’s willingness to fully espouse such ideas as the responsibility to protect or even global governance itself, and also potentially having serious implications for the enforceability of these ideas on an international scale. All of this is, of course, not to mention Beijing’s assistance to questionable regimes like those in North Korea or the Sudan. But I would argue that what is at issue here is not so much a complete lack of responsibility sentiments, but rather it is the contention eventuating from multiple and, at times, overlapping conceptions of responsibility.

Yet another complicating factor is China’s alternate identity as a developing power. Imbued with both past lessons and present experiences, the ideas of ‘reform, development and stability’ have, without doubt, come to form the cornerstones of Chinese foreign policy today. 337 Balancing between domestic and global responsibilities has, nevertheless, proven to be more difficult in practice than in

rhetoric. And while the government’s preference for Chinese self-governance is understandable given the gross economic disparities still found in China today, the wide-ranging repercussions of Chinese activities both at home and abroad have meant that there is growing pressure for China to move beyond its inward-looking imperatives to embrace more outward-looking responsibilities.

Following on from this, another two important limitations in Chinese conceptions of ‘responsible’ governance need to be recognised. First, there is still a tension between ‘harmony’ and ‘governance’ insofar as they manifest underlying tensions between respecting diversity on the one hand, and creating common ground based on an appreciation of universality, on the other. Needless to say, these are questions which remain hotly contested inside and outside of China, and which are unlikely to be resolved any time soon. Second, Chinese conceptions of governance continue to be mired in state-centric perspectives, where non-state and transnational actors are not afforded sufficient roles in governing processes. Even though this situation is not unique to the Chinese case, it is inherently problematic granted the broader global processes that have now rendered inevitable the introduction of new actors into the international public sphere.

That said, there are emerging trends which suggest oncoming winds of change. Especially in the realm of ecological governance, we are now witnessing the emergence of governing mechanisms that are not only cutting across state borders, but which are also increasingly being implemented as much from the ‘bottom-up’ as from the ‘top-down’. Taken together, the growing pluralism of Chinese society and the greater prominence of non-state actors – particularly transnational NGOs – within the global public sphere, have begun to open up space for the renegotiation of state responsibilities, as well as novel understandings of what ‘responsible governance’ entails. These gradual transformations, among other issues, will serve as the focal concern of the next chapter.
PART II

Governing Nature:
Locating ‘Responsibility’ in Chinese Foreign Policy
CHAPTER THREE

‘The Boat Is Sinking!’ — China, Responsible Stewardship and the Global Environment

The wise man delights in water,
The Good man delights in mountains.
For the wise move;
But the Good stay still.
The wise are happy;
But the Good, secure.

Confucius, The Analects 《论语》

If more than a hundred people in a leaking boat [were to] bargain as to who should scoop out the water, that is clearly foolish, [since] no one can [remain] that dry, in fact even the most selfish and impudent person on board would have to contribute a selfless scoop of water out of desperation.

Anonymous, ‘The Great Wisdom Aboard a Broken Boat’ 《破船上的大智慧》

The exponential growth China has experienced over the past several decades has come at a considerable price: that of the country’s ecological integrity. In light of the Chinese leadership’s obvious fixation on industrialisation and development, state efforts have until now been inexorably channelled into making

338 I would like to thank Professor Yu Tiejun for impressing on me this statement in our conversations.
340 The original text in Chinese is rendered as follows: ‘如果一百多人在漏水的船上讨价还价该往外舀水，那是明摆着的蠢，事实上没人会这么干，连船上那最自私最无耻的人，也会拿出最大公无私的精神拼命舀水的’ I have translated chuan as ‘boat’, as opposed to ‘ship’, given the Chinese cultural context, in which the term ‘boat’ (otherwise known as zhou) is commonly used in Chinese idioms to signify the sense of being in the ‘same boat’ (for example, the idiom tongzhou gangji, literally to ‘cross a river in the same boat’).
China a materially prosperous nation and a predominant power on the world stage. And as discussed in previous chapters, this is by no means a recent preoccupation. Ever since Deng Xiaoping’s reform initiatives, promoting economic growth has remained the main priority on Beijing’s political agenda. The result has, however, been mixed. On the one hand, this focus has allowed the People’s Republic to maintain a staggering average growth rate of around 9 percent for the post-1978 period, making it the world’s fastest-growing major economy, with there being no end to commentators predicting how the Chinese economy will surpass that of the United States as the world’s largest by 2020.\footnote{According to recent projections by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), China’s economy is forecasted to supersede that of the U.S. as soon as 2016. This is reportedly the first time that the IMF has officially made such a prediction on the prospective global economic power shift. For further details, see the IMF’s World Economic Outlook report, \textit{Slowing Growth, Rising Risks} (September 2011); see also Mark Weisbrot, ‘2016: when China overtakes the US’, \textit{The Guardian} (27 April 2011). [On-line] Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/apr/27/china-imf-economy-2016 (accessed 10 October 2011); and ‘China Overtakes Japan as World’s Second-Biggest Economy’, \textit{Bloomberg News} (16 August 2010). [On-line] Available at: http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-08-16/china-economy-passes-japan-s-in-second-quarter-capping-three-decade-rise.html (accessed 24 August 2010).} Yet on the other, privileging economic progress has clearly been at the expense of China’s natural environment, with consequences that are potentially irrevocable.

On 31 October 2011, the world’s population officially reached 7 billion, with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon acknowledging how it is expected to grow to 9 billion by 2050.\footnote{As world passes 7 billion milestone, UN urges action to meet key challenges’, \textit{UN News Centre} (31 October 2011). [On-line] Available at: http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40257 (accessed 10 October 2011).} From this number, more than 1.3 billion are in the People’s Republic alone. As foreshadowed in preceding chapters, China’s size is not only significant in relation to its status as a great power, but also in terms of its effects on the global environment. In the words of then Administrator of the PRC’s National Environmental Protection Agency Qu Geping (currently Chairman of the NPC’s Committee of Environmental and National Resource Conservation), ‘Whether in terms of land area or population, China is a large country which has a definite impact on the world’s environment. If China’s environmental problems can be solved, it will represent a major contribution to improving the quality of the world environment’.\footnote{Qu Geping, ‘China’s environmental policy and world environmental problems’, \textit{International Environmental Affairs} 2:2 (1990), p. 108; quoted in Morton, \textit{International Aid and China’s Environment}, p. 1.} Indeed, recent UN Climate Change Conferences have revealed the crucial importance of Chinese participation in deliberations and the delivery of outcomes, particularly in
Photograph 2. A smoggy afternoon in Beijing

Source: Taken by author

terms of devising and delegating the responsibilities and commitments expected of respective parties.

To a growing number of Chinese observers, the boat is undoubtedly sinking—not to mention at an alarming rate. And of course, it is not just the PRC’s environment that is critically at stake. Viewed within the context of deepening ties of interdependence between states and peoples, the global ecology is increasingly at risk from unrestrained consumerism and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. Transnational pollution serves as but one example of the inherently global dimension of these so-called ‘domestic’ problems. As such, whilst concerted action on the part of governments worldwide constitutes a definite necessity, equally vital is cooperation across the public and private spheres within individual societies. The fragmented, normatively ambiguous, and politically convoluted nature of these issues has meant that states, on their own, are no longer capable of dealing with the full spectrum of environmental challenges stemming from a fragile earth and volatile
climate. This is especially true for a country as socially diverse and geographically expansive as the People’s Republic.

The aim of this chapter is to uncover how Chinese conceptions of responsibility toward the natural environment have evolved in relation to China’s engagement with both domestic and international governing arrangements. Although it is certainly the case that unchecked economic expansion has exacerbated the degradation of China’s natural resources, problems originating from extreme weather conditions, including climate change, have actually been prevalent throughout Chinese history. The chapter, therefore, places a strong emphasis on interrogating the ways in which the human-nature relationship has been historically interpreted in tandem with shifts in the practice of responsible ecological governance. In so doing, I highlight how contested notions of environmental responsibility are found to have deeper roots in historical Chinese thought, once again emphasising how the idea of responsibility is by no means a modern artefact, but one which has been shaped by indigenous as well as exogenous understandings. To the extent that regime legitimacy has often been linked to natural occurrences and, more intangibly, to the temperamental power of nature, special attention is also afforded to the nexus between responsible stewardship, political power, and the management of state affairs – a relationship which, I argue, has long constituted an underlying leitmotiv in Chinese politics and society. In addressing these issues, this chapter introduces several important points that will reappear again in ensuing chapters, whilst outlining the broader context within which the thesis’ thematic cases on water and disaster governance are situated. Here, special attention is afforded to how the politics of responsibility has been palpable in ecological governance efforts at the global, national and local levels.

The chapter is divided into three parts. In the first section, I provide an overview of China’s current environmental crisis in the making, detailing the various challenges facing the Chinese government and its people. The second section explores the evolution of Chinese environmental stewardship – that is to say, how the Chinese conceive of ‘nature’ and understand their obligations to managing a highly complex, yet delicate, ecology. The main concern here is to illustrate how Chinese thought and praxis regarding responsible environmental stewardship have intersected and transformed over time. As such, I focus on continuities and changes before the contemporary reform era, so as to delineate the extent to which key discourses on environmental statecraft have corresponded to the major phases in Chinese thinking.
on global governance as examined in the preceding chapter, as well as to uncover the relevance of these discourses to contemporary Chinese attitudes on responsible stewardship. The final section proceeds to analyse contemporary Chinese efforts at managing ecological problems at the national level, before locating them within the broader context of global climate change. Adopting a multilevel governance lens, I further examine how Chinese conceptions of environmental responsibility have undergone significant contestation, not only at the international level but also at the local levels. In particular, the interactive dynamic between evolving international and domestic norms is emphasised, illustrating how they have collectively come to inform the politics of responsibility surrounding the PRC’s engagement with extant structures of ecological governance.

China’s Ecological Challenge

‘In China when people make policies, we don’t ask if nature will allow it or if nature agrees. We should. I have witnessed how China has cut down many forests. At each movement of Chinese history, the forests are the victims’.\(^{344}\) This statement made by long-time environmental activist Tang Xiyang captures an emerging sentiment within Chinese society, especially among communities affected by ecological degradation and the spread of industrial pollution, that a ‘business-as-usual’ attitude is no longer tenable. Heated debates have now surfaced both inside and outside of China over the sustainability of its current economic practices, together with the viability of its ongoing modernisation drive. As a report provocatively entitled ‘Before We Run Dry’ in the China Daily remarked, ‘The pursuit of economic growth has been the priority overshadowing the vital issues of water resources and ecological balance’.\(^{345}\) Unbridled development, in other words, has been the PRC’s double-edged sword, having come at the expense of the country’s natural resources and the invaluable ecological services they provide. At the crux of China’s contemporary environmental woes is thus its development dilemma.

According to one noted environmental scholar, the ‘uniqueness of [China’s] current environmental crisis lies in its scale, severity, and interdependence with the


outside world’. 346 Needless to say, there is ample evidence to corroborate this claim. Of the 20 most seriously polluted cities in the world, 16 are located in the People’s Republic. 347 ‘Cancer villages’ (aizheng cun) have now appeared as an established phenomenon in China, with more than 400 of such villages believed to exist. First reported in 1998 by the Chinese news media, these villages are characterised by a high rate of cancer-related deaths, with illnesses often traceable to industrial pollutants that have contaminated local water supplies. 348 Also noteworthy is how these cancer villages have been particularly endemic to the country’s developing, industry-intensive regions, with rural provinces like Hebei, Henan and Anhui identified as ‘top-ranked’ cancer-village provinces. 349 Indicative of a wider problem where Chinese local officials collude with polluting factories to attract investments, the emergence of these cancer villages reminds us of how reversing environmental decline is not just a matter of enhancing ecological security but is crucial to safeguarding human integrity. 350

Another pressing environmental problem in China is that of acid rain. Recently pinpointed as the reason behind damages made to important heritage sites like the Longmen Grottoes and the Leshan Giant Buddha statue in Sichuan Province, 351 the effects of acid rain are limited not just to hastening the corrosion of buildings and bridges. Increased sulphur dioxide (SO2) and nitrogen oxides (Nox) in the atmosphere as a result of fossil fuel combustion (chiefly from industrial plants and factories) can also lead in extreme cases to infertile croplands, as minerals and nutrients in the soil are dissolved by acidic downpours. Acid rain also threatens the country’s riverine ecosystems, granted how high acidity invariably renders rivers and lakes incapable of sustaining aquatic life. This, in turn, poses a direct threat to the country’s food

348 Given the proximity of some of the country’s most polluted rivers, including the Yangzi and Huai Rivers, to these aizheng cun, it is no mere coincidence that the largest concentration of these villages is found along the lower reaches of the Yellow, Yangzi and Pearl River deltas. Moreover, for villages like Mengzhi, Dachu, Sunying, and Xidatou in Henan, the rate can be more than twice the national average. In addition, it has been reported that Chinese farmers are almost four times more likely to die from liver and twice as susceptible to stomach cancer when compared to the global average. Watts, When a Billion Chinese Jump, p. 192.
350 These issues are raised again in subsequent sections of this chapter.
351 Both of these have been recognised as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.
security, at a time when critical droughts and flooding have already caused a substantial amount of failed harvests. Especially worrying is how at least 28 percent of China’s land territory, mainly located to the south of the Yangzi River, is believed to be affected by acid rain. A recent report by the Chinese Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) corroborates this, revealing that 258 cities and counties had recorded acid rainfall in 2009 alone, while the World Bank has calculated the damage caused by acid rain to be at RMB 37 billion annually.352

As an energy-intensive country that continues to be largely dependent on coal, chronic air pollution constitutes another critical problem. Apart from skyscrapers and bustling streets, thick smogs have now become a key characteristic of most Chinese cities. Impaired breathing and obstruction of normal vision are just some of the milder effects that air pollution can have on human health, with lung cancer and bronchitis being more serious consequences. Especially in Northern China, air pollution is made even worse due to the officially-sanctioned relocation of industrial complexes to this region. Notably, the problem of atmospheric pollution has posed as a prominent domestic concern as well as a significant transboundary problem for China’s neighbours. Based on a report conducted since the early 1990s by the Japanese Central Institute of Electric Power, it was estimated that half of the sulphuric ions found in Japan and a quarter of those in Korea had originated from China.353 Even now, the Yellow Dust (or Asian Dust) phenomenon, as it is popularly known, continues to pose ongoing challenges to South Korea, Japan and the PRC itself. Occurring annually and originating in large part from the arid lands in Northern China, it is a problem which has worsened significantly over time, aggravated by chronic desertification and industrial pollution in the Chinese mainland. In fact, not only have the occurrences of dust storms increased in frequency and severity within the past decade, but dust particles blown across the region are also attributed for causing a number of serious health problems, with the dust itself shown to contain an increase in industrial pollutants. To mitigate this problem, noteworthy afforestation initiatives have since been undertaken by China, whilst regional environmental cooperation

353 Taken from the Far Eastern Economic Review (4 February 1993); cited in Morton, ‘China and Environmental Security’, p. 56.
mechanisms like the Tripartite Environment Ministers’ Meeting (TEMM) have also been created to deal with the issue.\textsuperscript{354}

Certainly, the Yellow Dust problem constitutes only one of many examples of how the degradation of environmental resources, compounded by the effects of climate change, has made the People’s Republic all the more vulnerable to natural disasters, which range from extreme floods and droughts to long-term problems like biodiversity loss and emerging water shortages. As seen from the unraveling environmental crisis on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, desertification and pasture degradation due to overgrazing, along with peat mining and falling groundwater levels, are among the many ecological challenges threatening the region. In the Three Rivers Source Region, which boasts a number of rare and endangered wildlife and contains one of the world’s few largely intact grassland ecosystems, ‘black beaches’ (i.e. bare sand patches) are emerging in the place of degraded pastures, with the total area of its wetlands having decreased by 648 km\textsuperscript{2} by the 1990s.\textsuperscript{355} Equally of concern is how climate change and the resultant increase in temperature have led to faster rates of surface water evaporation on the plateau and a decline in precipitation. The Yellow River, for instance, had reportedly ceased to flow entirely in its source region on three occasions in the winters of 1961, 1981 and 1998.\textsuperscript{356}

Crucially, this points to yet another of the PRC’s recurrent problems, which is the management of its water resources. China’s annual per capita water supply is less than half of the global average, being even lower in its northern parts. It is claimed, for example, that between 50 to 90 percent of urban groundwater is contaminated by municipal wastewaters, agricultural runoff, as well as industrial pollutants, while some have estimated that up to 360 million people living in rural communities do not


\textsuperscript{355} John D. Farrington, \textit{Impacts of Climate Change on the Yangtze Source Region and Adjacent Areas} (Beijing: China Meteorological Press, 2009), p. 41.

\textsuperscript{356} This is not to mention the melt-off of river source glaciers and degradation of permafrost that supports the plateau’s wetlands. The otherwise pristine environments found in the Zoige Basin and Qinghai Lake Basin have all exhibited the symptoms of such ecological deterioration. See Farrington, \textit{Impacts of Climate Change}, p. 40.
have access to potable water.\textsuperscript{357} With China’s decreasing supply of water resources becoming an exigent concern for the Chinese leadership (as well as the rest of the world), it seems that the PRC’s ecological challenge now stems not only from what ‘it has too much of’ (e.g. pollution and carbon emissions) but equally from ‘what it doesn’t have enough of’.\textsuperscript{358}

China’s ‘water woes’ are exceptional in that the country suffers from both water shortages and excesses due to the uneven distribution of this natural resource. In the arid North, we find a stark situation of water deficiency as one-third of the Chinese population live in conditions of ‘absolute water scarcity’, with only 7.6 percent of the country’s freshwater reserves.\textsuperscript{359} From October 2010 to early 2011, for instance, Shandong Province was hit by the ‘worst drought in 60 years’, which caused a shortage of drinking water for at least 240,000 people and affected 56 percent of the province’s wheat-planting areas. Yet to the South, communities are commonly faced with problems of flooding. One of the more severe examples would be the 2008 South China floods, where torrential rains and landslides, together with flooding for almost a month, affected fifteen provinces in the southern and eastern parts of the country, leading to much destruction and human casualties. This unique topography has led hydro-policy planners to propose a mega-water diversion scheme, commonly known as the ‘South-to-North Transfer’ project, which involves the construction of tunnel and canal networks across the country in order to transform the national landscape.

\textsuperscript{357} The issue of China’s looming water scarcity notably gained wider public attention – domestically and internationally – with the publication of Ma Jun’s book, China’s Water Crisis (Zhongguo shui weiji), whose influence on environmental awareness has oftentimes been compared to Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring. See Ma Jun, Zhongguo shui weiji [China’s Water Crisis] (Beijing: Zhongguo huanjing kexue chubanshe, 1999); Rachel Carson, Silent Spring (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962). Carson’s Silent Spring is generally attributed for engendering popular movements against environmental pollution and, more specifically, the use of pesticides like DDT (which was subsequently banned) in the United States.


\textsuperscript{359} Seckler, Barker, and Amarasinghe, ‘Water Scarcity’, p. 37.
and waterscape.\textsuperscript{360} Doing so, it is hoped, would help ease flooding in the South as the Yangzi’s waters are diverted to the North China Plain instead.\textsuperscript{361}

China’s woes are, however, as much the result of natural circumstances as of human activities. Aside from the overexploitation of water resources by the agricultural and industrial sectors,\textsuperscript{362} the country’s rivers and lakes have been extensively polluted by industrial and human wastes.\textsuperscript{363} Over-fishing and habitat fragmentation due to the construction of dams like the Gezhouba Dam or the Three Gorges (Sanxia) Dam on the Yangzi River, which alter the seasonal variations in water levels, have further threatened river life – an ecosystem upon which the economic development of 40 percent of the Chinese population depends. Vast stretches of one of China’s most historic rivers the Yellow River (Huanghe) have also been identified as either ‘dead’ or dying.\textsuperscript{364} It is in this sense that efforts to ‘control’


\textsuperscript{361} By means of a reminder, this mega-project was officially approved by the State Council in late 2002, although its conceptual roots can ostensibly be traced back to Mao Zedong in the 1950s, as previously noted.


Interestingly, at one point, ‘rumors’ had appeared in the Chinese news media about the possibility of Russia exporting water from Lake Baikal – located in southern Siberia and considered the deepest lake in the world (1,743 m), holding 20 percent of the world’s fresh surface water – to China. Both Russian and Chinese officials have denied any talks over such plans, leading some observers to speculate that the Chinese might have been trying to ‘test the waters’ to gauge Russian reactions to this idea. See Sergei Blagov, ‘China, Russia float idea of selling Baikal water’, \textit{Eurasia Daily Monitor} 2:107 (2 June 2005).

\textsuperscript{362} It has been forecasted that China’s agricultural and industrial water demands will grow annually by more than 10 percent and expected to rise overall by 40 percent by 2020.

\textsuperscript{363} It was reported, at one point, that annual discharges into the Yangzi River included, \textit{inter alia}, 20 billion tons of liquid waste, 1.7 million tons of wastewater, together with 300 million tons of oil-contaminated water and sewage. McCormack, ‘Water Margins’, p. 9.

water – or nature, more broadly – has coalesced with state-led discourses that prioritise development through modernisation. This is a knowledge paradigm which has, as explained later on, considerably influenced how China has come to understand its roles and responsibilities in relation to the management of the Lancang-Mekong River.

Compared to water management, the PRC’s efforts and prospects with regard to forest management seem to fare better, with the central government having notably imposed a logging ban in 1998 and spearheaded afforestation initiatives in such localities as Gansu Province. Yet, it remains the case that more needs to be done as the country’s forest cover is still visibly low and forest resources remain scarce. Despite efforts by environmental activists to raise grassroots awareness on the matter, and the central government’s attempt to promulgate national laws and standards to regulate water use, environmental mismanagement persists. As explained in the following sections, the implementation of environmental regulations at the local and national levels continues to be inhibited by the lack of institutional capacity and an official focus on development. At the same time, environmental cooperation on a global and regional scale, while met with some success, remains mired in contention.


This ban is known in full as the ‘National Plan for Ecological Environmental Construction’.

An example of this is scholar and environmentalist Ma Jun’s development of China’s first on-line database on water pollution – the China Water Pollution Map (Zhongguo shui wuran ditu) – hosted by the Beijing-based Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs. It allows the public to monitor China’s water quality and pollution discharges. This project has been lauded as a positive step in terms of generating greater information transparency. See Jennifer L. Turner, ‘New Ripples and Responses to China’s Water Woes’, China Brief 6:25 (2007). [On-line] Available at: http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4014&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=196&no_cache=1 (accessed 23 May 2011).

The China Water Pollution Map can be accessed at the following web address: http://www.ipe.org.cn/pollution/index.aspx.

For example, the Water Pollution Prevention Law, the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Law, and SEPA’s Standards of Ambient Surface Water Quality, Standards of Ground Water Quality, and Comprehensive Standards of Sewage Discharge.
Variations on ‘Nature’: the legacy of Chinese environmental stewardship

We tend to think of the Mongol incursions in the thirteenth century, or the British gunboats that encroached upon the Qing in the nineteenth century, as being quintessential examples of security threats to the state. While this is not necessarily a mistaken view, just as threatening were the recurring ecological problems, especially those that came in the form of water and climate-related cataclysms which constituted a source of long-term instability for the regime. Not only did these challenges pose major hazards to human lives and livelihoods (i.e. through the destruction of agricultural supplies), they also served as compounding factors that could, in times of war and social unrest, hasten the demise of the ruling elite.

It comes as no surprise then that the practice of environmental statecraft – that is, how state affairs are managed vis-à-vis the governance of the country’s natural environment – would prove central to the course of Chinese history and the development of Chinese society, with ecological resilience (understood here as how societies respond to ecological threats) emerging as an integral factor impinging on the country’s socio-economic growth as well as the longevity of the Chinese state itself. Considering how China has historically responded to such challenges can, therefore, potentially provide insights into how it is framing and dealing with similar issues today. To quote Jared Diamond, ‘there are differences between the situation we face today and that faced by past peoples, but there are still enough similarities for us to be able to learn from the past’.

Empire and the environment: harmonising the human-nature relationship

‘Heaven nourishes and Heaven destroys’ (tian sheng tian hua) is an idiom that appositely captures ancient Chinese wisdom regarding the natural world. This notion can be traced back at least to the Yellow Emperor’s Scripture on ‘Unconscious Unification’ (Huangdi Yinfujing), a classic text of the Daoist school, which averred in similar terms that ‘Heaven creates and Heaven

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369 The date of composition of this classic Daoist text remains uncertain, though some scholars have suggested that it might have been a ‘forgery’ composed sometime in the eighth century during the Tang dynasty (618-c.906).
destroys, [for] that is the way of the Dao’ (天生天杀，道之理也). Given how Chinese society has been unremittingly plagued by various forms of natural disasters since ancient times – from floods and earthquakes to famines and pestilence – the Chinese have undoubtedly found themselves, in John Fairbank’s apt words, ‘at the mercy of the weather, dependent upon Heaven’s gift of sun and rain’. Nevertheless, it is important not to overlook the benefits of nature from which the Chinese people have profited.

The Yellow River (Huanghe) valley, for one, is considered by most to be the cradle of Chinese civilisation. Abundant in natural resources and covered by dense forests and fertile soil, the region provided favourable conditions for the cultivation of crops, acting as a food bowl that supported communities with game and fish stocks from the river. Strategically, the Yellow River also aided the Qin state in gaining control over its neighbours and unifying ‘All under Heaven’. With the geostrategic advantage of being situated to the west and enclosed by the Yellow River, Qin forces had sufficient resources at their disposal to sustain extensive military campaigns unlike their rivals; resources that came to lie at the foundation of a powerful empire. In more ideational terms, the river in particular would become an auspicious symbol for the newly-established dynasty. According to the Records of the Grand Historian (史记) compiled by Sima Qian, in line with the theory of the Five Phases (wu xing), Qin Shi Huang purposefully renamed the Yellow River as the ‘River of (Virtuous) Power’ (shui de), symbolising how the Qin dynasty under the sign of Water was capable of conquering Fire, which had represented the previous Zhou dynasty.

Apart from its strategic value, the Chinese environment has also been prized in its own right. Even today, the Chinese people continue to take pride in their country’s natural beauty, idyllically characterised by ‘a thousand mountains and ten thousand rivers’ (qian shan wan shui). However, just as the environment has been a source of pride, so has it been a force for destruction. As illustrated below, this has

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370 Fairbank and Goldman, China: A New History, p. 17.
371 It has been estimated that the average annual temperature of the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River five to three thousand years ago was two degrees higher than at present. Bao Maohong, ‘Environmental Resources and China’s Historical Development’ (2005) [unpublished manuscript], p. 2.
372 This was where the preceding Zhou dynasty first rose to prominence.
373 Literally, this means ‘Qin First Sovereign Emperor’.
consequently given rise to competing perspectives – ranging from harmony to control – on how the human-nature relationship is to be best governed.

**Linking responsible rulership to responsible stewardship**

Daoist philosophy is known for its allusions to nature as well as its emphasis on maintaining balance between the three spheres of heaven, earth and humankind so as to highlight the interconnectedness of these spheres. Chinese artistic and literary works generally serve as a reflection of this theme, being replete with natural imagery. Classical Chinese artwork, for instance, has been well-known for how majestic *shanshui*\(^{375}\) landscapes – with their impressive waterfalls, mountains and crags – would dwarf the human figures and man-made structures featured alongside them. At the same time, the fact that aspects of humanity were finely integrated into these pieces demonstrated how people were seen an essential part of nature.\(^{376}\) Here, the idea of *tian ren he yi* (天人合一) was a pivotal one. Just as humans are socially and politically organised within an all-encompassing cosmic order, so are they inextricably bound to a complex ecological system, where everything is connected to everything else. The maintenance of harmony and unity between humanity and nature thus constituted a foremost necessity.

To the imperial Chinese mind then, the human-nature relationship was idealistically cast in a transcendental light, where ‘nature’ (*da ziran*)\(^{377}\) is, at once, omnipresent and impermanent. Nature, in this sense, represents the entirety of the physical world that eludes the machinations of human control. In fact, the very idea of *tian* embodies this view. Aside from its popularised rendition as ‘Heaven’ or ‘heavenly power’, *tian* can also be used to refer to the ‘sky’, the ‘weather’ (as in *tianqi*), and ‘nature’ more broadly, insofar as it denotes an ‘inherent force directing

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375 A direct translation of this is ‘mountains [and] water’, and specifically refers to a distinctive style of art form that became popular during the Tang and Song dynasties.

376 In accordance with Daoist philosophy where human beings were seen to be part of a far larger cosmic order, the purpose of these *shanshui* paintings was not so much to realistically capture the appearance of actual landscapes, but was instead aimed at realising and conveying the implicit ‘movements’ of the Dao, the eternal Way of Nature. This, of course, stands in stark contrast with the landscape art of William Turner and John Constable, which attempted to portray nature devoid of human interference, as well as the anthropocentric paintings of early Renaissance artists, where nature only served as a mere backdrop. Robert P. Weller, *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 22.

377 The Chinese term for nature can be rendered as both *da ziran* (‘great nature’) or just *ziran*. These are more contemporary translations.
the world’. Not only does this underscore the inherent relationship between heaven and nature within Chinese thinking, but it also reveals the many significations of nature embedded within Chinese culture. Concepts such as ecological conservancy and sustainability, although commonly seen as being modern ideas (not to mention Western in orientation), can actually be found to have similar antecedents in historical Chinese attitudes toward governing nature. Confucius, for one, was admired for having ‘caught fish with the rod, but never with the net; he hunted birds, but never when they were in their nests’, thereby allowing time for nature to replenish itself.

The challenge, however, centred on how this was to be accomplished – a challenge which was seen to rest with the ruling regime. The influential Confucian scholar and Han government official Dong Zhongshu (c.195-c.105), for one, believed firmly in the inviolable and mutually constitutive relationship between Heaven, earth, and humans, as embodied in his doctrines on the ‘interactions between Heaven and humankind’ (tian ren gan yi). By synthesising Confucian political thought with Daoist teachings (including the concept of yin-yang cosmology), Dong’s theory underscored the importance of natural omens and portents in validating political legitimacy and consolidating imperial authority, with such calamities as earthquakes, drought and famines read as admonitions from Heaven itself. Having been bestowed the

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378 Weller, Discovering Nature, p. 21. When combined with the word di (meaning ‘earth’), the term can gain an even wider scope, such that it can be used to signify the universe in its totality.
380 In a similar vein, consider the ensuing conversation documented in Sima Qian’s Shiji between Shang Tang, founder of the Shang dynasty (c.1766 BC-c.1122 BC), and Zhu who had set out a net trap:

Zhu said: ‘All things under heaven enter my trap’. Shang Tang replied: ‘What, your trap will lead to their extinction (jin)! Why not open three sides [of the trap]’. Zhu replied: ‘If I wish what is on the left, I get what is on the left. If I wish what is on the right I get what is on the right. I do not use special powers, and animals still go into my trap’. The officials who heard this story said: ‘Shang Tang is the more virtuous. He has attained knowledge of birds and beasts’.

380 In Dong’s words:

The genesis of all such portents and wonders is a direct result of errors in the state...If...men still know no awe or fear, then calamity and misfortune will visit them...We should not hate such signs, but stand in awe of them, considering that Heaven wished to repair our faults and save us from our errors. Therefore it takes this way to warn us.


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Mandate of Heaven, the Chinese emperor was essentially tasked with acting as the physical agency of Heaven. The onus of responsibility thus fell on the ruler to ensure that 'ordered harmony' was sustained in how humans related to the natural world through the adherence to proper rites (li) and the kingly way. Were it to be the case that the ruler fails to fulfil his moral obligations or engages in the abuse of his temporal powers, his duty would still have to be one of responding to such inauspicious events by rectifying his ways.\textsuperscript{381} To not address these admonitions would supposedly result in the revocation of Heaven's mandate entirely, a prospect that threatens to bring about much social unrest as well as the dynasty's eventual collapse.

On this view, a state of 天地交泰 (tian di jiao tai) – that is, peaceful and prosperous times resulting from celestial and terestrial forces being in harmony – can eventuate only with good governance, while political instability and violent uprisings, depicted by 'the heavens falling and the earth splitting asunder' (tian beng di lie), conversely surface as symptoms of weak or corrupt governance.\textsuperscript{382}

\textsuperscript{381} There is written evidence to suggest that this view is based not just on mere rhetoric, but on a deep understanding of ecological processes. This excerpt from the Wen Tao, composed during the Warring States period, attests to this: 'The rulers enjoy themselves degrading famous mountain spots. This blocks the great rivers which overflow around the famous mountains. Therefore, great floods come more often, harming the people and causing the crops not to grow'. Quoted in Edmonds, Patterns of China's Lost Harmony, p. 24.

\textsuperscript{382} Apparently, this harks back to Confucian notions of responsible statecraft, where the cultivation of a ruler's virtues and benevolence was fundamental to ensuring the people's welfare, as well as for lasting peace within and beyond the empire. Consider this in view of Confucius' statement that 'Tianming implies all of the proper sense of morality and responsibility of human life'. Confucius, Lunyu Xin Jie [New Understanding of the Analects], annotated by Qian Mu (Taipei: Dong datshu gufen youxian, 2000), p. 34.

Also to quote, once again, the prescient words of Dong Zhongshu:

[W]hen the human world is well-governed and the people are at peace, or when the will [of the ruler] is equitable and his character is correct, then the transforming influences of Heaven and Earth operate in a state of perfection...But when the human world is in disorder and the people become perverse, or when the [ruler's] will is depraved and his character is rebellious, then the transforming influences of Heaven and Earth suffer injury, so that their [yin and yang] ethers generate visitations and harm arises. (Fung Yu-lan, A History of Chinese Philosophy, trans. Derek Bodde, Vol. II (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 57.)

While Dong primarily interpreted natural portents as symbolising a withdrawal of the mandate to rule, other scholars were found to have perceptibly shifted later towards a more 'positive' interpretation that emphasised instead how these omens – together with natural imagery – represented regime legitimation. Consider the following excerpt from Ban Gu's historical account of the founding of the Han dynasty:

Now, the great Han has washed away all of the weeds of the Qin, eliminated danger and eradicated misery, expanded kingly glory and magnified imperial discipline...as it lords over the kingdom it brightens it like the sun, overawes it like a spirit, contains it like the ocean basin, and nourishes it like the spring. Therefore, all within the six directions...flow together from the same origin, are washed by
It is in this respect that the *tianming* became not a permanent attribute of rulership, but one subject to change according to the moral quality of human actions. References to such natural phenomena proved to be inherently politicised, working to enable as well as constrain the ruler’s power. Political legitimacy, in other words, became closely linked to how effectively the government was able to manage environmental ills. Reflecting Dong’s view of the human-nature relationship, this signalled the inauguration of a nature-centric value system that would influence successive understandings of the proper roles and responsibilities expected of rulers and ministers. Indeed, historical sources appear to attest to this, revealing how disasters and anomalies like floods, solar eclipses, plagues, hailstorms, and avalanches were recorded with greater frequency during periods of dynastic instability. This was the case for the Han, as well as the Southern Song, where the Mongol conquest was purportedly assisted by a dynasty already weakened by the *Huanghe* bursting over its banks on several occasions earlier in the thirteenth century. In like fashion, part of the Qing dynasty’s decline was precipitated by the government’s inability to deal with famine relief and flood control. Observance of the characteristics and social effects of the various seasons by the ruler and his ministers, together with knowledge of the stars, was thereby rendered as important requisites for the effective management of the environment, as well as the country more broadly.

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profound virtue, and naturally raised in great harmony. Leaves are applied to their branches, just as herbs and trees grow in mountain forests, and birds and fish grow among streams and marshes. That which obtains the Han’s influence [qi] has flourishing growth, while that which misses its era is scattered and desolate. (Quoted in Anthony E. Clark, *Ban Gu’s History of Early China* (New York: Cambria Press, 2008), pp. 155-156.)

383 Dong’s view eventually became the prevailing variant of Confucian philosophy for the Western Han dynasty.

384 This fact is evident from the annals of the *Book of the Later Han* (Hou Hantshu), which documented from the 160 years of later Han up until the Yellow Scarves rebellion in 184 the increasing number of calamities that befell the dynasty since the reign of Emperor Guang Wu (r.141-187). George A. Hayden makes similar observations, noting how the increased number of entries on natural disasters ostensibly reflected the anxiety of the record keepers over the fate of the Han, and acts as a ‘testament to the seriousness with which people at the time took these anomalies’. Hayden, ‘The Beginning of the End: The Fall of the Han and the Opening of the Three Kingdoms’, in Kimberly Besio and Constantine Tang (eds), *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 47.

385 Interestingly, the Mongols’ own downfall was marked by massive Yellow River floods sometime in the mid-fourteenth century. Radkau, *Nature and Power*, p. 109.

386 Historical documents have also shown how certain Han emperors were compelled into issuing edicts of repentance or self-criticism in the face of severe disasters during their respective reigns. According to the ‘Great Plan [of Jizil]’, included in the Document of Zhou (Zhoushu) of the Classic of History (*Shujing*),
Controlling nature as ‘responsible’ stewardship?

Crucially, the significance of these natural phenomena also reached beyond the political ruminations of the ruling elites to impact Chinese society on a more localised level. As previously mentioned, not only has the way in which the Chinese have adapted to their physical environment proven vital to their survival, but Chinese ways of living have likewise been distinctively ‘nourished, conditioned, and limited by the good earth and the use of it’. The Yellow River, though central to the growth and development of Chinese society, has equally been known as a force of widespread destruction. The catastrophic 1887 flood, for one, led to the deaths of at least two million people as a result of both drowning and starvation caused by the destruction of agricultural yields. In yet another example, the 1556 Shaanxi earthquake – known as one of the deadliest earthquakes on record – resulted in the deaths of some 830,000 people during the Ming dynasty.

In addition, recent studies by Chinese paleo-climatologists and climate historians have suggested how climate change and extreme weather events had literal effects on dynastic cycles as well as patterns of social unrest. One interesting instance

...of the various verifications. They are rain, sunshine, heat, cold, wind, and seasonableness. When the five come, all complete, and each in its proper order, (even) the various plants will be richly luxuriant. Should any one of them be either excessively abundant or excessively deficient, there will be evil...[Following from this,] "[t]he king should examine the (character of the whole) year; the high ministers and officers (that of) the month; and the inferior officers (that of) the day. If, throughout the year, the month, the day, there be an unchanging seasonableness, all the grains will be matured; the measures of government will be wise, heroic men will stand forth distinguished; and in the families...there will be peace and prosperity. If, throughout the year, the month, the day, the seasonableness be interrupted, the various kinds of grain will not be matured; the measures of government will be dark and unwise; heroic men will be kept in obscurity; and in the families...there will be an absence of repose. By the common people the stars should be examined. Some stars love wind, and some love rain. The courses of the sun and moon give winter and summer. The way in which the moon follows the stars gives wind and rain.


387 Fairbank and Goldman, China: A New History, p. 15.


of this is taken from Sima Guang’s historical chronicles. The Song dynasty historian had claimed in his magnum opus, the *Zizhi Tongjian*, that severe and variable climatic conditions – especially those that came in the form of extreme snowfall and dust storms – rather than the machinations of court politics, were the main reasons behind the Wei Emperor’s decision to relocate the northern Biwei Dynasty’s capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang in 494AD. Similar claims have also been forwarded in relation to the fall of the Tang dynasty during the reign of Emperor Ai in 907AD, which is attributed to widespread famine brought about by a devastating drought, whilst temperature cooling has been linked more broadly to an increase in the frequency of internal strife due to drought and locust plagues during the Han, Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties.

It is in this regard that political interests came to intersect with local ones, as the Chinese elites and the common people shared an incentive to ‘tame’ an unruly environment. Adaptation to ecological constraints, as opposed to an outright attempt to assert hegemonic control over the environment, proved crucial for coping with the temperamental wills of nature, although what this entailed more precisely with regard to actual methods was often subject to contestation. Whereas the Daoists came to stress *wu-wei* (i.e. ‘non-action’) as a means to pursue self-cultivation in harmony with nature and the Dao through the delimitation of human interference, the more politically-minded philosophies of Legalism and Confucianism tended to elect for a more ‘active’ approach that necessitated human intervention in the natural world.

Ultimately, the result was that the anthropocentric Confucian and Legalist approaches to environmental management emerged as the favoured modes of governance in pre-modern China, given the ineffectiveness of Daoist methods (namely, that of allowing nature to run its own course with lighter constraints) in

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392 The concept of *wu-wei* is generally understood in relation to political non-action. However, with such works as the *Book of the Prince of Huainan* (thought to be compiled by Liu An in the 150BC), the concept came to gain naturalist overtones as well.
mitigating environmental problems.\textsuperscript{393} Refusing to simply ‘stand in awe’ of disasters and other natural anomalies, human effort was invested into vigorously regulating nature through large-scale environmental engineering projects, while exploiting natural resources for agrarian development and economic growth.\textsuperscript{394} Mastery over nature, in effect, became the overarching rationale for human interactions with a ‘non-human’ environment, as well as a state prerogative. Responsibility, in this sense, was defined not so much in terms of the state’s ability to maintain harmony between humans and the natural world, but more in terms of its ability to manipulate the environment to the benefit of humankind.

This proclivity was especially pronounced when it came to hydro-engineering, as evinced from the number of flood-related myths and ‘heroes’ in early Chinese culture, including semi-legendary Yu the Great who tamed the Yellow River and the actual figure of Li Bing who harnessed the Min River, which is likely to be unmatched by any other civilisation.\textsuperscript{395} The Qin, in particular, was well-known for its manipulation of nature.\textsuperscript{396} Managing the environment was undertaken chiefly with strategic or military purposes in mind, as the various canals and irrigation networks built by the Qin state worked to bolster its economic strength and agricultural backbone – two major factors that contributed ultimately to the success of its first military conquest. The Dujiangyan irrigation system, for instance, managed to quell the annual flooding of the Min River, all the while providing the Qin state with a fairway for the transportation of timber for warship construction and contributing to the transformation of the strategic Chengdu Plain into fertile farmlands.\textsuperscript{397}

\textsuperscript{393} This was particularly the case for the hydro-engineering of China’s rivers. However, rather than being the result of differing philosophical perspectives, the successes of so-called ‘Confucian’ as opposed to ‘Daoist’ approaches lay arguably more in their engineering approaches.

\textsuperscript{394} For example, with the advent of a massive flood in 2297 BC, a Minister of Works was delegated with the task of preventing future floods from occurring (this was done, however, with little success).

\textsuperscript{395} Li Bing was a governor and engineer during the Qin dynasty, having been responsible for such projects as the renowned Dujiangyan irrigation system. Upon his death, the Fulong Guan Temple was built in commemoration of his ‘heroic virtue’ in regulating the floodwaters. For more on China’s ‘flood myths’, see Mark Edward Lewis, \textit{The Flood Myths of Early China} (New York: State University of New York, 2006).

\textsuperscript{396} Founded upon Legalist doctrines of firm control through law and coercion, Qin Shi Huang had apparently believed that ‘Only ruthless, implacable severity could make the Five Powers accord’.

\textsuperscript{397} A key Qin innovation in hydro-engineering, this irrigation system was built during the Warring States era. See ‘Taming the Floodwaters: The High Heritage Price of Massive Hydraulic Projects’. Similarly, shelter belts planted alongside the Great Wall by the Qin emperor, though potentially encouraging if seen from the lens of environmental conservancy, was mainly to serve the strategic function of acting as a defensive barrier to slow the advance of invading troops, whilst elm trees planted along the Yellow River were likewise meant as a barrier to impede invading tribes from accessing water.
extreme cases, the environment was manipulated for purely military purposes (and often with detrimental consequences). An exemplary example of this is none other than the 1642 Kaifeng flood, where the Ming army intentionally breached the Yellow River’s dikes to flood the city of Kaifeng in an attempt to suppress a peasant uprising led by Li Zicheng.\(^{398}\)

To some, this might seem to spotlight an inherent contradiction, as the conduct of Chinese environmental statecraft diverged somewhat from professed ideals of harmony. It does deserve note, however, that imperial Chinese scholars were not advocating environmental conservation and protection *per se* in their philosophical ruminations; rather, they were driven by a concern over how to best maintain social order and political stability. The security of the Chinese state and its people as such remained the primary referents of responsibility, whilst the environment was at most of secondary concern.\(^{399}\)

It should come as no surprise then that Imperial China’s landscapes and waterscapes were among the most transformed in the pre-modern world.\(^{400}\) In the long-run, however, the price of modernisation would prove costly. From agricultural cultivation which resulted in mass land clearances and large-scale engineering projects that led to the disruption of ‘environmental flows’;\(^{401}\) to the harvesting of wood for fuel and construction purposes that ended in deforestation, these practices collectively put in motion processes of ecological breakdown that came to characterise late Imperial China. Although the Chinese state had until then been fairly resilient in ecological terms by virtue of the abundance of environmental resources, the arrival of the Qing dynasty, which was marked by exponential population growth, would signal the beginnings of what soon became China’s rapid environmental decline from the nineteenth century onwards.

**China’s environmental crisis in the making**

\(^{398}\) It is estimated that about half of the population of the Kaifeng perished in this man-made disaster. For other examples of how nature featured in Chinese art of warfare, see Ralph D. Sawyer, *Fire and Water: the Art of Incendiary and Aquatic Warfare in China* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2004).

\(^{399}\) The following pronouncement by the Kangxi Emperor attests to this: ‘If officials are not clear, then it harms the people. If water is not clear, that, too, is of no benefit to the people. All the muddiness in the world is like this. As for officials that are not clear, I have a method to correct them. As for water that is not clear, I have a policy to manage it.’ Quoted in Lillian M. Li, *Fighting Famine in North China: state, market, and environmental decline, 1690s-1990s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 7; cited in Morton, *China and the Global Environment*, p. 19.


\(^{401}\) My thanks to Dr. Lei Zhang for impressing this term on me.
From 1600 to 1911, late Imperial China saw at least a doubling of its population, with there being an estimated total of 400 million people by 1850.\textsuperscript{402} Crucially, this led the Qing government to give priority to safeguarding national security and quickening the pace of development, with little attention afforded to the ecological repercussions of doing so. Although the notion that humans should live in harmony with nature was not discarded entirely by the Qing, there was a subtle inclination towards harnessing nature’s power, as the state strove to strengthen the country through a Confucian mode of governance and ensure the welfare of its people. According to Mark Elvin, it was in fact during the latter half of the Qing period that the perspective prioritising control over nature became predominant, coexisting uneasily with other competing views:

There were Qing-dynasty enthusiasts for gigantic engineering projects...There were those who believed that nature should be attacked in military fashion. Others argued that humans should accommodate themselves to the pattern of natural processes without forcing matters. Others again saw nature as savage towards humankind, or indifferent. Some, influenced by a moral meteorology, spoke of the weather as reflecting the judgement of Heaven on the populations affected. Others again saw nature as benevolent, or immersed themselves in it, beyond morality, in a kind of nature mysticism.\textsuperscript{403}

Pressure to modernise in response to both internal and external security threats, combined with a stress on developing its agrarian economy (inherited from its predecessors), meant that forests were being felled for timber unsustainably, just as open lands were denuded by livestock and cultivated for agriculture. Environmental neglect was, in other words, pervasive. Deprived of its ecological buffers, the Qing state was faced with a higher rate of natural disaster occurrences as well as looming energy shortages. The emerging resource scarcity also enhanced social tension, paving the way for so-called ‘development disputes’, while technological and institutional ‘lock-in’ further exemplified the limitations of the government’s centralised, top-down model of ecological governance.\textsuperscript{404} By the time prohibitions

\textsuperscript{402} Do note that this is based on the lowest estimates.
\textsuperscript{403} Elvin, ‘The Environmental Legacy of Imperial China’, p. 755.
\textsuperscript{404} For more on the concept of technological and institutional lock-in, see Mark Elvin \\textit{et al}, \textit{Japanese studies on the history of water control in China: a selected bibliography} (Canberra: Institute of Advanced Studies, Australian National University, 1994), p. 24; and Morton, \textit{China and the Global
were implemented by the state to aid in forest conservation, the situation was already in dire straits.

This is not to suggest, however, that such forms of (irresponsible) environmental statecraft were not met with criticism or contention, for they did. Critics bemoaned the effects of deforestation and human ‘over-interference’ in natural regimes. Calling instead for moderation and ecological conservation, they returned to Daoist attitudes that emphasised the ruler’s responsibility to sustaining balance and harmony with the natural world. In one case that took place around the mid-eighteenth century, significant opposition arose in Hangzhou against a quarry which was allegedly upsetting the earth’s natural forces. Indeed, it is often in the unanticipated consequences of environmental control that the Daoist concept of wu-wei gains reason. Even though there is no denying the disastrous consequences of the great floods on human life and livelihoods, flooding of the Yellow River was not entirely detrimental to Chinese society. Similar to the natural advantages of the Nile floods, the Huanghai would bring with it masses of fertile soil particles that enriched fields and even created new farmland. At the same time, while the raising of the riverbed increases the danger of more flooding, it also facilitated irrigation, as farmers did not have to rely on lifting devices to move water into the fields. As Joachim Radkau rightly observes, ‘These stark contrasts in Chinese history are in part two different sides of the same coin. And the solution and trigger of environmental problems cannot always be clearly distinguished’.

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Environment, p. 24. I should also note here that while there were, without doubt, instances of ecological governance at the local levels to be found at the time, the state still remained the main locus of governing authority.

405 The following passage taken from the Discourses of the States (or Guoyu) expresses this sentiment well: ‘Now if the mountain’s forests are overexploited, the forests at the foot of the mountains will be destroyed, the swamps will be exhausted, the people’s strength will be used up, and the fields will become devoid of crops and full of weeds. Resources will have been squandered. The gentlemen (junzi) will continuously express shock and regret. Moreover, how will it be possible for there to be any happiness?’ Quoted in Edmonds, Patterns of China’s Lost Harmony, p. 24.

Another example, predating the Qing and taken from one of Ban Gu’s accounts in the Hanshu, relays a protest made by a statesman by the name of Gong Yu: ‘Digging some thousands of feet into the ground [results in] dissipating the quintessence of the yin qi. Earth’s stores are left depleted, so that [it] is unable to retain the qi and send forth clouds. The felling of forests knows no seasonal restraints. One cannot be certain that the calamities of flood and drought do not arise from this’. Ban Gu, Hanshu [History of the Former Han], Volume X (Beijing, 1973), p. 3075; quoted in Helen Dunstan, ‘Official Thinking on Environmental Issues and the State’s Environmental Roles in Eighteenth-Century China’, in Mark Elvin and Liu Ts’ui-jung (eds), Sediments of Time: Environment and Society in Chinese History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 609.


These issues aside, the point to be made here is that responsible statecraft defined in terms of the people’s well-being was greatly dependent on the ‘good earth’\textsuperscript{408} remaining good. Throughout China’s imperial history, legitimacy of the ruling elites remained predicated upon responsible ecological stewardship which, in practical terms, required both the harnessing of nature’s power and living in harmony with its processes. Failure to do so was not only taken as a sign of regime ineptitude, but was likely to impinge on its political and moral authority as well. That said, without exploitation of the country’s land, forests and rivers, Chinese civilisation as we know it would likely not have developed to the extent that it has. Therein lies the paradox of sustainable development, one which has evidently beleaguered the Chinese for centuries. Viewed in this light, the relationship between the Chinese people and their environment is better understood as a two-way dynamic, whereby it was not just a case of the Chinese being ‘at the mercy’ of the elements, but of nature being equally at the mercy of the anthropogenic forces that sought to fundamentally reshape it.

In spite of its adverse ecological consequences, the imperial legacy of regulating and manipulating nature for the ‘good’ of human society (or rather, for one’s own ends) would prove to be a more forceful discourse than that of harmony. This paradigm would be taken to its fullest extreme during the Maoist era, where the imperative to enhance material growth trumped concerns over spiritual development and ecological sustainability.

\textit{Conquering ‘All under Heaven’: the Maoist legacy of environmental control}

Compared to imperial views on the Chinese ecology, ‘revolutionary’ conceptions of the human-nature relationship prevalent during the 1950s up until the 1980s were expressed in much simpler and straightforward terms – that is, as the need for humans to struggle against and dominate nature (\textit{zhan tian dou di}).\textsuperscript{409} At the height of

\textsuperscript{408} I borrow this phrase from Pearl S. Buck’s novel written in the early 1930s, \textit{The Good Earth} (London: Mayflower, 1966).

\textsuperscript{409} Literally translated, this would be rendered as ‘making war against heaven and fighting against the earth’.

As expressed in two verses of a poem, entitled ‘Personalities in the Commune’, by Zhang Zhimin:

\begin{quote}
Let’s wage war against the great earth!
Let the mountains and rivers surrender under our feet.
March on Nature,
Let’s take over the power of rain and wind.
\end{quote}
Chinese communist fervor, this mentality became officially epitomised in the popular adage of 人定胜天 (ren ding sheng tian), or ‘Man must conquer nature’. Harking back to the ‘great power dream’ and Chinese efforts at self-strengthening in the face of European imperialism (elucidated in Chapter 2), this so-called ‘war against nature’ (xiangziran xuanzhan) was likewise initiated for more or less similar reasons. Paralleling Western discourses that prioritised material power and development, conquering nature (zhengfu ziran) became part of a state-led nationalist discourse, as well as a means for China to modernise rapidly and reclaim its rightful place as a major power in international society. Natural resources were exploited to fuel both the country’s industrialisation as well as localized efforts at intensifying the agricultural sector. Notably, this was a perspective reflected in the example of Dazhai in Xiyang County, Shanxi Province. Glorified as a model of agricultural productivity, Dazhai was also celebrated for its ‘Red Flag Canal’ (Hongqiqu), a mega-engineering project allegedly spearheaded by peasants in the 1960s. The canal – meant to divert water from the Zhang River to the parched fields of Lin County in Henan Province – was officially touted as having been dug by volunteer labourers entirely by hand, exemplifying how humans through collective hard work and diligence can overcome any natural obstacle. ⁴¹⁰

As was plainly evident from propaganda posters at the time, not only were successes in conquering nature perceived as a testament to the ‘power’ of the proletarian state, but the environment also became closely linked to the Chinese

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We shall not tolerate a single inch of unused land!
Nor a single place harassed by disaster.
Make wet rice, wheat, and yellow corn grow on top of the mountain,
And beans, peanuts, and red gaoliang rise on sheer rocks…


⁴¹⁰ There is, not surprisingly, much contention as to the exact veracity of these claims. Nonetheless, what is important here is the way in which the Chinese leadership framed notions of responsibility. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Daqing in eastern Heilongjiang Province, whose oil fields were being developed to address the PRC’s then growing energy shortages, was similarly promoted as the model industrial city, with the Chinese leadership issuing the following slogan: ‘In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai, In Industry, Learn from Daqing’. Quoted in Jonathan D. Spence, The Search for Modern China (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), p. 594.
Illustration 3. Propaganda poster (1976): ‘Man must conquer nature. Heaven collapses and the earth splits asunder – what is there to fear? [For] these two hands represent a new world (tiandi)’.

Source: http://www.chineseposters.net
leadership's broader campaign of ridding the fledgling country of its feudalist past and memory of national humiliation at Western hands. Interestingly, this appears to be the message embedded in Mao's famous speech to the CCP's Seventh National Congress, where the chairman recounted the story of the 'Foolish Old Man of North Mountain' who relentlessly tried to dig up two peaks obstructing his way.\textsuperscript{411} While otherwise seen as an example of communist political allegory, Judith Shapiro has poignantly argued how this socialist rendition of a classic fable attests to the mentality of conquering nature at a more literal level, as the environment - together with capitalism, revisionism and remnants from China's past - comes to symbolise significant impediments that need to be rooted out and subjugated.\textsuperscript{412} Here, nature comes to serve paradoxical purposes: despite being perceived from a utilitarian lens as an important resource that was key to China's transformation into a 'strong state', it was likewise portrayed as a hindrance to China's growth as a modern nation-state that must be removed.

Certainly, this discourse of controlling nature was not an unprecedented one. As previously explained, while competent and 'benevolent' rulership was seen to be founded upon a respect for the natural world in the ancient Chinese mind, in actuality, practices frequently fell short of professed ideals. This came as 'Confucian' engineers and peasant farmers strove to reconstruct the landscapes and waterscapes of Imperial China through water control schemes, the opening up of forests, and the extraction of minerals from the earth. In fact, by the time the CCP came into power, most of the country's arable land was already showing the consequences of widespread erosion due to centuries of over-exploitation, whilst forest coverage had then comprised only 8.6 percent of the total land area.\textsuperscript{413} On this view, it is not infeasible to posit that Chairman Mao was following - whether intentionally or unintentionally - in the ecologically unsustainable footsteps of his predecessors who, under the political banner of Legalism, Confucianism, or even nationalist modernism, were likewise inclined towards achieving mastery over nature.

Despite the growing degradation of the natural environment, Mao persisted in promoting the 'man over nature' mentality to its extreme, rendering the revolutionary years of the People's Republic a quintessential example of unbridled human

\textsuperscript{412} Shapiro, \textit{Mao's War against Nature}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{413} Morton, \textit{China and the Global Environment}, p. 27.
interference in natural processes that resulted in irreparable damages and alterations to complex ecological systems. While it is fair to say that the Chinese communist revolutionaries did not view humans as being fundamentally distinct from the natural world, it was certainly the case that they saw an untamed environment in highly adversarial terms. A case-in-point here is the infamous ‘Four Pests Campaign’, or more commonly known as the ‘Great Sparrow Campaign’ (Da Maque Yundon), initiated in 1958. As one of the early policies implemented during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961), the campaign had identified rats, flies, mosquitoes, and sparrows as pests that needed to be exterminated. Sparrows were included as they were believed to have eaten the grain seeds of farmers, and thereby blamed for lowering agricultural production. The result was the mass killing of sparrows throughout the Chinese countryside. It would not be until the early 1960s that awareness of the importance of sparrows to agrarian ecosystems was raised by the National Academy of Science. This came with the realisation that sparrows were, in fact, central to keeping crop-eating insect populations at bay. Without them, not only did rice yields not increase, but agricultural output declined substantially as locust and grasshopper infestations worsened in intensity. Significantly, the disruption to the delicate ecological balance that ensued from this campaign is believed to have contributed to the catastrophic famine that would come to characterise Mao’s ‘Great Leap Forward’, and which subsequently led to the deaths of millions of Chinese people.414

Apart from widespread starvation instigated by Soviet-inspired agricultural schemes and the disastrous ‘Great Sparrow Campaign’, the Great Leap Forward is also known for having precipitated the clearance of at least 13 million hectares of forests to fuel backyard steel furnaces, in a push to industrialise China’s rural areas. This negative trend of ecological imbalance would continue well into the 1970s with the ideological dogmatism of the Cultural Revolution (1964-1978), where official propaganda again directed its attention to mega-civil engineering projects (like that of Dazhai) which were to be applied throughout the country for the sake of agricultural modernisation. As observed by Richard Louis Edmonds, ‘mismanagement during the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the efforts under Mao

414 For an excellent account of the disastrous consequences of Mao’s Great Leap Forward campaign, see Frank Dikotter, Mao’s Great Famine: the History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-62 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010).

Source: http://www.chineseposters.net
Zedong to make all regions self-sufficient in grain [was] responsible for failure to stem soil erosion during the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{415} By the time the government initiated afforestation schemes and forest use regulations (e.g. the 1950 China Land Reform Law), the extent of the degradation had already far exceeded mitigation efforts.

Like Imperial China, hydro-engineering was another area where the PRC’s ‘revolutionary nationalism’ merged with the discourse of conquering nature. In fact, it was with Mao’s rudimentary ruminations that the conceptual foundations for the massive water diversion project, the ‘South-to-North Transfer’, were first proposed. The imperial Chinese penchant for large-scale waterworks projects had apparently been carried into the Maoist era, to the extent that dams, in particular, emerged as manifestations of national pride and revolutionary grandeur. The highly controversial Sanmenxia (Three Gate Gorge) Dam on the lower stretches of the Yellow River was one instance of this. Completed in 1960 with the purpose of generating hydropower, controlling floods, diverting water for irrigation purposes, and navigation, the dam was initially viewed as a major achievement for the People’s Republic. However, it soon proved not only a huge failure, but its social and ecological consequences were equally serious. The accumulation of sedimentation behind the reservoir meant a far lower rate of hydropower generation than expected, as well as flooding upstream which resulted in the displacement of more than 400,000 people.\textsuperscript{416}

It is fair to say that revolutionary China’s understanding of responsibility during the heyday of communist fervour was defined in anything but environmental terms. For the most part, references to ‘responsibility’ were articulated on two levels: first, as a state obligation to bolster national development and socialist progress, and second, as a social obligation delegated by the state to the Chinese people to ‘reshape the physical world radically’ in pursuit of this development goal.\textsuperscript{417} It was therefore the case that the idea of ‘responsible’ ecological stewardship became ironically founded upon an ‘irresponsible’ – not to mention unsustainable – obsession with controlling and exploiting nature.

It deserves note that, compared to the contention surrounding contemporary articulations of environmental responsibility, historic Chinese conceptions of

\textsuperscript{415} Edmonds, Patterns of China’s Lost Harmony, p. 71.
\textsuperscript{416} For more on the controversy surrounding the Sanmenxia, see Dai Qing, The river dragon has come!: the Three Gorges dam and the fate of China’s Yangtze River and its people , John G. Thibodeau and Philip B. Williams (eds), trans. Yi Ming (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998).
\textsuperscript{417} Shapiro, Mao’s War against Nature, p. 3.
responsible environmental stewardship were not as susceptible to processes of normative contestation. Officially-sanctioned and imposed in a hierarchical fashion, they were generally accepted without much question, as the authority to define and designate responsibility laid mainly with the ruling elites. Especially in the case of Maoist China, the iron hold of the CCP over the workings of Chinese society meant that any opposition against the prevailing discourse was effectively muted, as dissidents were either faced with physical detention or persecution. Interestingly, this has allowed for a degree of continuity in how the notion of environmental responsibility has been interpreted historically during both the imperial and Maoist periods. A common thread uniting the multiplicity of views on this issue is their implicit anthropocentrism, where nature is ultimately seen to be of only secondary importance to human needs. Governing nature, as such, was undertaken primarily for the sake of safeguarding the welfare of the country and its people, rather than for nature itself. Even now, this human-centric development paradigm is more than a remnant of a distant past. Still espoused today (albeit in a more nuanced fashion), an imperative to develop continues to underlie the Chinese leadership’s rhetoric on how the PRC is to solidify its status as a global power.

China’s Responsibility to Global Ecological Governance: a multilevel approach

Having said this, the People’s Republic has come a long way in terms of ecological governance – a development which has been precipitated, in part, by evolving international norms on environmental protection and by the reinvigoration of indigenous Chinese ideas on the interdependency between humans and nature. Certainly, problems arising from a fragile biosphere pose as much of an exigent problem for China as for the rest of the world. As was evident from the case of the Bohai Sea and Pearl Delta, where high levels of water pollution combined with the occasional man-made disaster (such as the oil spill in 2010 which resulted in about 11,000 barrels of oil contaminating the Bohai418) have detrimentally affected regional

418 The spill occurred when two pipelines had burst in Dalian. Statistics released in 2007 revealed that around 5.7 billion tons of toxic waste and two billion tons of solid were dumped into the Bohai each year. In testament to the effects of this widespread pollution, fishing communities dependent on the Bohai have pointed to how no whales or sharks, for instance, have not been seen in the area for years. See Lily Kuo and Barbara Demick, ‘China seeks to limit damage from oil spill’, Los Angeles Times (19
fisheries, most environmental problems encountered today have gained a transnational dimension through emerging ecological interdependencies.\textsuperscript{419}

The challenge of governing nature, therefore, speaks directly to visions of a common future and the notion of a shared responsibility. Pointing to a convergence between international, state and human security concerns, the mitigation of such complex problems further underscores the need for a multilevel governance approach. It is precisely in this light that China’s new litmus test as a responsible power has now come to lie squarely with its performance in managing the environment at multiple levels. For whilst the adoption of international environmental norms and agreements are certainly indispensable for dealing with these ecological challenges, equally important are the implementation and enforcement of environmental regulations and policies on the ground. In exploring these issues further, the following sub-sections analyse China’s engagement with the different levels of ecological governance in turn, so as to shed light on the politics of responsibility underlying the PRC’s involvement in extant governing arrangements.

\textit{Towards an ecological civilisation? Managing sustainability, building ecological resilience}

The idea of ‘environmental responsibility’ (\textit{huanjing zeren}) – that is, the notion that humans have an obligation to conserve nature – is one that has undoubtedly gained greater resonance within Chinese society in recent years.\textsuperscript{420} From the time of China’s attendance at the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the Chinese government has made a number of noteworthy strides with regard to ecological governance. In 1979, the country’s first trial Environmental Protection Law was promulgated, and subsequently strengthened with additional provisions in the revised Environmental Protection Law of 1989, while a little more than a decade later in 1992, the PRC was the first country to adopt the UN’s Agenda

\textsuperscript{419} See Peter Hills \textit{et al}, ‘Trans-boundary Pollution between Guangdong Province and Hong Kong: Threats to Water Quality in the Pearl River Estuary and Their Implications for Environmental Policy and Planning, \textit{Journal of Environmental Planning and Management} 41 (1998), pp. 375-396.

21 and create its own version, known as the China Agenda 21, to address environmental management issues raised in the Rio Declaration. That the State Environmental Protection Agency was upgraded to become a fully-fledged Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) in 2008 constituted yet another significant event in a string of positive developments. In spite of inheriting a destructive legacy from the Maoist years, and the profit-oriented mentality of the Dengist era where ‘to get rich’, above all else, was ‘glorious’, the Chinese leadership, especially under Hu Jintao, has been considerably successful in demonstrating its capacity to instigate social and political shifts toward recognising the importance of a healthy natural environment to the country’s overall well-being as well as its so-called ‘comprehensive power’.

In accordance with the National 11th and 12th Five-Year Plans (2006-1010 and 2011-2015 respectively), new policies are now restructuring the industrial sector and creating a Harmonious Society based on Hu Jintao’s ‘scientific development’ concept (kexue fazhan guan), founded upon socially and environmentally ‘responsible’ behaviour that falls largely in line with the principles of sustainable development, as articulated by the Brundtland Commission in 1987. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the aim here is to engender not only a society where conflicts are minimized, but also a society where long-term development and steady progress are ensured through harmonised relations between human beings and their natural environment. It is a society, to revisit Jiang Zemin’s terminology, where the people’s material and spiritual well-being is assured through the development of a vibrant political civilisation alongside a thriving ‘ecological civilisation’ (shengtai wenming).

According to one leading Chinese scholar of environmental philosophy, the notion of ecological civilisation constitutes a comprehensive response to modernity that can emerge only with changes in four key areas: (1) a shift in fundamental ideas on the human-nature relationship, where attitudes and ways of living at the individual

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421 The Commission had famously defined ‘sustainable development’ as ‘development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. For more on the Brundtland Commission’s findings, see Our Common Future (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

422 This idea was first incorporated into official rhetoric in November 2007 at the CCP’s 17th Convention, where it was highlighted as a major dimension of the Party’s political guidelines for constructing socialism with Chinese characteristics. For more on the relationship between ‘ecological civilisation’ and the ‘scientific development’ concept, see Yu Keping, ‘Kexue fazhan guan yu shengtai wenming’ [Scientific development concept and ecological civilisation], Mokesi Zhuyi yu Xianshi [Marxist thought and Contemporary Issues] 4 (2005), pp. 4-5.
and societal levels need to be changed in order to generate a move from consumerism to a spiritualism that values and respects nature; (2) a shift in the logic of capitalism underlying extant social institutions so as to open up space for alternative ways of ‘green thinking’; (3) an ecological turn in the area of science and technology, where recognition is afforded to the limitations of human technology in ‘dominating’ (zhuzai) nature and the inability of science to fully understand the intricacies of nature; and (4) a shift in the modes of production and models of economic development to centre more on the development of green industries and a low-carbon economy. 423

To effect these changes, cooperation between the public and private spheres constitutes a foremost requirement, with the onus of responsibility falling upon both the state and Chinese society. Similar understandings of the state’s mounting ecological responsibilities have been likewise put forward by the so-called ‘eco-socialists’. Stressing the compatibility between socialism and environmentalism, scholars and officials advocating this theoretical perspective (including MEP Vice-Minister Pan Yue) have touted the notion of a ‘socialist ecological civilisation’ as a way forward for humans and nature to actively achieve harmony by going against the capitalist-induced logic of ‘over-development’ and by basing ecological progress on scientific development and the Party’s core concept of ‘putting the people first’. 424

It deserves note that the idea behind the concept of sustainability is not an entirely new or foreign one in Chinese political discourse. It can, in fact, be compared to the notion of ‘harmonious development’ (xietao fazhan), which first appeared in Chinese policy rhetoric in 1973, coinciding with the PRC’s First National Conference on Environmental Protection. It was coined largely in response to the Stockholm Conference a year earlier, which had marked China’s initial engagement with the global architecture of ecological governance. As explained by Liu Tianqi, harmonious

423 Interview with Professor Lu Feng, School of Humanities and Social Science, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China (10 January 2011). For an elaboration on these ‘four changes’, see Lu Feng, Cong Xiandai Wenming dao Shengtai Wenming [From Contemporary Civilisation to Ecological Civilisation] (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2009).

development refers to a cycle in which ‘natural rebirth and economic rebirth processes work together’. Reminiscent of the virtues of recycling, this idea also predates the more modern concepts of ‘circular’ or low-carbon economies, where emphasis is placed on clean production, energy efficiency, and taking preventative action before environmental pollution occurs.

Of importance here is the fact that this ‘green rhetoric’ has been matched by state regulations and initiatives. Since 1979, China has promulgated over 40 environment-related laws and a considerable body of regulations. Environmental policies formulated by the central government have also come to progressively integrate concepts like the ‘polluter pays’ and precautionary principles. In 2006, for example, Wen Jiabao announced the ‘Three Changes’ (san ge zhanbian) to environmental management, which included strengthening the comprehensive use of legal, economic, technical and other relevant administrative measures to solve ecological problems and encourage environmental protection. In particular, of significance here is how far more stringent social and environmental standards have been imposed officially onto Chinese businesses through such initiatives as the ‘green finance policies’, including the ‘green credit policy’ initiated in 2007 by the MEP, which work to further complement established regulations like the ‘three simultaneities’ (san tongshi) system. Taken together with the government’s more

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426 It does deserve note that the logic behind the ‘polluter pays’ principle can be found in Article 41 of the 1989 Environmental Protection Law, which stipulates that ‘an entity that has caused environmental pollution damage shall have the obligation to eliminate it and make compensation to the entity or individual that suffered direct losses’.

427 Attention was specifically directed here to legal reforms vis-à-vis the environmental accountability and civil liability of polluters, given how the Chinese legal system is rather inexperienced in dealing with environment-related disputes and problems. See Huang Jijun, ‘Huanjing zeren yige ye buneng shao’.

428 Otherwise known as the ‘Opinion on Enforcement of Environmental Law and Prevention of Credit Risks’.

429 The green finance policies refer to a set of policies and regulations introduced by the central government in 2007 and 2008 with the purpose of reducing the adverse environmental consequences of resource- and energy-intensive industries. They included policies aimed at promoting environmental insurance, green securities as well as the utilization of green credit by lending banks. The latter, in particular, necessitated increases in the cost of credit commensurate to the borrowing company’s polluting activities. Banks, as such, were required to consider the environmental records of prospective borrowers beforehand, while lending to ‘blacklisted’ companies was effectively banned, with the banks themselves subject to legal liabilities should they be found in violation of these terms. Notably, in early 2008, SEPA and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) had agreed to jointly introduce the IFC Performance Standards (along with the Equator Principles) to the Chinese banking sector, so as to
recent EIA regulations for medium to large investment projects, the combined application of these standards to Chinese infrastructure-development projects have significantly resulted, for instance, in the MEP’s order to suspend EIA approvals for China Huaneng Group’s and China Huadian Corporation’s hydro-development schemes on the middle stretches of the Jinsha River in 2009.  

Paralleling this development, the concept of ‘corporate social responsibility’ has also been applied increasingly to the overseas investment activities of state-owned enterprises and the major ‘policy banks’ (i.e. the China Export-Import Bank and the China Development Bank). Similarly in 2007, the State Council announced its ‘Nine Principles on Encouraging and Standardizing Foreign Investment’, which included, as its fifth principle, the need for SOEs to ‘fulfil the necessary social responsibility to protect the legitimate rights and interests of local employees [and] pay attention to environmental resource protection’, whilst under increasing pressure to adopt the Equator Principles, the China Exim Bank was likewise prompted to draft its own policy guidelines aimed at managing and lessening the social and environmental risks in its project financing.

Here, the Chinese state’s conception of environmental responsibility is interpreted as the fulfilment of social duties related to China’s development trajectory whilst sustaining the country’s precarious ecological balance. Defined in terms of maintaining ‘harmony’ between the country’s economic, social and environmental

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encourage policies that are more socially responsive in terms of deterring key Chinese industries (e.g. the iron, steel and paper sectors) from engaging in excessive polluting practices.


Dating back to the early 1970s, the ‘three simultaneities’ renders it mandatory for pollution controls to be applied to the design, construction and operation phases of investment projects.


imperatives, responsible stewardship is deemed as a prerequisite for both domestic stability and national security. Yet as was the case for Imperial China, where environmental legal codes promulgated by the Qin and Qing dynasties were implemented with only tempered success, the implementation and enforcement of the PRC’s novel set of environmental laws, regulatory ‘guiding principles’, and initiatives continue to be frustrated by weak enforcement and compliance at the local levels.

The performance incentives of local government officials are still largely geared towards development objectives on the basis of ‘pollute first, clean up later’, rather than on environmental conservancy and sustainability. The adoption of more rigorous social and environmental safeguards by Chinese companies and banks notwithstanding, businesses and financiers remain attached to profit-oriented motives with limited concern for the impacts of their activities on surrounding environments. This reality is starkly manifest in the continuing problem of incomplete and lax environmental impact assessments being undertaken and approved for Chinese investments at home and abroad (seen in the controversy surrounding the Lancang cascade and lower Mekong mainstream dams), as well as in the failure to develop more comprehensive social impact assessments (SIAs) for ecologically-hazardous projects despite mounting pressure from civil society for greater public participation. The fact that factories are now relocating to the country’s western regions as part of the central government’s ‘Great Western Development’ strategy, moreover, raises further concerns among Chinese environmentalists and scholars on account of the irreparable damages likely to be inflicted upon fragile ecologies in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Yunnan Province.

It is in this respect that the implementation of effective ecological governance amounts to one of the most taxing challenges facing the Chinese government today, with a key task being to prevent such ecological concerns from becoming mere manifestations of a ‘fashionable conscience’ that can be easily discarded once popular interest subsides. Taking a closer look at China’s burgeoning environmental activism and its participation in global environmental initiatives, there are promising

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433 Controversy erupted towards the end of 2010 when, under the government’s ‘saving energy, cutting emissions’ policy and nearing the end of the 11th Five-Year Plan, local governments were desperate to meet national objectives and acted abruptly by cutting the electricity supply to large factories. My gratitude to Professor Huan Qingzhi for alerting me to these events.
434 Such problems could, of course, further exacerbate unresolved ethnic issues. Interview with Dr. Ran Ran, School of International Relations, Renmin University, Beijing, China (16 December 2011).
435 Taken from The Times (30 May 1970); quoted in Stern, ‘Morality and International Order’, p. 144.
signs suggesting how a greater awareness of environmental issues has begun to take root in Chinese society as well as in the country’s policy agenda. As the ensuing sections reveal, changes in the PRC’s environmental policy at the global, regional and local levels are reflective of this development, with evolving international norms on ecological protection becoming particularly manifest in the conceptions of responsibility forwarded by grassroots activists within China.

Contesting China’s responsibilities: the global climate context

The Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released in 2007 made the sobering discovery that the global mean surface temperature had increased 0.74 degrees over the past century (1906-2005) largely as the result of greenhouse gases.\textsuperscript{436} The report also predicted that, unless GHG emissions are greatly reduced, global surface temperatures are expected to rise 1.1 to 6.4 degrees higher than the period from 1980-1999 by the end of the twenty-first century. From the time of the 1979 World Climate Conference, where scientists first linked greenhouse gases (GHG) to climatic variability, and the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (also known as the Rio Conference), which saw the formalisation of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the challenge posed by anthropogenic climate change has now been recognised widely by most states as a matter demanding immediate attention and one which requires them to act on the basis of a shared responsibility. To appreciate this important development one need only consider the very first paragraph of the 2011 Durban Platform, where climate change was understood as ‘an urgent and potentially irreversible threat to human societies and the planet and thus requires to be urgently addressed by all Parties’. It was further acknowledged that ‘the global nature of climate change calls for the widest possible cooperation by all countries and their participation in an effective and appropriate international response, with a view to accelerating the reduction of global greenhouse gas emissions’\textsuperscript{437}. Here, the language of responsibility has clearly become a powerful one.


It deserves note, however, that arriving at this stage of consensus was by no means an easy achievement. To one degree, contention surrounding the issue of climate change can be seen to correspond with broader debates on the challenges of governing the global environment. Diplomatic power-struggles between the major emitters, coupled by ongoing uncertainties in the science of climate change, have largely worked to impede the progress of climate negotiations, such that a binding agreement to curtail carbon emissions and, by implication, volatile temperature rises remains elusive even now. All of this is further complicated by a strong attachment to the sovereign right of states to develop and exploit environmental resources within their respective territories.\footnote{One attempt to reconcile these interests with more environmentally-attuned imperatives is seen in Principle 2 of the Rio Declaration which reads: "States have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental and developmental policies, and the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction." See 'Rio Declaration on Environment and Development' (June 1992). [On-line] Available at: http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?documentid=788&articleid=1163 (accessed 21 March 2009).} In particular, what has proven to be problematic is the process of apportioning obligations to respective states. Exacerbating tensions prevalent in climate negotiations, the process has tended to result in the interests of the developed world and the global South being cast in highly oppositional terms. In light of this discord, some commentators have come to question whether a norm of global climate protection can be said to exist at all.\footnote{See Stephen M. Gardiner, 'Ethics and Global Climate Change', Ethics (April 2004), pp. 555-600.}

Upon the conclusion of the Copenhagen and Cancun climate conferences, both of which fell short of expectations for a legally-binding treaty to manage the global environment, it certainly seemed that the world's environmental prospects were not too encouraging. Despite official rhetoric lauding domestic reforms and national efforts aimed at mitigating climate change and environmental degradation, and a public relations campaign emphasising the PRC's 'constructive' role during climate negotiations,\footnote{See, for example, Wang Danna, 'Minister hails China as future eco-leader', China Daily (23 December 2009), p. 12; Song Ping, 'Co-processing pioneers spread the word across China', China Daily (24 December 2009), p. 12; Liao Wei, 'New plan promises major reduction in incinerator levels', China Daily (24 December 2009), p. 12; Fu Jing, 'Wen says nation will strive for goals', China Daily (18 December 2009), p. 10; Li Xing and Sun Xiaohua, 'Crunch time prompts final push amid doubts on meetings' last day', China Daily (18 December 2009), p. 10; and Li Jing, 'Most Chinese very aware of green issues, China Daily-EDF survey finds', China Daily (18 December 2009), p. 10.} the general sentiment (at least among Chinese academics) is one where the boat is inevitably sinking, and yet all those aboard were still concerned...
chiefly with their own interests, refusing to lend a hand to scoop out the incoming water. At issue here is the non-binding nature of the Copenhagen Accord, along with the overarching question of to what extent the commitments stated therein could actually be translated into verifiable state policies. While pledges by national governments to enhance ecological sustainability were a promising start, of greater importance is the need to take concrete steps toward attaining that common goal.

Especially in the case of the 2009 Copenhagen Summit, China (together with the United States) was frequently depicted in Western media as the main culprit hampering the success of the negotiations. The British Climate Change Secretary Ed Miliband even publicly denounced the People’s Republic for having ‘hijacked’ the negotiations, accusing it of vetoing two proposed (legally-binding) agreements to curb emissions. This was met with a fiery response from the Chinese side, with Foreign

Illustration 6. Cartoon featured in the China Daily by Luo Jie (26-27 December 2009)\textsuperscript{441}

Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu arguing that the allegation amounted to a Western ‘political scheme’ aimed at ‘shirk[ing] responsibilities that should be assumed

\textsuperscript{441} Taken from ‘Wen’s 60 hours in Copenhagen’, China Daily (26-27 December 2009), p. 9.
towards developing countries, and to provoke discord among developing countries’. This diplomatic posture of delegating – or perhaps even deferring – the burden of responsibility primarily to the developed world would reappear again in Cancun the following year. The roots of contention lie mainly here with the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’. First articulated in Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration, the concept of CBDR, as applied to the climate debate, is now popularly rendered as the notion that developed states should bear more responsibilities for their historical emissions than developing countries.

Needless to say, one of the most ardent advocates of this principle has been the People’s Republic. According to China’s own 2007 National Climate Change Assessment Report, it was projected that the PRC’s average annual temperature could increase between 1.3 to 2.1 degrees by 2020, whilst rising sea levels and extreme weather events would likely threaten major coastal cities – a fact which is substantiated by the slate of (un)natural disasters that has hit the mainland in recent years. It is precisely in this sense that climate change impinges directly on China’s national and ecological security. Yet, even though the Chinese leadership has recognised the need for the PRC to contribute to global efforts at mitigating the effects of climate change, contending perspectives have since surfaced as to the extent of Chinese responsibilities to the global environment, and the way in which China should address its international obligations to climate protection.

Three views stand out in particular. First is the view that China should do its utmost to ensure that its emissions are significantly curbed, regardless of the performances of other states, given its responsibility as a global power. The second advocates the familiar argument that China, though a major power, is still a developing country and therefore national development goals come first. Not trying to deny outright China’s responsibilities to the global environment, this view tends to espouse ‘fair and equitable’ responsibility-sharing. The third perspective takes a more

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443 Principle 7 stated that ‘States shall cooperate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth’s eco-system. In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command’.

444 See Ministry of Science and Technology of the PRC, ‘National Climate Change Report’ (Beijing, 2007).
offensive posture, denying China’s obligation to partake in global efforts to mitigate climate change. Protagonists of this view remain unconvinced by the science of climate change, claiming instead that the issue is derivative of broader economic and environmental inequalities between states and, in more extreme terms, a Western ploy to hold back the development of industrialising states.445

Thinking back to the previous chapter, the logic of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ clearly resonates with traditional Chinese perspectives (e.g. the rectification of names), as it supports the appropriation of obligations commensurate with a country’s level of development and capacity to respond. According to one prominent scholar of Chinese environmental politics, we first need to clarify the concept of CBDR itself, distinguishing between ‘common’ responsibilities and ‘differentiated or special’ responsibilities. According to him, common responsibilities refers to the sentiment that all states should participate in environmental protection, but that domestic standards and initiatives should be made in keeping with the respective capacities of individual states. On the other hand, given that developed nations have the advantage of expansive technological know-how and are purportedly guilty of ‘environmental colonialism’ (i.e. transferring their polluting industries to the developing world),446 they should provide developing states with the financial support and technical assistance to meet environmental objectives.447

But while this stance has led outside observers to focus on China as the most culpable for derailing the climate proceedings, it should be noted, however, that other major developing states under the rubric of the BRICs also stand to gain considerably from bandwagoning with the Chinese. At the crux of normative contestation on climate change – as with other issues pertaining to ecological governance – is essentially a development dilemma, one indicative of the longstanding difficulties involved in pursuing material well-being on the one hand, and environmental conservation on the other. Although the majority of states have committed themselves

445 These distinctions are based on the interviews I conducted in Beijing from 2010-2011. Need more information here.
Interestingly, in a similar vein, Wen Jiabao once reportedly remarked on how, from one DVD machine produced in China, only three quarters of the profit actually comes back to China. My thanks to Professor Mei Fengqiao for alerting me to this.
447 Interview with Professor Mei Fengqiao, School of Environmental Science, Peking University, Beijing, China (13 December 2011).
to a discourse of ‘sustainable development’, the way in which this ideal is to be achieved in practice continues to elude most. Needless to say, the challenge of sustainable development remains as much of a problem now as in 1987.

At the same time, it is also important to take into consideration the major steps China has taken to become a more constructive player in the realm of global ecological governance. Promising developments at the 2011 climate summit in Durban, together with the introduction of such ideas as ‘global ecological security’ (quanzhu shengtai anquan) into official policy discourses, serve as instructive examples of this. Within the past two years since Copenhagen, the People’s Republic has become more aware of its capabilities in managing its carbon emissions, such that this has given them newfound, albeit somewhat tempered, confidence in committing to emission targets. The result was evident in Durban, with the Chinese delegation exhibiting a greater willingness to engage in negotiations over a legally-binding agreement. It was this shift in attitude that arguably allowed for what the UNFCCC now refers to as the ‘groundbreaking’ Durban Platform. Crucially, the platform incorporates a second commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol, while imposing stronger obligations unto states to cut emissions by 2020. Especially noteworthy was how the agreement marked the first time in which the world’s three biggest emitters (that is, China, the U.S. and India) conceded to ‘launch a process to develop for a[n] [international] protocol, another legal instrument or an agreed outcome with legal force under the Convention applicable to all Parties’.

Equally significant is how the Chinese government has not only voiced support for the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) – having notably played a vital role in pushing for the creation of the Green Climate Fund at Durban as well – but has also been an active participant in regional environmental cooperation mechanisms like the Northeast Asian Conference on Environmental Cooperation (NEAC) and the Northeast Asia Sub-regional Program on Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC). This is, moreover, reflective of emerging bilateral cooperation on climate issues. In 2009, for instance, the United States and China jointly announced the establishment of

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the U.S.-China Clean Energy Research Centre (CERC), tasked with encouraging scientific and technological collaboration between the two countries.

Aside from initiatives at the interstate level, the People’s Republic has likewise taken notable steps domestically to reduce emissions, proactively curtail environmental degradation, and enhance the ecological resilience among its people. In fact, the People’s Republic has now become a leading producer and innovator in the renewable energy industry, especially in the wind and geothermal power sector, as well as a major exporter of clean energy technologies. Of particular interest here is how, even with growing recognition in China of the country’s obligation to protecting the global environment, it remains the case that Chinese conceptions of ecological responsibility continue to be filtered primarily through a domestic lens. This is, however, not necessarily to the detriment of global efforts at environmental conservation. Local actors are of critical importance here, as they work to translate global strategies and national policies into actual practices on the ground. Certainly, to reverse current trends of environmental decline and mitigate the effects of climate change, one invariably has to ‘think globally’ but ‘act locally’.

Arguing ‘responsibility’ from the grassroots

No doubt for a country like China, long accustomed to rule from above and with a population dispersed in disparate locales, integrating participatory processes into its governance mechanisms is a slow and highly circumscribed process. There are, nevertheless, observable trends which suggest how growing environmental activism within China has gained momentum, proving to be increasingly central to coordinating local conservation efforts on the ground and revealing deficits in implementation that continue to hinder the effectiveness of extant governing arrangements. Indeed, among the NGOs operating within the mainland, the majority of these are environmental organisations, with over 2000 having been reportedly established by the end of 2001 alone.

At present, official estimates have placed the total number of ‘green NGOs’ operating within China – including those sponsored by the government – to be at more than 3500, which is double the number for 2005. According to a 2008 report

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released by the All-China Environment Federation, compared to the social and political climate three years earlier, environmental organisations now play a more prominent role in raising public awareness on environmental protection, protecting people’s environmental rights, as well as enhancing government accountability.451 By arguing against state-led discourses on national development and debunking the misconception that ‘development is always good’, these green activists are working towards reclaiming the public sphere by redefining the concept of environmental responsibility and what it means to ‘put people first’.

While Chinese environmentalism constitutes a fairly modern phenomenon, having emerged with the promulgation of the first Environmental Protection Law in 1989 that emboldened communities to demand for their environmental rights, it has strengthened remarkably over the past two decades mainly as a consequence of grassroots activism, as well as the gathering momentum of the international environmental movement, which has seen the proliferation of evolving norms on ecological protection. Official support has likewise grown in recent years, largely in response to mounting pressure for the Chinese government to deliver on its environmental duties and obligations. With the sharp increase in environmental-related protests, for instance, this has prompted the central government to establish experimental ‘environmental courts’ to specifically deal with disputes involving critical environmental issues.452

The PRC’s so-called ‘green advocates’ have also garnered notable successes in influencing public opinion and government policy to adopt more ecologically-friendly practices as part of nationwide initiatives aimed at promoting low-carbon lifestyles. Spearheaded by the Beijing-based Friends of Nature, collective efforts by environmental NGOs had succeeded in publicly advocating for placing limitations on office air-conditioning – a move which was later promulgated as a government regulation dictating how the temperature in air-conditioned public rooms should remain at no lower than 26 degrees Celsius in summer.453

453 In another interesting example, a group of environmental activists staged a demonstration in the cafeteria of Microsoft’s Chinese headquarters against the use of disposable wooden chopsticks. Orchestrated by Greenpeace, the rally constituted part of a bigger, nation-wide campaign targeting the use of disposable chopsticks deemed as ‘pointless waste’ that merely works to exacerbate the depletion
In this regard, China’s home-grown environmental NGOs have been at the forefront of pushing for new thinking on ecological governance, whereby the inextricable interdependencies between humans and the natural world are emphasised to spotlight the need for a more ‘holistic’ – or in more traditional Chinese terms, ‘harmonious’ – model of governance that takes into due consideration the interests of local communities alongside those of the complex ecosystems upon which they depend. As exemplified in the popularised notion of ‘关爱生命，保护环境’ (guan’aishengming, baohuhuanjing),

responsible social and political governance ultimately comes to rest upon the sound stewardship of shared environmental resources. Here, shifts in the official attitude – from putting ‘development first and governance later’ (xianfazhan, houzhili) to prioritising ‘development alongside environmental governance’ (bianfazhan, bianzhili) – are not to be seen as mere products of a ‘fashionable conscience’. Rather, they indicate growing recognition gained from both international that a healthy environment is necessary for improving the country’s overall welfare and security.

From this perspective, these green advocates are not simply fulfilling their duties as important agents of ecological governance – particularly in terms of filling in the gaps left by formal bureaucratic institutions – but their involvement has also helped to stimulate contestation on how environmental responsibility is to be appropriated to relevant stakeholders. Indeed, the increased visibility of non-state actors in challenging the centralised model of environmental management parallels emerging global sentiments that stress the importance of inclusive and deliberative approaches to ecological governance, which can better account for the multileveled nature of environmental issues as well as for the diverse interests of stakeholders.

of China’s precious forests. In response to this movement, certain measures have been officially endorsed, including the levying of a five percent consumption tax on ‘environmentally unfriendly’ goods (which covers disposable chopsticks), the banning of disposables during the Beijing Olympics, and the issuing of a set of guidelines by the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) in 2008 encouraging restaurants to reduce their use of disposables. See Jane Spencer, ‘Banned in Beijing: Chinese See Green Over Chopsticks’, The Wall Street Journal (8 February 2008). [On-line] Available at: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120243065314952215.html (accessed 15 December 2011); and ‘China’s environmental NGOs’ influence increases as total doubles in 3 years’.

This popularly used adage of guanai shenming, baohu huanjing translates roughly as ‘connecting lives to protect the environment’. This, of course, generates the image of an ecosystem where all living things are interrelated.

In Chinese, the first adage is rendered as ‘边发展，边治理’, whilst the second is rendered as ‘先发展，后治理’.
One instructive example of this is found in the case of the strong social resistance that has emerged vis-à-vis the construction of hydropower dams on China’s major rivers.\textsuperscript{456} Rather than helping to alleviate poverty and social inequalities, the construction of the Manwan Dam on the Lancang Jiang (located in the upper reaches of the Mekong River within Chinese territory) has led to an exacerbation of social grievances, as families were forced to give up their land to reservoir inundation and then insufficiently compensated. In Manwan Township of Jingdong County, for example, it has been documented that between 1993 and 1996, landslides and debris flows caused by the reservoir devastated around 320 mu of surrounding farmland and forest areas, resulting in the displacement (for the second time) of more than 30 households from three nearby villages.\textsuperscript{457} In Yun County, landslides induced from the infilling of the dam’s reservoir also adversely affected access to drinking water and the supply of irrigation water to several villages within the premises. Shortage of fuel and health problems soon followed in these two counties, while families found themselves in deeper debt. Despite official efforts to alleviate these problems (e.g. a fund was set up for the conservation of the reservoir’s surrounding area as well as a resettlement assistance fund), the resources and subsidies allocated to the resettled communities fell short of actual needs.\textsuperscript{458}

The culminated effect of these issues has been to stimulate popular campaigns demanding greater community rights and public visibility in formal decision-making processes. Most notably, the Yunnan-based environmental NGO, Green Watershed, has advocated the implementation of in-depth, ‘participatory’ social impact assessments alongside environmental ones, prior to dam construction and the application of integrated river basin management principles to hydro-development projects.\textsuperscript{459} In October 2004, Yu Xiaogang, the founder of Green Watershed, led a

\textsuperscript{456} Transboundary resistance to China’s Lancang dams and their implications are discussed in depth later on in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{457} The \textit{mu} is a Chinese unit of area. One \textit{mu} is equivalent to approximately 0.0667 hectares.

\textsuperscript{458} The Manwan-related facts cited here are largely based on an Oxfam Hong Kong-sponsored project conducted by the Study Group on the Impacts of Lancang River Manwan Power Plant (which was also incorporated subsequently into the ‘Research on the Fair and Justifiable Exploitation of Aquatic Resources and Ecological Conservation of Transnational Rivers in the Southwest’ of the Key Scientific and Technological Research Project Prioritized by the State Council’s Ninth Five-Year Plan (No. 2000-KO-02-01) and the State Natural Science Foundation Project (40161010)). See He Daming \textit{et al}, ‘Master Report: On Findings of the Study on the Social, Economic and Environmental Impacts of the Lancang River Manwan Power Plant’ (December 2002).

\textsuperscript{459} See also the findings of the following study by Chen Lihui and Li Qin: ‘Manwan kuqu shengchan huifu zhang’ai ji qi yuanyn’ [Obstacles in production restoration and the related reasons in the area around the Manwan Dam], \textit{Changjiang Liu yu Ziyuan yu Huanjing} [Resources and Environment in the
delegation of dam-affected villagers to a UN Symposium on Hydropower and Sustainable Development in Beijing, where he gave a presentation on the social implications of the Manwan Dam.\footnote{See Yu Xiaogang, ‘The new development view is calling for participatory social impact evaluation – case study of Manwan Hydropower Station’, presented at the UN Symposium on Hydropower and Sustainable Development (27-19 October 2004). [On-line] Available at: http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/SDissues/energy/1op/hydro_yu.pdf (accessed 10 May 2011). See also the paper delivered at the Symposium by Ge Quanxiao – one of the affected villagers who accompanied Yu Xiaogang – on local concerns over the Hutiaoxia (Tiger Leaping Gorge) Dam on the Jinsha River, ‘The Relationship between Dam Construction and the Rights of Original Inhabitants to Participation’ [On-line] Available at: http://www.internationalrivers.org/files/dampar.pdf (accessed 10 May 2011). The team consisted of officials from the local Public Security Bureau, the Civil Affairs Office, the Science and Technology Bureau, as well as representatives from the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences.} Around the same time, controversy surfaced with the Yunnan provincial government attempting to shut down the NGO on the basis of allegations that it had engaged in ‘illegal’ activities (that is, the organisation of ‘public meetings’ without official permission). Though the investigation team assembled by the provincial government\footnote{Respite for Yunnan anti-dam NGO as movement mourns loss of key activist’, China Development Brief (21 January 2005). [On-line] Available at: http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com/node/104 (accessed 14 June 2011).} ultimately dismissed the charges made against the organisation (even the State Environmental Protection Administration acknowledged how there were no sufficient grounds to force the NGO’s dissolution), it did issue a warning that Green Watershed had exceeded its legal mandate by becoming involved in resettlement issues.\footnote{Landslides in the Xiaowan’s surrounding areas have proven to be fairly commonplace, especially during the dam’s construction period.}

Of note is how these events had been preceded by the ‘817’ Incident in 2003 (so named as it took place on 17 August), whereby an estimated 3,000 people affected by the Manwan’s construction had mobilized, under Green Watershed’s auspices to demand a meeting with the Manwan Huaneng Power Company on the topic of resettlement and compensation grievances. The incident was, in part, catalysed by the official announcement of the Xiaowan Dam’s construction, which was anticipated to result in even more harmful impacts on the surrounding environment and higher numbers of social dislocation than what was claimed in official reports.\footnote{Yangtze Basin] 12:6 (2003), pp. 541-546. More broadly, this sentiment is also notably shared by other environmentalists like Ma Jun, who has been a long-time advocate of extensive public participation in the country’s environmental governance See Ma Jun, ‘How participation can help China’s ailing environment’, China Dialogue (31 January 2007). [On-line] Available at: http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/733-How-participation-can-help-China-s-ailing-environment (accessed 24 July 2010); and Ma, ‘Your right to know: a historic moment’, China Dialogue (1 May 2008). [On-line] Available at: http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/1962-Your-right-to-know-a-historic-moment (accessed 24 July 2010).}
demonstration itself lasted a total of three days, and has since become a milestone for local anti-Lancang dam activists. Another meeting was held a year later on the incident's anniversary, notably with the participation of villagers from Dachaoshan (another dam site in the Lancang cascade), who also subsequently invited the Green Watershed to hold a village forum.464

However, it does deserve note that in contrast to the protests over the damming of the Nu-Salween River that resulted in Premier Wen Jiabao announcing the suspension of plans for a thirteen-dam cascade on the river in early 2004,465 these protests did not attract as much attention from central government. Having said this, the activists were successful in rallying public awareness of the issue as well as in increasing their ‘visibility’ in policy-making processes at the local levels.466 Findings from a social impact assessment study conducted by Yu Xiaogang and Jia Jiguo, for example, had urged the Yunnan provincial government to set aside an additional $9.7 million in resettlement funds, which was consequently allocated to help the communities displaced by the construction of the Manwan dam.467

In another heralded display of the spreading influence of civil society actors, in June 2007, Chinese citizens, ‘netizens’, university professors (from Xiamen University), and media reporters had successfully organised a protest via mobile text messages against a government proposition to build a PX (paraxylene) chemical plant in the southern city of Xiamen. Although the issue was initially raised as a result of

464 The meeting-cum-'workshop' was also joined by local representatives from the Nu and Jinsha River areas. Mertha, China's Water Warriors, pp. 112-114.
465 Anti-dam activists protesting against the proposed Hutiaoxia Dam have also been successful in persuading the central government to suspend the scheme. However, it needs note that preparation work on one of the planned hydroelectric plants for the Nu River – the Liuku power station – had apparently proceeded in spite of Wen's suspension. This has led the premier to order another halt to construction in 2009, but with recent news reports now claiming that preparations for the cascade are currently under way yet again. Jane Macartney, 'Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao halts construction of power plant on Nu river', The Times (21 May 2009). [On-line] Available at: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/environment/article6332022.ece (accessed 21 June 2010).
466 Significantly, there is evidence to suggest that contact between Lancang and Mekong civil societies, although relatively limited, can play a considerable role in spotlighting these issues at a more 'internationalised' level. For instance, in the Second International Meeting of Dam-Affected People and their Allies held in Thailand from 28 November-3 December 2003, which was attended by prominent Chinese environmental NGOs, namely the Green Watershed, Friends of Nature, and the Green Earth Volunteers, the meeting culminated in a petition signed by more than sixty countries for the protection of the Upper Salween (Nu) River. The petition was sent to UNESCO, while a similar letter protesting hydropower development on the Nu was sent to the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok, having been signed by over eighty Thailand-based environmental and social rights organisations in a display of solidarity.
the affected community’s fear of land devaluation given the close proximity of the plant’s proposed location to residential and commercial districts, focus would quickly shift instead to the ecological threats posed by the factory’s chemical output. Industrial pollution, it was feared, could severely harm Xiamen’s seaside environment. The fact that the Xiamen city government ultimately gave in to public demands and ceased plans has since been heralded as a victory for environmentalists and a testament to the power of public pressure. And significantly, this is not an isolated case. Echoing the sentiments that ran high during the PX protests, industrial pollution became the focus of popular outrage yet again when, in August 2009, a lead factory in Fengxiang County, Shaanxi Province, was accused of poisoning more than 600 children in two nearby villages. Although the social and ecological dangers posed by the factory had been known since the start of its operations in 2003, it would only be after persistent protesting by angered Chinese villagers that the local government finally conceded that emissions from the Dongling Lead and Zinc Smelting Company had seriously harmed the health of local communities, resulting in the suspension of the facility’s operation. Illustrative of how local authorities can, at times, be complicit in exacerbating the problem of environmental pollution, because the local government had then been seeking out private investments to fulfil economic targets, the risks associated with setting up a lead factory in such close proximity to residential areas were conveniently overlooked to the detriment of neighbouring communities and the surrounding environment. In Huaining County, Anhui Province, reports of lead

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468 See ‘China calls on Xiamen to rethink chemical plant’, Reuters (7 June 2007). [On-line] Available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/06/07/environment-china-environment-xiamen-dcidUSPEK84083200070607?feedType=RSS&pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0 (accessed 10 September 2011). Notably, similar protests against PX plants have also surfaced in other parts of China. One of the biggest so far was the anti-PX demonstration in Dalian in August 2011, which saw the mobilisation of around ten thousand people.

poisoning similarly led authorities to close down two battery factories that had been (illegitimately) operating in very close proximity to residential neighbourhoods.470

From this perspective, contestation generated from these activists has been key to the politics of responsibility. By bringing greater scrutiny to bear on issues which would otherwise be omitted from the public domain, these non-state actors have managed to fundamentally contest the predominant paradigms of development officially touted by the government, having forwarded their own interpretations highlighting the value of living with nature. It is also in this sense that, through the orchestration of protests and mass demonstrations, these agents of contestation have contributed to the reformulation of how ‘environmental responsibility’ is to be conceived and to whom this responsibility is delegated.

Mirroring concerns raised at the global level regarding the developed world’s transfer of pollution to China, this problem is also manifest in the socio-economic disparities that exist between the country’s urban and rural areas. It goes without saying that those who stand to be most affected by environmental degradation are the communities who have to live, breathe and, in some cases, even drink pollution on a daily basis. Exemplifying a perversion of the ‘polluter pays’ principle where it is instead the victims who pay, the welfare of local populations is sacrificed (somewhat ironically) for the sake of ‘national development’. In his remarks on ‘environmental injustice’, where social injustices are seen to breed environmental ones, Pan Yue draws on the example of coal mine owners in Shanxi Province. These operators are accused of ‘indiscriminately extract[ing] coal and dig[ging] up the land, creating pollution. As a result they [the owners] become extremely wealthy...They create pollution, but are removed from its consequences. They take all the benefits of polluting industries, but pay nothing towards the clean-up costs’.471

In light of these issues, it is no exaggeration to say that China’s grassroots environmental movement has breathed new life into international norms like the ‘polluter pays’ principle, considering the greater assertiveness on the part of

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communities in demanding that polluters are made accountable for the consequences of their actions. Crucially, this parallels nascent conceptual shifts at the international level with regard to how people ought to relate to their natural environment. Rather than interacting on the basis of the principle of ‘no significant harm’, where some degree of damage to the environment is justifiable so long as it is incurred for the sake of the ‘common good’, the ‘do no harm’ or precautionary principle is instead espoused by activists as a remedy to halt the spread of environmental degradation, whereby any form of damage made to the environment is not permissible. Furthermore, in reorienting the referents of responsibility from economic growth and national development to the natural environment and local communities, these ‘everyday activists’ have situated themselves as an alternative locus of authority, gradually working to challenge the government’s position as the sole wielder of legitimate governing authority. In fact, one might even posit that these civil society actors are now laying the foundations for a novel responsibility-sharing arrangement where obligations toward the environment are delegated not only to the state, but also to local communities and the Chinese people as a whole.

Taken together with developments at the global level, these changes within Chinese society have the potential to reinforce the country’s responsiveness to environmental issues within and beyond its borders. There is, indeed, truth to the Chinese leadership’s contention that responsibility for the global environment begins at the domestic level. Given the scope of the PRC’s environmental problems and the likelihood for them to spill over into the international sphere, responsible self-governance in China’s case would certainly represent a sizeable contribution to global ecological governance. As seen in the case of climate change, mitigating this common threat requires cooperation between states as well as local action within individual countries.

That said, this gradual shift towards a decentralised model of ecological governance still remains considerably circumscribed by state power and control. Following the Xiamen protests, for instance, it was revealed that the PX project had actually been moved to a neighbouring city in a classic case of pollution transfer. Especially when it comes to industrial centres like Fujian, Hunan, Guangxi and Sichuan, the social and ecological problems caused by toxic pollution from industrial.

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factories that fail to meet environmental standards have gone largely unmitigated.  
There are three major reasons for this. First, it is often the case that Chinese enterprises maintain close ties to the central and local governments, gaining strong leverage over government decision-making in the process. For example, Hydrolancang, which holds hydropower development rights on the Lancang River, is actually a subsidiary of the China Huaneng Group, whose majority stake is held by the Chinese government. Second, NGOs operating in China — should they want to be ‘officially’ recognised as such — can only complete their registration as a legal Chinese NGO once they have gone through the convoluted, bureaucratic process of receiving affiliation with a state agency willing to endorse them. The Beijing-based Greenpeace China, for example, is registered as a business rather than a social organisation. Third, as demonstrated in the case of the Yunnan dams, efforts to institutionalise inclusive, multi-stakeholder governance mechanisms continue to be hampered by government regulations that work to deter extensive public participation. In short, despite emerging trends suggesting the greater empowerment of societal actors, ecological governance still remains a state-centric enterprise. The Chinese government, as such, remains the primary locus of political authority and of responsibility.

Conclusion: Striving for ‘happiness under the same blue sky’

How China understands and acts upon notions of responsibility in the realm of ecological governance at both the domestic and international levels is largely predicated upon evolving conceptions on the human-nature relationship. Processes of

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473 Interview with Professor Huan Qingzhi, Research Institute of Marxism, Peking Centre for Environmental Politics Research, Peking University, Beijing, China (8 December 2011).
474 Also known in full as the Yunnan Huaneng Lancang River Hydropower Company (Yunnan huaneng Lancang jiang shuidian youxian gongsi).
475 Also known in Chinese as Zhongguo huaneng jitian gongsi.
476 Nevertheless, although not officially or legally recognised as an NGO per se, this has not entirely prevented Greenpeace China from being active in the public domain and being recognised de facto as an international NGO.
477 This is a line taken from Hu Jintao’s 2007 New Year’s speech. The broader context of the phrase was as follows: ‘At this moment, we [in China] are greatly concerned about people still suffering from warfare, poverty, disease, and disasters. We Chinese people [sic] are deeply sympathetic to them and are willing to do our utmost in helping them get rid of their plights as early as possible. And we sincerely hope that people of all nations can live a peaceful life of freedom, equality, harmony, and happiness under the same blue sky’. See Hu, ‘Make Joint Efforts to Advance the Lofty Cause of Peace and Development for Mankind [sic]’, in ‘China and the Olympics’, AIIA Policy Commentary (June 2008), p. 8.
contestation prove to be integral here, as they work to precipitate conceptual shifts in how this relationship is interpreted over time. Discussed in the preceding sections, an instance of this occurred amidst the political turmoil that had characterised the period from late-nineteenth century until early Maoist China when foreign subjugation had prompted the Chinese government to adopt a rhetorically-charged policy of nationalist modernisation. It was through this policy that the state-sanctioned idea of controlling nature became validated as a national prerogative, ultimately translating into the gross exploitation and degradation of the country’s natural resources.

Having said this, looking to China’s present role in governing nature at home and abroad, it is apparent the People’s Republic has come a long way since its Maoist years of unsustainable development founded upon a disregard for nature. Even for mega-events like the 2010 Shanghai World Exposition, Chinese elites saw the necessity of ‘green-washing’ it, with public relations campaigns focusing on such aspects of the Expo as the ‘eco-friendly’ architecture of its monumental pavilions and its selection of displays meant to promote low-carbon lifestyles. Significantly, central to this deepening ecological awareness on the part of Chinese elites is the country’s nascent environmental movement. As I have demonstrated above, local communities and civil society organisations are now actively exerting their newfound authority to contest preexisting, officialised paradigms of development and, in so doing, reassert their own rights and responsibilities as those who stand to be the most profoundly affected by environmental mismanagement. Such efforts, in turn, have helped to prompt the Chinese government into reprioritising its imperatives and reinterpreting the CCP’s guiding mantra of ‘putting people first’, with restoring clear skies, clean water, and clean air to the people becoming identified as an exigent task. At the crux of this conceptual shift is the growing realisation that material progress and environmental protection need not be mutually exclusive. Just as private interests

\footnote{The Chinese news media also reported on how the materials used in building the Expo were to be recycled subsequently, with the main site notably boasting a 4.7 MW solar power system. Moreover, in line with its theme of ‘Better City, Better Life’, the Expo also featured novel ideas for ‘urban sustainability’ that ranged from the use of green technologies and recycled goods to smoke-free fireworks and zero-emission patrol vehicles. See Wang Zhenghua and Wu Jiao, ‘Shanghai Expo opens for the world’, China Daily (1 May 2010). [On-line] Available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010expo/2010-05/01/content_9799561.htm (accessed 10 October 2011); for more details on other environmental initiatives taken at the Shanghai Expo, see Lo Sze Ping, UNEP Environmental Assessment: Expo 2010 Shanghai, China (Nairobi: UNON, 2010); and Jiang Qijia, ‘Reasons to love a low-carbon lifestyle’, China Daily (22 October 2010). [On-line] Available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010expo/2010-10/22/content_11447024.htm (accessed 10 October 2011).}
have increasingly converged with the public good in the way in which climate protection is slowly transforming into a ‘profitable business,’ there is no inherent conflict between pursuing national interests and environmental responsibilities.\textsuperscript{479}

But just as the Chinese leadership has been intensifying efforts at environmental protection within its borders, questions have arisen as to whether it is – and indeed, whether it should be – contributing to broader global efforts at ecological governance. It is by the same token that concerns have been voiced regarding how China’s efforts at ecological rejuvenation tend to stop at its borders. Considering the wealth of natural resources it has at its disposal and the transnational repercussions that environmental degradation within China can have on the global environment, the PRC constitutes a quintessential ‘environmental superpower.’\textsuperscript{480} One might even posit that China’s responsibility is confined not only to the environment, but should also be directed to those communities most vulnerable to drastic ecological change. It is in this regard that the People’s Republic, as a rapidly-industrialising power, has now come to face far heavier duties and obligations than ever before, especially when compared to other industrialising countries that are going through a similar learning curve. This greater burden of environmental responsibility is appropriated not simply in light of the PRC’s sheer geographical and demographic size, but also in view of its greater capacity to lead action and strengthen existing institutions as a major rising power.

A residual attachment to sovereignty, however, has meant that China remains reluctant to grant the international community a greater presence in shaping its environmental policies and goals, which have unsurprisingly been identified as domestic issues. It has become a situation where international censure pertaining to China’s ‘irresponsible’ management of its environment or its failure to participate ‘constructively’ in the global climate regime will likely be treated as an affront to the country’s ‘face’ (mianzi).\textsuperscript{481} And as evinced from the nationalist sentiments that ran high at Copenhagen and Cancun, this association can – and has – placed considerable strain on negotiations, particularly in North-South dialogue. Taken together with more strategic considerations (i.e. Beijing’s fixation on national development), this also

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{479} Interview with Professor Andreas Oberheitmann, Research Center for International Environmental Policy, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China (16 December 2011).

\textsuperscript{480} Interview with Dr. Lei Zhang, School of Environmental Science, Renmin University, Beijing, China (15 December 2011).

\textsuperscript{481} Interview with Dr. Ran Ran, School of International Relations, Renmin University, Beijing, China (16 December 2011)
\end{footnotesize}
partially explains the PRC’s reticence to assume binding commitments and a stronger leadership role in past climate talks.

Nevertheless, this is not to undervalue the contributions that China has made to global efforts at environmental management through the mitigation of its own environmental problems. The notion of ecological civilisation, for one, promises to offer insights into the way forward, with scientific development and socio-economic progress understood as necessarily proceeding hand-in-hand with environmental sustainability. In the words of Professor Bao Maohong, a leading scholar of Chinese environmental history based at Peking University, China’s rise will be a ‘green rise’, one which ‘will not only be a symbol of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, but [will] also explore a new and unique development path, [and act as] an exemplary role model for the whole world to follow’. 482

At the same time, it is important that we do not to lose sight of the PRC’s own incentive to halt the processes of environmental decline that are happening on a global scale. As evinced from the adverse effects that climate change can have on its water resources and vulnerability to disasters, a congruence of interests can be found here between China and the international community. What we are witnessing is the creation of webs of responsibility within an interdependent global system, where peoples and places become connected through the environmental problems that flow across socio-political divides and territorial boundaries. Indeed, despite its characteristic aversion to making binding promises, there is reason to believe that China has become increasingly aware of the limitations of a ‘self-governance’ approach for dealing with environmental issues. As evinced from its participation in regional cooperation schemes like the Northeast Asian Conference on Environmental Cooperation and the Tripartite Environment Ministers’ Meeting, or the support it has shown for the Clean Development Mechanism, China is arguably moving up the learning curve towards greater compliance in its engagement with extant ecological governance arrangements.

It should, nevertheless, be borne in mind that while decreasing water tables, declining biodiversity, and disappearing forests can have implications beyond China’s immediate borders, but so does dealing with the symptoms of ecological stress fall within the obligatory purview of not just the People’s Republic. We return here to the

482 Bao Maohong, ‘Environmental Resources and China’s Historical Development’, p. 22.
notion of responsibility-sharing – one which will reappear again throughout this thesis. In contrast to burden-sharing which, I argue, carries with it negative connotations as it essentially denotes the apportioning of culpability or accountability, the idea of responsibility-sharing presents a more positive alternative in the sense that it focuses attention on commonalities of interest by spotlighting the transboundary nature of threats and challenges faced by states and, more precisely, peoples today. Environmental responsibility, in effect, constitutes a shared responsibility, one which applies to all members of the international community. To quote the 1987 UN World Commission on Environment and Development (or better known as the Brundtland Commission),

We have in the more recent past been forced to face up to a sharp increase in economic interdependence among nations. We are now forced to accustom ourselves to an accelerating ecological interdependence among nations. Ecology and economy are becoming ever more interwoven locally, regionally, nationally, and globally into a seamless net of causes and effects.\footnote{Brundtland Commission, \textit{Our Common Future}, p. 21.}

Ultimately, for China to demonstrate its identity as a responsible power, this will require more of a ‘solemn commitment’ (\textit{zhuangyan chengnuo}) to build a harmonious society at home and promote an ecological civilisation beyond its borders. Here, cooperation is of the essence. Just as environmental pollution does not stop at its borders, so should efforts at environmental protection reach beyond its own mountains, rivers and forests.
CHAPTER FOUR

Contending Responsibilities, Contested Waterscapes\(^{484}\): China and Water Governance in the Mekong River Basin

There were no maps of the country; we had to make them. Nobody had any data on the [Mekong] river flow, or even any idea how to keep data. What I saw was a truly *virgin river*. Such sights disappeared in our country [the United States] long before I was born.

Lieutenant General Raymond A. Wheeler (1957)\(^{485}\)

We don’t need more water in the dry season, and we don’t need less in the wet season. We would like to see the water as it is.

Pianporn Deetes, Coordinator of Living River Siam (2010)\(^{486}\)

The purpose of this chapter is to critically consider China’s involvement in the water governance of the Mekong River Basin through the lens of contending responsibility claims. It seeks to uncover the underlying politics implicated in allocating shared water rights and norms, as well as in validating knowledge paradigms on water resources management. In so doing, it addresses three interrelated questions: first, how has the issue of water governance in the Mekong

\(^{484}\) The notion of ‘contested waterscapes’ is borrowed from François Molle, Tira Foran and Mira Kakoñen (eds), *Contested Waterscapes in the Mekong Region: Hydropower, Livelihoods and Governance* (London: Earthscan, 2009).


River Basin been politically framed by the main actors involved over time? Second, to what extent has China appropriated a language of responsibility in relation to its discursive claims and how have these been contested by other actors? And third, how has China subsequently acted — or not acted — upon notions of responsibility in its use and management of this transboundary river? These questions, in turn, feed into the overarching question of what rights and responsibilities come with China’s position as an upstream power capable of ‘controlling’, to a considerable degree, the fate of this originally free-flowing river and the allocation of its resources.

Fascination with the Mekong River has been a long-standing one, spanning more than six decades. Described, at various times, as being a ‘River of Life’, ‘River of Peace’, and even a ‘River of Terror and Hope’, the Mekong has borne witness to the rise and fall of ancient kingdoms and civilisations, and was also the setting for the protracted and violent Indochina Wars whose conclusion, it was then hoped, would beckon in a new era of peace and common prosperity for the region. Not only has this majestic river captured the imaginations of many historians and explorers alike, it has also drawn great interest from ecologists for its diverse flora and fauna, as well as engineers for its untapped potential. Yet despite more than forty years of relative peace, the Mekong has once again become the focus of renewed attention in recent years, albeit for very different and much more worrying reasons.

In the words of one observer, ‘paradoxically, peace and prosperity is currently the biggest threat to what is one of the world’s last great wild rivers’. China’s planned cascade of eight hydropower dams in the upper stretches of the Mekong

489 Recent evidence has surfaced that, apart from this cascade, at least another 17 dams on the Lancang’s mainstream between Gongguoqiao and the borders of Tibet and Yunnan, including the Lidi and Miaowei, have either been approved or are in various stages of planning or consideration by the Chinese government. That said, the exact names, locations, and specifications of these dams remain in flux due to limited information. Personal communication with Dr. Darrin Magee and John Dore, Bangkok, Thailand (4 December 2011).

This notably falls in line with a plan released by the Yunnan Provincial government in 1995, where it was originally intended for there to be a series of fourteen dams on the Lancang: Liutongsiang (estimated elevation at 2174 metres), Jiabi (2054m), Wunenglong (1964m), Tuoba (1820m), Huangdeng (1640m), Tiemenkan (1471m), Gongguoqiu (1319m), Xiaowan (1236m), Manwan (994m), Dachaoshan (895m), Nuozhadu (807m), Jinghong (602m), Gunlanba (533m), and Mengsong (519m). Taken from Hiroshi Hori, The Mekong: Environment and Development (Tokyo: United Nations
River within its southwestern province of Yunnan, together with at least twelve mainstream dam projects proposed for its lower reaches, have been the source of much social apprehension among local communities, who are faced with the uncertainties and potentially devastating consequences of such schemes on riverine ecosystems. Whilst the state-led ‘development mentality’ has apparently come to pass in developed (predominantly Western) societies, China along with the rest of Southeast Asia are still in the process of modernising their economies, with the state continuing to play a central role in such efforts. Hydro-development and dam-building feature prominently in the policy agendas of these resource-intensive countries, being depicted as a ‘cleaner’ and more affordable alternative (compared to fossil fuels) to feed growing populations and increasingly power-hungry industries.490

In recasting the linkages between international security and emergent water scarcities in certain parts of the world, the Mekong issue emerges as one which reflects a broader global challenge that necessitates both regional cooperation and local action. Given how five of the world’s biggest rivers – the Yangzi (Chang jiang), Lancang-Mekong, Irrawaddy, Tsangpo-Brahmaputra and Nu-Salween (of which the latter four are transboundary) – originate from the Tibetan Plateau and pass through Chinese territory first before flowing into their various tributaries and watersheds downstream, the PRC’s activities and projected plans for developing these rivers have proven to be greatly worrying to its southern riparian neighbours. The case of the Mekong, in particular, has raised ‘alarm bells’ for many observers, especially local civil society groups, given how the Chinese have already built three large dams on the mainstream of their section of the river (i.e. the Lancang Jiang). Any obstruction to the river’s natural flow regimes and aquatic ecosystems would undoubtedly stand to have tangible ramifications for the millions of people whose livelihoods depend on the Mekong.

To interrogate the ‘hydropolitics’ of the Mekong, the chapter will proceed in four parts as follows: the first section provides a general background to China’s
international rivers as well as the biophysical attributes of the Mekong River. To contextualise the social and political dynamics at play in the region, the second section introduces the challenges immanent in governing water as a shared resource, as it unpacks the debate on the implications of Chinese hydropower development on regional and human security. The third section then considers the normative contestation surrounding Chinese assertions of responsibility vis-à-vis the Mekong’s governance within both the state and non-state spheres. Special focus is afforded to the contentious debate between conventional development paradigms and emergent discourses on environmental sustainability, paying particular attention to the complex set of actors and interests operating at multiple levels. Following from this, the final section assesses Chinese responses to the normative contestation taking place at the interstate and societal levels, whilst reflecting more broadly on the challenges that lie ahead with regard to ecological governance and the forging of collective responsibility in this ‘eco-region’.

Accordingly, what this chapter seeks to reveal is how the Mekong case, though commonly characterised as being driven by a conflict of geostrategic interests, remains couched within a normative language of responsibility, as China attempts to legitimise its actions in relation to those of others. In more practical terms, I illustrate how the Mekong issue does not merely indicate a Chinese attempt to derogate responsibility, but is also symptomatic of a failure to enforce responsibility-sharing and strengthen ecological governance within the region. I argue that to appropriate blame solely to China would misrepresent the crux of the problem, which lies more with the weakness of existing sentiments of shared responsibility at the interstate level, and the limitations of governing arrangements currently in place that have so far failed to fully incorporate a participatory, multi-stakeholder mechanism necessary for implementing the principles of integrated water resources management (IWRM) in the basin.

Contrary to the majority of studies on this issue, I also highlight how China’s stance towards regional hydro-development schemes has not evolved in isolation from global and regional perspectives on water governance, but in fact exemplifies a complex triangulation of global, regional, and Chinese discourses on the relationship between national development and ecological sustainability. As such, although the developmental challenges currently threatening the Mekong tend to be localised or largely regional in scale, they nevertheless prove to be derivative of bigger global
issues to do with the governance of international rivers and transboundary water resources.

I should reiterate here, however, that my objective in this chapter is not so much to provide normative prescriptions as to what China ought to do; nor is it to pass moral judgments on what China is currently doing. Rather, it is to identify the parameters of China’s rights and obligations relating to the governance of transboundary water resources, and uncover for whose benefit and for what purpose these responsibilities have been conceived.

**China’s International Rivers**: the Lancang-Mekong

A distinguishing trait of water lies in how it is a renewable, yet finite, natural resource, and one which has no substitute. It constitutes a critical element to the sustenance of healthy ecosystems, being likewise central to local cultures and livelihoods, as well as to national economies as an important market commodity. References to water as ‘blue gold’ underscore this very recognition of its value. But like other natural resources, the finite nature of water has given rise to an array of problems and concerns that mirror contemporary challenges of global governance. Unanswered questions concerning equitable use and rightful ownership continue to cast a shadow over ongoing discussions over shared water resources management. For while it is often claimed to be a possession of individual states – or, even more specifically, of certain communities – by virtue of its fluid nature, it invariably gains the added transnational dimension of being a common public resource, taking the form of shared rivers and watersheds.

In many cases, disputes over the appropriation and utilisation of water resources epitomise a classic ‘tragedy of the commons’ scenario, as outlined by Garrett Hardin: multiple actors compete to exploit natural resources for their own interests, ultimately culminating in the depletion of such resources to the detriment of all.\(^{492}\) Cooperation, in other words, is seen as difficult – if not entirely improbable – being considered as

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\(^{491}\) An ‘international river’ is understood here as referring to a river that is shared and flows across two or more states and/or separates the territory of two or more states from one another. See A. H. Garretson et al (eds), *The Law of International Drainage Basins* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1967).

\(^{492}\) In Hardin’s words, ‘Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all’. Garrett Hardin, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, *Science* 162 (1968), p. 1244, see also pp. 1243-1248.
politically and strategically unviable. Nevertheless, the significance of recent developments in terms of rising global ‘environmental awareness’ on pressing issues like ozone depletion, the illegal wildlife trade, or the looming ‘water stress’.\textsuperscript{493} in certain regions of the world, cannot be understated. It is this awareness, underpinned by the advent of globalisation and the deepening interconnections between states and peoples through relations of risks and harm, which has ushered in novel reconsiderations of state responsibilities and precipitated a greater appreciation of the need for concerted action on the part of both state and non-state actors to mitigate such transnational problems.

But while water governance has long been identified as a common task necessitating the cooperative efforts of governments, it continues to be an area where the development of effective and extensive institutional mechanisms to manage it remains largely elusive. As Ken Conca rightly notes, ‘Governance of water involves enduring, chronic, and sometimes raging controversies about local practices of resource management, conservation, and environmental protection in an increasingly transnational context’.\textsuperscript{494} And it is precisely these ‘controversies’ that have made the governance of shared water resources one of the most challenging tasks facing global governance today.

China, in particular, is in the unique position of being the upstream power in a number of international river basins, leading James Nickum to aptly identify the PRC as an ‘upstream superpower’.\textsuperscript{495} Of the 261 major international river basins (not to mention an untold number of shared aquifers) that cover almost one half of the total land surface of the globe, fifty-three of these are located in Asia.\textsuperscript{496} And of these fifty-

\textsuperscript{493} ‘Water stress’ constitutes a category in the demographic index used to measure water poverty. The beginning of water stress is marked at a per capita availability of 1,700m\textsuperscript{3} per year, whereas chronic water scarcity is at 1,000m\textsuperscript{3} and absolute water scarcity at 500m\textsuperscript{3}. Timo Menniken, ‘China’s Performance in International Resource Politics: Lessons from the Mekong’, \textit{Contemporary Southeast Asia} 29:1 (2007), p. 100; see also Peter H. Gleick, Elizabeth H. Chalecki, and Arlene Wong, ‘Measuring Water Well-being: Water Indicators and Indices’, in Peter H. Gleick (ed.), \textit{The World’s Water: The Biennial Report on Freshwater Resources 2002-2003} (London and Washington: Island Press, 2002), pp. 87-112.

\textsuperscript{494} Conca, \textit{Governing Water}, p. 8.


three, nineteen of these basins have transboundary rivers which flow through Chinese territory first, before splitting downstream into various tributaries and finally emptying into the sea. These shared basins make up around one-third of the PRC’s land area (3,200,000 km²) – making China only fourth to Russia, the United States, and Brazil – and span along most of China’s 22,000 km land border with 14 countries.

Several of these shared rivers have been – and continue to be – politically central to the conduct of Chinese foreign policy, especially its regional engagement. The Amur-Heilong River Basin, for one, was the subject of much contention, dampening Sino-Soviet relations back in the 1960s. Both sides had even exchanged fire over their competing territorial claims, most notably over Zhenbao Island in 1969, which sparked serious fears of the issue escalating into a war. While Russia subsequently recognised the island as part of Chinese territory in 1991, disputes over other islands and sections delimited by the river persisted. It was not until 2004, after forty years of negotiations, that both parties were finally able to definitively demarcate their 4,300 km border, with the formal handover of Yinlong Island and half of Heixiazi Island to the Chinese taking place in October 2008. These episodes have subsequently been touted by China as demonstrating its ‘peaceful’ intentions and willingness to cooperate even on sensitive issues to do with sovereignty.

The Tumen River constitutes another good example, though one rendered even more complex by the presence of cross-border ecological challenges. Given its geographical location, not only has it served as a crossing point for illegal North


497 To the northeast, these are the Amur-Heilong, Yalu, Suifen (Razdolnaya), and Tumen Rivers; to the northwest, the Aral Sea, Har Us Nur, Ili, Ob-Itys, Pu Lun To, and Tarim Rivers; in the southwest, Beilun, Ganges-Brahmaputra-Megna, Indus, Irrawaddy, Lancang-Mekong, Nu-Salween, Pearl (Xi and Bei), and Yuan (Red) Rivers. Nickum, ‘The Upstream Superpower’, p. 227; see also Gleick, The World’s Water 2000-2001, p. 249.


500 Interview with Professor Zhang Zhirong, School of International Studies, Peking University, Beijing, China (16 December 2009). See also Yang Gongsu and Zhang Zhirong, Dangdai Zhongguo waijiao lijun yu shizhan [Contemporary China Foreign Relations: Theory and Practice] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2009), pp. 200-202.
Korean migrants to enter China, but it has also been a crucial element in the development of a Northeast Asian infrastructure and economic cooperation mechanism.\footnote{See ‘Northeast Asian countries’ cooperative development accelerates’, Xinhua (3 September 2010). [On-line] Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-09/03/c_13475838.htm (accessed 26 June 2011); ‘Int’l energy cooperation key field in Tumen River development’, China View (Xinhua) (3 September 2005). [On-line] Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2005-09/03/content_3439701.htm (accessed 26 June 2011); ‘China, DPRK to enhance water resource cooperation’, Xinhua (29 October 2008). [On-line] Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-10/29/content_10275329.htm (accessed 26 June 2011).} Originally known as the Tumen River Area Development Programme (TRADP), which had been initiated by the UNDP back in 1991 with China, Russia and the DPRK (the three riparian states) as its founding members, this project has since evolved into the UNDP-supported Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI), with a membership that has expanded to include the ROK and Mongolia.\footnote{The GTI was established in 2005. For a brief history of the GTI’s evolution, see the GTI’s official website, ‘Background Information about the Tumen River Development Area Programme (TRADP)’ [On-line] Available at: http://www.tumenprogramme.org/index.php?id=128 (accessed 26 June 2011).} Preservation of the environment and, more precisely, the rich and vibrant biodiversity of the Tumen Delta’s vast wetlands, have been identified by the GTI members as a key concern ever since the initiative’s inception. Although application of sustainable development principles to the area has proven to be more difficult in practice, there is nevertheless mounting recognition that transboundary environmental collaboration is both imperative and necessary. Recent discussions over the possible creation of a Tumen River biosphere reserve are significant in this respect.\footnote{Contributions by local and transnational environmental NGOs, together with growing international concern, have opened the way for this greater awareness on the part of the GTI member-countries. Similarly, it was international scrutiny that had served as an early catalyst for the issuing of the TRADP’s 1995 Memorandum of Understanding on Environmental Principles Governing the Tumen River Economic Development Area and Northeast Asia, and the subsequent compilation of an Environmental Action Plan. For an overview of the Tumen’s environmental challenges and timeline of cooperation, see Sangmin Nam, ‘Ecosystem Governance in a Cross-border Area: Building a Tuman [sic] River Transboundary Biosphere Reserve’, China Environment Series 7 (2005), pp. 83-88; and Simon Marsden, ‘Developing Approaches to Trans-boundary Environmental Impact Assessment in China: Co-operation through the Greater Tumen Initiative and in the Pearl River Delta Region’, Chinese Journal of International Law (2010), pp. 400-407.}

Significantly, these cases underscore how cooperation, rather than conflict over water resources, has been more visible. This is, of course, not to deny the presence of tension or contestation over the use and distribution of such common goods: large-scale hydro-development projects on the Tigris-Euphrates, Jordan River, Nile River, and Klamath River have certainly had an impact on relations between the upstream and downstream riparians involved. It is, by no means, a mere historical coincidence that the modern-day English word ‘rival’ should be derived from the Latin rivalis.
signifying ‘a person using the same stream (rivus)’. Nonetheless, strategic cooperation tends to dominate riparian relations even in hostile settings. This was the case for the Jordan River, as it is for the Indus: although Indian and Pakistan remain at odds over Kashmir, they still signed a treaty to divide and manage water resources despite a nuclear standoff. At present, an estimated three hundred agreements are in place for the purposes of managing of shared basins, not to mention the numerous multilateral mechanisms such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC) established in 1995 to coordinate stakeholders.

The PRC’s deepening involvement in the Mekong River sub-region through its hydropower projects and participation in such initiatives as the Greater Mekong Subregion project, makes the Mekong all the more crucial – politically and geostrategically – to China’s engagement with the region. Indeed, as a powerful upper riparian state, China’s reticence to join the MRC as a fully-fledged member has sparked many concerns, especially among its neighbours, over the feasibility and effectiveness of collective action to mitigate emerging water-sharing problems. It is, in this regard, that the Mekong serves as a key site for interpreting Sino-Southeast Asian relations in coming decades. Before proceeding further into the dynamics of water governance, a brief overview of the Lancang-Mekong’s importance to the region and its people is in order.

**The Mekong River and its significance**

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the French explorer Francis Garnier made the following remark on the Mekong River: ‘Without doubt, no other river, over such a length, has a more singular or remarkable character’. The 795,000 km² Mekong Basin, which is roughly the size of the Danube Basin in Europe, encompasses five Southeast Asian states – Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, and Vietnam – as well as China’s southwestern province of Yunnan. Rising in Mount Tangula in China’s Qinghai Province, its waters plunge through the high gorges of

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Yunnan, subsequently broadening in the so-called ‘Golden Triangle’ area and demarcating a large portion of the Thai-Laotian border before passing through Cambodia, and ultimately emptying into the South China Sea through the delta in Vietnam. It is known variously as the Dza Chu (‘Water of Stone’) in Tibet, the Lancang Jiang (‘Turbulent River’, as derived from the Dai name of Laan-chang or ‘million elephants’) in China, Mae Nam Khong or Mekong (‘Mother of Water’) among locals on the Thai-Lao border, as Tonle Khong (‘Great River’) in Cambodia, and the Cuu Long (‘Nine-tailed Dragon’) in Vietnam,\(^\text{509}\) having been historically central to the development of the societies and cultures of the countries that border it.

From the time of Garnier’s expedition along the river, the exceptional qualities of the Mekong have been well-extolled by scholars, ecologists and travellers alike: it constitutes the twelfth longest river in the world at 4,880 km and is often calculated as being the eighth largest in terms of average freshwater discharge into the South China Sea (475 billion m\(^3\)); the basin is home to more than 70 million people, with their subsistence reliant on the river’s natural ebbs and flows; and the Mekong boasts a concentration of biodiversity only second to that of the Amazon, with approximately 1,700 known fish species. The Mekong Delta region has recently been referred to as a ‘biological treasure trove’, with more than a thousand new animal species having been discovered by scientists to date.\(^\text{510}\)

The river’s migratory fish, such as the Mekong giant catfish (one of the world’s biggest freshwater fish)\(^\text{511}\), mud carp or the greater black shark, together with the kai (cladophora) – a type of freshwater seaweed commonly found in the northern Thai province of Chiang Khong\(^\text{512}\) – make up a complex ecosystem, upon which the livelihoods and diets of the rural communities (mainly comprised of farmers and

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\(^{509}\) To be more precise, ‘Cuu Long’ refers to the delta area in southwestern Vietnam where the river separates into a network of nine distributaries before subsequently emptying into the sea, whereas the Mekong in Vietnamese is more accurately called ‘Mae Nam Thien’.


\(^{511}\) The Mekong giant catfish is also listed as a critically endangered species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

\(^{512}\) The kai is popularly used by locals in cooking as well as in the making of traditional herbal medicines due to its beneficial nutrients and the fact that it is high in protein. See Living River Siam, ‘ความจริงจากน้ำตก-review ข่าวผู้สื่อข่าวจากแนวชายแดนไทย-กัมพูชา’ [The Truth from People on the Water Margins: from Southern China to the Thai-Lao border], Report on the transboundary effects of upper Mekong hydro-development (Bangkok: 2008), p. 24.
Figure 5. Map of the Mekong River

Countries of the Mekong Basin
- Mekong
- Mekong basin boundary
- Country boundary

Flow contributions per country
- China 16%
- Myanmar 2%
- Laos 35%
- Thailand 18%
- Cambodia 18%
- Vietnam 11%

River flow data is generalised for illustrative purposes
Source: Mekong River Commission

fishermen) residing along the river depend. Eighty percent of the protein consumed in Cambodia is estimated to come from the river’s inland fisheries.\textsuperscript{513} Further, apart from serving as the world’s largest freshwater fishery (two to three million tonnes are produced annually), the ecological importance of the Mekong is also reflected in its major watersheds like the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, also known as Vietnam’s ‘rice bowl’, which produces approximately 40 percent of the country’s crop; or Cambodia’s Tonle Sap (‘Great Lake’), with its seasonal ‘natural reverse flows’ that act as a buffer against floods and a nursery for various aquatic life and plant species in the surrounding wetlands.

The significance of the Mekong is not only confined to the riparian countries in the lower basin area. The upper section of the river – the Lancang Jiang – constitutes China’s sixth longest river at 2,164 km long,\textsuperscript{514} with a drainage basin of 167,487 km\textsuperscript{2}, accounting for nearly two percent of China’s total land area. China contributes around 16 to 20 percent of the Mekong’s flow,\textsuperscript{515} having a mean annual discharge of 76 billion m\textsuperscript{3} that supplies half of the sediment discharge flowing into the Mekong Delta. In Yunnan, the river runs for 1,240 km, flowing through seven prefectures, with a drainage basin of 91,000 km\textsuperscript{2} that makes up 23 percent of Yunnan’s total land area. The Lancang watershed is populated by almost five million people, while the fertile Lancang valley in Xishuangbanna Prefecture is inhabited by various ethnic groups – most notably the Dai – and has 75 percent of its surface area covered by forests that are known to contain more than 5000 plant and 400 animal species, and which also contribute to the regulation of hydrological flows to the Lower Mekong Basin.

The Lancang-Mekong River, with its ecological diversity and vital function as the region’s ‘food bowl’, appositely captures the essence of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’ remark in \textit{New Jersey v. New York} (1931) that ‘[a] river is more than an amenity, it is a treasure. It offers a necessity of life that must be rationed among those who have power over it’. Responsible ecological stewardship is, therefore, vital to sustaining and protecting the health of the region’s ‘lifeblood’.

\textsuperscript{513} Nathan Badenoch, \textit{Transboundary Environmental Governance: Principles and Practice in Mainland Southeast Asia} (World Resources Institute, 2002), p. 3.
\textsuperscript{514} It comes after the Yangzi (6,300 km), Yellow (5,464 km), Amur-Heilong (3,420 km), Songhua (2,308 km), and Pearl (2,214 km) Rivers respectively.
\textsuperscript{515} It does deserve note that these estimates are fairly contentious. Official Chinese sources often put the Lancang’s contribution to the lower Mekong’s flow as being around 13 percent.
Governing Water as a Shared Resource: the dam debate

The Lancang-Mekong is, of course, well-known for being one of the least developed river systems in the world today (the other prominent one being the Nu-Salween River). Although its total hydropower potential is calculated to be at 35,000 MW, with 18,000-20,000 MW in the upper and 15,000 MW in the lower basins, only a fraction of its energy potential has so far been developed. But this is soon to change—or more accurately put, is in the midst of changing. With the dynamic modernisation drives of respective riparian states, coupled by a regional emphasis on economic growth, the Mekong has effectively been ascribed a newfound economic value as a highly profitable resource, one which needs to be tapped not only for the sake of national development, but also for the region at large.

China has notably been responsible for spearheading the hydro-development of the river, as part of the State Council’s 10th Five-Year Plan (2001-2005) of ‘Opening Up the West’ (xibu da kaifa), an infrastructure-development plan which aims to tap the energy potential of Yunnan and Tibet, as well as forging closer socio-economic ties with its southern neighbours. As one commentator notes, ‘Few things in China are [ever] done on a small scale’.\textsuperscript{516} The PRC’s projected dam cascade on the Lancang Jiang reflects this historical and modern proclivity of the Chinese leadership, with plans for large-scale development of the Lancang Jiang having been proposed as early as the 1970s. Yunnan Province has the second largest exploitable hydro-energy resources in China: in 2001, it was able to export 900,000 MW of electricity to Guangdong Province. In building this cascade, China is hoping to take advantage of the 700 m drop in elevation along the middle and lower sections of the Lancang in Yunnan (see diagram below). Once completed, the dams are designed to produce 15,600 MW, which would constitute around 80 percent of the expected output of the Three Gorges Dam.\textsuperscript{517}

Awareness of the full scope and potential transboundary implications of China’s hydropower projects on the Lancang Jiang is a fairly recent phenomenon. It was not until the mid-1990s that the issue was brought to public attention.\textsuperscript{518} Up until then, the

\textsuperscript{518} This was the result of a paper presentation by E.C. Chapman and He Daming at a conference in Melbourne. Milton Osborne, River at risk: The Mekong and the water politics of China and Southeast

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Chinese government had not publicised its hydropower plans for the Lancang, nor did it seek any external financing for these schemes\(^\text{519}\) – a move which is rather unconventional for such large-scale hydropower projects.\(^\text{520}\) Had the Chinese sought external investments from the private sector or funding from international financial institutions (IFIs) like the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank, this would have most certainly revealed its ambitious plans to its neighbours as well as to the rest of the world.

The first of the planned eight-dam cascade – the 1,500-MW Manwan Dam – became fully operational in 1995, having been well under construction since 1986. The construction of the second dam – the Dachaoshan – began soon after in 1996, and was completed in 2003 with an installed capacity of 1,350 MW. This was followed by the 1,500-MW Jinghong Dam, which was completed in 2008 and is located only 270km from the Thai border in the Golden Triangle area. While these two dams are already considered to be very large – each having an active water storage of almost

**Figure 6. Altitudinal profile of the Lancang-Mekong**

![Altitudinal profile of the Lancang-Mekong](image)

Source: Taken from Cronin, ‘Mekong Dams and the Perils of Peace’, p. 150.

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519 Osborne, River at risk, p. 11.

520 In the case of the Three Gorges Dam, for example, China did seek foreign funding, which generated substantial debate among donors and, to one degree, led to the ‘internationalisation’ of the problems surrounding the mega-project, with the World Bank eventually pulling out from the scheme.
Figure 7. Proposed and operational dams on the Mekong

one billion cubic metres – the 292 m-high Xiaowan Dam, which has a reservoir worth 15 billion cubic metres and is now in the process of being filled, has exceeded both, proving to be of far greater concern to communities downstream. Equally large (and worrying) is the prospective 254 m-high Nuozhadu Dam, which will have a storage capacity of more than 20 billion cubic metres of water. Together, the Xiaowan and Nuozhadu will have the cumulated power capacity of nearly 10,000 MW, and have been expected to have tangible effects on seasonal hydrological flows further downstream as cistern dams. It is believed that the Xiaowan Dam alone would already be capable of regulating the river by controlling a substantial amount of the Mekong’s flow through the opening and closing of its sluice gates. In fact, Thai locals in Chiang Khong district, the closest major Southeast Asian town to Yunnan, have consistently claimed that noticeable rises in water levels could be observed whenever the sluice gates of the Lancang dams were opened (see map above).

Implications for regional security

China is, by no means, the only country in the region seeking to harness the Mekong’s hydropower. Southeast Asian governments, especially Laos, are as eager to exploit the river’s natural endowments. There is believed to be more than 80 hydropower projects in various stages of development for the Mekong and its tributaries, of which eleven have been proposed for the lower reaches of the Mekong mainstream, including the controversial Xayabouri and Nam Theun II Dams in Laos. It is precisely the presence of other actors and their varied interests that renders the Mekong case an inherently complex and politically sensitive one.

As mentioned earlier on, there has yet to be formally established an authoritative and globally-sanctioned regime to deal with the governance of international rivers. The closest so far is the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, which was meant to promote negotiations and intra-basin cooperation, as well as strengthen existing accords for specific river basins. However, it failed to acquire the required number of ratifying

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states by the set deadline in May 2000 and now exists, more or less, as an unratified framework convention with limited powers to foster compliance. A similar lack of ‘thick’ institutionalisation on water-sharing also exists at the regional level, being particularly common to developing regions like Southeast Asia. Indeed, the institutional history of the Mekong River’s governance aptly illustrates this.

Even though a water governance regime has existed in the region since the late 1950s when the Mekong Committee (1957-1975) was first established under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), the institutional mechanisms in place have proven to be relatively ‘weak’ in terms of their ability to stringently enforce state compliance with extant water management norms. Instability within the region up until the 1980s translated into instability for the Mekong Committee itself, as regional geopolitics impinged on how member-states participated and negotiated over prospective water management projects and policies. In fact, Cambodia withdrew its membership at one point (in part the result of internal socio-political turmoil), leading the remaining committee members to form the Interim Mekong Committee (1978-1992) which, needless to say, suffered from a significantly weakened mandate. It would only be with the Mekong River Commission (MRC) established in 1995 that full membership was once again restored, with China and Burma as upstream riparians also participating as ‘dialogue partners’.

The MRC has inherited much from this historical legacy, especially in terms of its mandate which remains largely focused on the affairs of the downstream riparian states. Funding for the organisation continues to be chiefly provided by external – often private – donors (also the case for the Mekong Committee). This, again, imposes considerable constraints on the MRC’s capacity to act, effectively delimiting its functions to that of an epistemic community responsible for acting as a ‘clearing house’ for proposed hydro-projects, and tasked with providing impartial, scientific knowledge on the river’s hydrology and ecology. Moreover, like its predecessors, the MRC operates primarily at the state level, having yet to fully incorporate a non-state participatory framework into its operational paradigm. And as explored in subsequent sections, it is precisely this lack of public participation that has emerged as a major

issue of contention in recent years, raising doubts over the MRC’s political
‘impartiality’ as well as popular discontent over existing transnational water-sharing
arrangements.

Besides the MRC, alternative mechanisms for managing the Mekong Basin’s
ecological resources are contained in both the Greater Mekong Subregion and
ASEAN frameworks. In 1996, the Basic Framework of ASEAN-Mekong Basin
Development Cooperation was agreed upon in Kuala Lumpur with the purpose of
enhancing ‘economically sound and sustainable development of the Mekong Basin’, 525
whilst a decade later saw the inception of the GMS Core Environment
Program, 526 along with its Biodiversity Conservation Corridors Initiative (BCI),
which constitutes an attempt to link poverty reduction by ‘improving the livelihoods
of people’ in the region through the implementation of ecological conservation
strategies. 527 Yet despite such emerging sentiments of environmental responsibility,
these mechanisms still remain chiefly geared towards the fulfillment of regional
development imperatives, with ecological protection constituting less than a focal
concern. 528 It has, in fact, taken the GMS more than a decade (since its founding in
1992) to ‘mainstream’ environmental considerations in its official rhetoric and
policies. Similarly, it would only be years before the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-
Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) mechanism – yet another sub-
regional grouping formed with the stated objective of stimulating the region’s socio-
economic development – introduced environmental cooperation as a key issue-area
within its institutional framework through the establishment of a working group. 529

525 For the full text of the declaration, see ASEAN, ‘Basic Framework of ASEAN-Mekong Basin
(accessed 21 August 2011).
526 Other components of this program include capacity-building for sustainable environmental
management, the conduct of Strategic Environmental Assessments and Environmental Performance
Assessments (EPAs) for the GMS corridors, as well as the implementation of ‘sustainable financing’
for the program. For additional information on these components, see the GMS Environment
2011).
527 ADB, ‘GMS Biodiversity Conservation Corridors Initiative: Strategic Framework and Technical
Assessment’ (May 2005), p. 29.
528 For example, in the Joint Ministerial Statement of the Second GMS Environment Ministers’
Meeting at Vientiane on 29 January 2008, emphasis was explicitly placed on the notion of
‘Environment for Development’ [emphasis in original].
529 The ACMECS member-countries are Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. For more
details as well as the official announcement of this Working Group on Environmental Cooperation
(which has Cambodia and Vietnam as co-chairs) at the Fourth Summit of the ACMECS, see the
‘Phnom Penh Declaration on the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy’
In addition, the existence of multiple and oftentimes overlapping institutions for transboundary environmental management within the region can at times have paradoxical consequences. Instead of encouraging more integrated ecological governance structures within the region to help reform the prevalent mentality of ‘development-over-environment’, these institutions can ironically work to undermine one another, effectively weakening compliance among governments and further ensconcing recurring ecological problems in the process. The case of the Mekong navigation project exemplifies this well, given how the stakeholders involved in the dialogue process over the blasting of the river’s rapids had benefitted from the institutional ‘loophole’, which allowed them to negotiate within the GMS’ development-oriented framework, rather than that of the more ecologically-sensitive MRC.\(^{530}\)

Developing the Mekong’s water resources thus invariably raises a range of regional challenges to do with issues of equitable use and distribution, environmental degradation, among other social and economic externalities, including popular discontent and social instability from forced resettlement and displacement. These, in turn, directly correspond to what we can view as being the major areas of contention in water governance: (1) resource security, vis-à-vis the power asymmetry between upstream and downstream riparian states; (2) socio-economic development, in terms of the implications – both intended and unintended – of large-scale hydropower schemes on local livelihoods and human welfare in the Mekong River basin; and (3) ecological sustainability, with regard to the direct and indirect effects of resource utilisation and development on the river’s freshwater ecological system and its surrounding environment (e.g. wetlands, floodplains, and forests). The question has now become one centred on how China, as the so-called ‘paramount power’ in the region,\(^{531}\) will act in relation to its Southeast Asian neighbours, particularly in the case of conflating interests. In this respect, the PRC’s performance serves as an important litmus test of its regional diplomacy, as well as its professed self-image of being a peaceful and responsible power.

\(^{530}\) This issue will be raised again and explained in greater depth later on in this chapter.

\(^{531}\) This term is borrowed from Milton Osborne: see Osborne, *The paramount power: China and the countries of Southeast Asia* (New South Wales: Lowy Institute, 2006).
With collective action and ‘free-rider’ problems being endemic to most water-sharing arrangements, the problem, simply put, is one which stems from power-based inequities in the access and utilisation of water resources. The interplay between upstream and downstream riparians has constantly proven to be problematic, as the imperatives of upper and lower riparian states come into conflict. Frequently characterised as ‘zero-sum’ or even a ‘Rambo’-style game, upstream development is seen as necessarily at the expense of those further downstream. Lax supervision of environmental impact assessments, together with the weak institutionalisation of operative norms on water rights and state accountability vis-à-vis transboundary environmental harm, have often meant that the risk of states having to compensate its neighbours for the consequences of ‘irresponsible’ hydropower projects is low compared to the benefits they stand to gain.

Present concerns over the proposed construction of Laos’ Xayabouri Dam serve as a potent reminder of this propensity to relegate even legal obligations. Vientiane had controversially elected to proceed with the dam’s construction despite strong opposition from its fellow MRC members, Cambodia and Vietnam, relentless protesting from civil society groups, and the recommendations of an MRC-commissioned Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) report that advised a ten-year moratorium for lower Mekong mainstream dams in view of their potential social and ecological repercussions. Should the Laos government proceed with dam construction, not only would this constitute a blatant disregard of the 1995

532 ‘Rambo’ situations are typified by an upstream actor who does not use cooperation to achieve his interests, but rather relies on a predominance of geophysical, political, military, and/or economic power. Menniken, ‘China’s Performance in International Resource Politics’, p. 101; see also Thomas Bernauer, ‘Explaining Success and Failure in International River Management’, Aquatic Sciences 64:1 (2002), p. 7.

533 For the complete content and recommendations of this report conducted by the International Centre for Environmental Management (ICEM), see ICEM, MRC Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of hydropower on the Mekong mainstream (Hanoi: 2010). This report is also notably part of the MRC Initiative on Sustainable Hydropower (ISH). More information on this initiative can be accessed at the MRC’s website at http://www.mrcmekong.org/ish/ish.htm. More recently, following a meeting of the MRC’s member countries to deliberate the fate of the Xayabouri Dam, an official statement was made to the effect that the member governments agreed to first study the ramifications of the dam in greater depth before any permissions are given to the Laotian government to proceed with the dam’s construction. See James Hookway, ‘Big Dam Project Delayed on Mekong’, The Wall Street Journal (9 December 2011). [On-line] Available at: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203501304577086012500372618.html (accessed 12 December 2011). Similar concerns have also recently arisen with regard to the proposed Lower Se San 2 Dam in Cambodia (having considerably financed by Electricity of Vietnam, and to be undertaken by the Cambodia-Vietnam Hydropower Company), which poses a significant threat to the Se San River’s native fisheries and to the indigenous communities located along the Se San and Srepok Rivers which will inevitably be displaced.
‘Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin’ (or the Mekong Agreement), to which it is party, but it would also signify the conscious ‘abuse’ of Laos’ privileged position on the river. In this situation, hydropower and the promise of economic gains would clearly come before the environment and one’s neighbours.

A similar predicament arises with China’s dam cascade. At the ‘Public Forum on Sharing the Mekong Basin’ held in April 2010 (shortly before the inaugural MRC Summit in Hua Hin), which saw the gathering of scholars, civil society groups, the media, along with government agencies, the official representative from the Chinese embassy in Bangkok had attempted to assuage discontent over the Yunnan dams with the following statement:

China and the countries along the Mekong River are good neighbours. Rational harnessing [of] the water resources of the Mekong River is in the interests of all countries in the Great Mekong Sub-region. While harnessing the water resources of Lancang River, China takes seriously into consideration the impact on the environment, ecology and natural resources and takes care of the concerns of the lower-reach countries in an active manner and keeps smooth communication with them. As a responsible upper-reach country, China will never do things that harm the interests of the lower-reach count[ries].

The reality, however, is that as the uppermost riparian with the most hydropower potential and facing the least vulnerabilities, not to mention its comparative advantage in terms of political and economic strength, China clearly has little incentive to voluntarily join existing water-sharing agreements which would only work to circumscribe its freedom to manoeuvre. The PRC’s obvious reticence over serving as a fully-fledged member of the MRC, as opposed to just a ‘dialogue partner’, arguably attests to this strategic consideration.

As a dialogue partner, the PRC does not have to observe the mandatory rules and obligatory principles stipulated in the Mekong Agreement – including prior


535 Myanmar is the only other MRC dialogue partner aside from the PRC. Shortly following a Dialogue Meeting in 2004, there had been talk of China joining the MRC. However, this hope was soon dispelled. See ‘China Discusses Joining River Commission’, Vientiane Times (26 August 2004).
consultation, reasonable and equitable use (Article 5), the maintenance of minimum monthly flows (Article 6), the prevention and cessation of harmful effects (Article 7), and state responsibility for damages (Article 8) – which reflect global norms on water-sharing, as outlined in the UN Watercourses Convention.\textsuperscript{536} Apparently, China has asserted that prior to any talks over its MRC membership, it will first need to ‘study in depth the effect of the...water usage rules on China’s capacity to utilise upstream water’, and that the MRC will have to be responsible for formulating agreed-upon water utilisation provisions.\textsuperscript{537} However, what this really seems to suggest is more of a cautious attempt on Beijing’s part to deflect some of the responsibility (i.e. ‘pass the buck’) for its hesitancy to join the MRC.

Critics of China’s hydropower schemes frequently cite this failure to become a member as evidence not only of China’s ‘irresponsibility’, but also of its ‘unilateral’ inclination on issues pertaining to Chinese national interests. Without the full participation of a key upstream state, this has considerably weakened the MRC’s mandate and continues to limit its capacity to implement an integrated water resources management approach to basin planning. There is, in other words, little the MRC can do to guarantee Chinese compliance. Furthermore, even though an agreement to share hydrological information on the Lancang-Mekong was reached between China and the MRC through the ‘Dialogue Meeting’ mechanism,\textsuperscript{538} anti-dam activists have pointed to how these data-sets are of limited use for gauging the ramifications of Chinese dams on water levels since they represent data taken from only two of China’s upstream monitoring stations\textsuperscript{539} and provide hydrological information only for the wet season.

It comes as no surprise then that the continuing transparency question of Chinese actions would be interpreted by many as belying Beijing’s self-interested motives and ‘less-than-benign’ intentions. The fact that China has not ratified the UN Watercourses Convention, and was responsible for casting one of the three opposing

\textsuperscript{536} Mekong River Commission, ‘Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin’ (5 April 1995), pp. 3-5.


\textsuperscript{538} This provision was agreed upon in 2002.

\textsuperscript{539} It should be noted, however, that one of the two is the Jinghong station, which is located downstream from three of the dams in the cascade.
votes against it, has also worked only to fuel further doubts.\textsuperscript{540} Moreover, the PRC’s decision to ‘actively’ oppose the convention and its principles, which include information exchange on ‘planned measures’ (Article 11),\textsuperscript{541} rather than just simply abstaining from the voting process (a diplomatic method usually preferred by Beijing and one which was used by other important riparians like France, Egypt and India) is equally noteworthy, as it suggests how water issues have been securitised as a national interest concern by Beijing’s policy-making elites.

Deepening regional economic integration and political interdependence, coupled with a general reluctance on the part of Southeast Asian governments to engage in any outright confrontation with their northern neighbour, has nonetheless ensured that the prospect of interstate war or militarised conflicts over the Mekong’s resources remains highly unlikely. At present, the problems associated with the utilisation of the Lancang-Mekong’s water resources has been politically framed by the state actors involved as being not so much an ‘exigent’ problem of asymmetrical regional ‘resource politics’, but is instead treated by China and other members of the MRC in more ‘politically-neutral’ terms, as a long-term environmental issue related to the social and ecological consequences of global climate change.\textsuperscript{542} Moreover, aside from the presence of growing Chinese investment and political influence in the countries of mainland Southeast Asia, the fact that China has been an active participant in regional governing mechanisms like the ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN Regional Forum, or ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus, means that it is all the more difficult for Southeast Asia governments to consistently level criticisms at Beijing. The dynamics at play here fit with Beijing’s broader regional strategy of engaging in ‘forum-shopping’ or selective multilateralism, opting to cooperate on particular issues and participate in certain multilateral institutions deemed to be to its benefit. While the PRC’s extensive involvement in the GMS initiative and CAFTA are often taken as quintessential examples of this diplomatic approach, even more striking, perhaps, was China’s participation in the Quadripartite Economic Cooperation (QEC) initiative.\textsuperscript{543}

\textsuperscript{540} The other two opposing states were Turkey and Burundi.
\textsuperscript{542} This ‘climate change’ discourse is explored further later on.
\textsuperscript{543} Also known as the ‘Golden Quadrangle’.
Hydropower has not been the only factor driving Chinese moves to develop the Lancang-Mekong: Beijing also has an interest in improving the river for navigation purposes. Compared to the pirate-infested and strategically vulnerable Strait of Malacca, the Mekong seems to offer a better alternative that allows China to transport refined oil up the river in a fairly ‘risk-free’ environment, thereby ensuring regular oil supply to its southwest provinces, while serving also to facilitate the export of Chinese agricultural and manufactured goods from its landlocked provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan and Guangxi to Thai markets. In fact, talks on improving the Mekong’s navigability by large ships, in hopes of turning the Mekong into the region’s major trade and shipping route, have been held between China, Thailand, Laos and Myanmar since 1993, with the QEC having been formalised later in 1994 to set the guidelines for navigation along the Upper Mekong. For China, navigation constitutes a ‘principle use of the river for which cooperation produces direct benefits upstream’. That is to say, by participating in such projects, Beijing stands to gain both economic and commercial advantages, whilst being able to advertise its ‘good-neighbour’ intentions and ‘constructive’ role in promoting regionalism.

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544 China first used the Mekong as an oil-shipping route in 2007 when two Chinese vessels transported 300 tons of refined oil from a Thai port in Chiang Rai Province to Yunnan. This was conducted under the terms of an agreement reached under the auspices of the GMS between Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and China in April 2006.

545 Marwaan Macan-Markar, ‘Sparks Fly as China Moves Oil up Mekong’, Asia Times Online (9 January 2007), [On-line] Available at: http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/AO09Ae01.htm (accessed 10 August 2010). To transport goods by river, as opposed to sea routes, would also help lower shipping costs due to the shorter distance that the cargo vessels would have to traverse. And especially following China’s entry into the WTO in 2001, there was added incentive to develop the river so as to promote the creation of a regional free trade zone – a prospect which was attained in early 2010 with the inauguration of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (ACFTA).


548 Around the time of the announcement of this navigation project in June 2001, the Chinese state-run news media notably featured a number of articles on the advantages of cooperation on the Lancang-Mekong River.


It also deserves note how during the Second Summit Meeting of the GMS held in July 2005, for instance, billboards promoting such themes as ‘The River Links Six Countries’ and ‘Strengthen GMS
It was, however, not an entirely welcomed development when China announced, back in 2001, that it had signed the Agreement on Commercial Navigation on the Mekong with Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos, which sought to improve river navigation by clearing a 33-kilometre stretch of the Mekong to allow for the otherwise impossible passage of 100-tonne cargo vessels from Simao to Luang Prabang. This was not due to the content of the agreement itself, but had more to do with the process through which the agreement was reached: negotiations had notably taken place outside of both the GMS and, more importantly, the MRC’s institutional frameworks. Conducted instead under the QEC, this amounted to a blatant sidestepping of the MRC with its avowed role in coordinating river development projects, as well as an explicit disregard of the prior consultation principle, considering how Cambodia and Vietnam – the two downstream countries most prone to major alterations to the river’s flow – had not been notified of these plans. 549

The fact that ‘the first instance in which Chinese (as well as Burmese) authorities [were] party to an agreement on the use of the Mekong River with downstream countries’ 550 was made on the basis of a ‘minilateral’ economic dialogue, as opposed to the more ecologically-stringent processes of the MRC, is telling. It underscores the underlying pragmatism of China’s regional engagement, encouraging cooperation in overlapping institutions (i.e. the QEC, MRC and GMS) to fragment negotiations, and consistently separating economic issues from environmental ones. 551

Equally noteworthy is how this episode constituted one of the few cases that elicited a more publicly negative response from the MRC, as exemplified in an opinion piece written by former MRC Secretariat’s Chief Executive Officer Joern Kristensen, which is worth quoting at some length:

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551 The notion of ‘issue fragmentation’ serves as an institutional outcome directly at odds with that of ‘issue linkage’, where different issues are bundled together to provide a state with a higher bargaining leverage in negotiations.

A new river trade route through the underdeveloped region of Laos, Burma and northeastern Thailand could have obvious benefits for the people of that region...But it could also mean that further downstream small producers could be hurt if they have to compete with imports from China. Moreover, river work...such as removing shoals and rapids and dredging the riverbed, could affect the reproduction of fish, as well as create changes in the downstream water flow. Three-quarters of the population of the Lower Mekong Basin...earn their living from the river. That is why it is so important to take fully into consideration how a new river trade route will affect their livelihoods...It is critical that universally accepted planning and resource-sharing arrangements be adhered to, and be seen to be fair by all parties...The challenge is to find ways to manage development of the Mekong so that the benefits are shared equally and harm to the environment is minimized.552

Other than more general regional security concerns, China’s hydro-development plans are also believed to have a damaging effect on the economic and commercial interests of individual Southeast Asian states. Cargo ship owners, for instance, have accused China of abusing its ability to manipulate water flows for the sake of its own commercial gains by lowering water levels when Thai ships are due to travel to upstream ports, and conversely, releasing water from its dams when Chinese cargo ships need to travel downstream.553 This is but a minor concern, however, when compared to the consequences that a reduction in water flows can have on the production of downstream hydropower. Laos, whose socio-economic development has now been tied to a series of large-scale hydropower projects on the Mekong, would find itself in a particularly vulnerable situation in this regard.

With 95 percent of its territory in the Mekong Basin, the country relies on the Mekong’s water to irrigate its farmlands and the river’s fish to sustain its people’s livelihoods, as both a local staple food and an export commodity. Of even greater importance to Laos are the potential hydropower sites along its stretch of the river. Electricity has, of course, been crucial to the country’s economy, being one of its main exports to neighbouring countries. In a bid to become Southeast Asia’s ‘battery’, the Lao government has planned at least seven large-scale dams on the Mekong.

553 See, for example, ‘China Accused of Obstructing Flow of Mekong River’, The Nation (31 January 2006). Complaints were mainly lodged then in light of China’s Manwan and Dachaoshan dams.
mainstream, not to mention more than a dozen others on its tributaries. Thailand is expected to be the country’s main consumer market, though the energy demands of an industrialising Vietnam have also shown signs of sharply increasing within the next decade. But with China’s upstream dam-cascade on the horizon, Laos is potentially faced with a very worrying competitor in terms of both resources and commercial interests, should Chinese dams restrict water flows downstream or Laos’ hydropower exports be undercut by more cost-effective Chinese dams with higher power-generation capacity.\(^{554}\)

This is not to mention the fear prevalent among Southeast Asian states at one point over the possibility of China intentionally retaining the river’s water to gain strategic leverage (even if only short-term) over its neighbours. While this is rather unfounded given the capacity limitations of its reservoirs, it still does not completely ensure against the probability of Chinese ‘water-grabbing’ behaviour, considering the looming water scarcity facing the country’s arid northern regions.

The ecological and human security dimension

Another source of socio-political contestation over the Mekong River stems from the ecological and human vulnerabilities that arise from large-scale hydro-development. Despite proponents of the Lancang dams citing their potential benefits – specifically the Xiaowan and Nuozhadu – in helping to regulate the river’s flow regime in times of drought, with China reputedly intending to put about 40 percent more water into the river during the dry season and reduce the monsoon flow by 17 percent as circumstances demand in the wet season,\(^{555}\) local communities and NGOs have voiced much apprehension and discontent over the perverse impacts of the cascade. These include the upstream flooding of vast expanses of river valleys, villages and farmlands, which are transformed into reservoirs, as well as reduced sediment loads

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\(^{554}\) Claims were made, at one point, that due to fewer resettlement and inundation-associated costs, Chinese dams were constructed more cost-effectively than proposed dams on the Mekong mainstream (calculated at being a third of the cost), and as such, were able to generate cheaper electricity. It was, for instance, estimated that the costs for producing and transporting power from Laos’ Nam Theun II Dam to Bangkok would be 0.10 yuan per kWh more expensive than electricity supplied by Jinghong Dam. Goh, ‘Chapter Four’, p. 52.

\(^{555}\) China is, however, not alone in enumerating the positive ramifications of its dam projects. David Jezeeph, regional advisor on water resources to the UN’s Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), has notably lauded China’s positive role in helping to manage the river’s resources – a stance also echoed by the Mekong River Commission. As discussed in greater depth in later sections, this serves as part of a broader regional push for development.
and abnormal water levels, given fluctuations in volume and flow rates caused by the retention and release of water by the dams. These consequences, in turn, can cumulatively affect the river's morphology, together with its mineral and nutrient concentration, which are vital ingredients for the sustenance of the Lancang-Mekong’s biodiversity (i.e. changes to fish migration patterns) and the downstream ecology of watersheds like the Tonle Sap and Mekong Delta. 556

As a downstream country with no access to a stretch of the Mekong mainstream with hydropower potential, Vietnam arguably has the most to lose as upstream development prospectively threatens the Mekong Delta. The scenario here is a bleak one, where social vulnerabilities combine with natural hazards, namely extreme climate conditions and increasing salt-water intrusion. Laos, being one the region’s least developed countries, also stands to lose considerably. Seventy percent of Laos’ rural households supplement their income by fishing, with an estimated 52 percent of the country’s total GDP coming from its fishing and agricultural sectors. Should fish stocks decline as a result of unnatural fluctuations in water levels and turbidity, this would leave these already impoverished communities to become even more so.

Somewhat ironically, as Chinese policy-makers tell downstream communities that the Lancang dams can help regulate the Mekong’s hydrology, they have also argued that these dams will have little effect on water levels, given how the Lancang Jiang contributes only 16 percent to the river’s total discharge. This is, however, not entirely the case. Changes in the discharge level from the upper reaches of the Mekong will have important and immediate implications downstream, as it contributes 100 percent of the flow at the Yunnan-Laos border, 60 percent at Vientiane, 15 to 20 percent in Vietnam, and 16 percent at Phnom Penh. Moreover, the Lancang’s water discharge further impinges on the dry-season flow along the mainstream of the Mekong in Laos and Thailand, as well as the average flow in Cambodia, to which it contributes nearly 45 percent in April. 557

The controversy of Chinese activities on the Lancang mainstream had originally been triggered by the advent of unusually low water levels in 1993, and then again in 1997, when it had seriously impeded navigation in the Golden Triangle area. Lower riparian states voiced both their discontent and suspicions, believing that the Manwan Dam, which had been in the process of filling up its reservoir, was responsible. In response, China had to consequently release water from its dam to raise the river’s water levels. Issues to do with river fluctuations arose yet again during the dry season of 2004, when unusual flow patterns were observed in the Lower Mekong Basin, with water levels being far lower than normal. Downstream agricultural and fishing industries suffered considerable economic losses, whilst cargo vessels could be seen stranded mid-river. Given how another of its large dams – the Dachaoshan – had just been completed earlier in 2003, China was again spotlighted as being the most culpable, not for the drought *per se* but more for exacerbating it. Significantly, the MRC found the situation so critical that it actually called an emergency meeting, which culminated in the sending a formal letter to China to seek more information on its dam operations.\(^{558}\)

More recently, the Great Mekong floods in 2008 became another event that marred China’s ‘good-neighbour’ image in the eyes of local Southeast Asians, who once again saw Chinese dams as to blame for the severity of the flooding. The floods had partially inundated Vientiane and Luang Prabang, as well as affecting several of Thailand’s northern provinces, especially Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen districts in Chiang Rai Province. Locals believed that China’s upstream dams had swelled the run-off from the sudden downpours and that the navigation development projects it had then been undertaking, which involved the blasting and dredging of river rapids, for the rising water levels. The Chinese, as to be expected, denied such allegations. But of note is how the MRC, along with Thai and Lao government officials, also contended that Chinese dams were not at fault, arguing that the storage areas of then operating dams had been too small to affect the Mekong’s flood hydrology.\(^{559}\) Instead, the flooding was officially conceived as being more attributable to a volatile climate.\(^{560}\)

\(^{558}\) Goh, ‘Chapter Four’, p. 45.

\(^{559}\) Gunn and McCartan, ‘Chinese Dams and the Great Mekong Floods’.

\(^{560}\) It should be noted, however, that heavy flooding in Vietnam and Myanmar due to torrential rainfall was seen to attest to this view.
The case of the Great Mekong floods notably highlights a recurring pattern in
the dam discourses surrounding the Mekong issue: if in doubt, blame climate change
first. For most of the abnormalities that the Mekong displayed, the root cause has been,
more or less, relegated to extreme and erratic climatic conditions. In response to the
advent of unprecedented low water levels in 2010 (which coincided with the filling of
the Xiaowan’s reservoirs),\textsuperscript{561} Chinese officials were again quick to point out how
China was equally suffering from the unusual dry spell that led to serious drought –
the worst in 80 years – in southwestern China, creating water shortages for 24 million
people and causing 3.5 billion dollars worth of agricultural losses.\textsuperscript{562}

To be fair, the majority of studies on the consequences of the Chinese dams
have ostensibly pointed to the lack of any major, systematic alterations to water
levels\textsuperscript{563} that could have led to such occurrences as the 2008 floods or the ongoing
low water levels in the Lower Mekong Basin.\textsuperscript{564} Nevertheless, much is still left to
uncertainty, as scientists and engineers will themselves admit. While water levels
might not be directly affected by the cascade, there remains the possibility that the
river’s fisheries, along with its water quality and silt loads, will be. Further,
considering China has yet to complete construction of all its planned dams, gauging
the full consequences of the cascade remains elusive; and this ambivalence will likely
persist for several years to come, granted that the effects of such large-scale dams take
years to manifest. But regardless of actual correlations, at the crux of the problem is
the lack of transparency and accountability on the part of the PRC’s actions.

\textsuperscript{561} This problem of low water levels has periodically reappeared in subsequent years. In early 2012 it
became an issue once more as sections of the Mekong River dried up and portions of the riverbed
became visible. Serving as a serious impediment to water transportation, shipping companies have
complained about the longer time taken to transport their cargo (for instance, instead of taking around
three days, it can now take up to five days or more), whilst riparian communities continue to attribute
most of the blame to China’s upstream dams, which are allegedly guilty of retaining much-needed
water.

\textsuperscript{562} This was a central aspect of the reasoning behind Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Song Tao’s speech
at the 2010 MRC Summit. For a transcript of his speech, see ‘Work Together for Common
Available at: http://www.mrcmekong.org/MRC_news/speeches/remarks-H.E.Song-Tao-5-Apr-10.htm
(accessed 10 May 2010).

\textsuperscript{563} See, for example, He Daming, Feng Yan, Gan Shu, Darrin Magee, and You Weihong,
‘Transboundary hydrological effects of hydropower dam construction on the Lancang River’, Chinese
Chinese dams to be blamed for the lower water levels in the Lower Mekong?’, in Matti Kummu,
Marko Keskinen and Olli Varis (eds), Modern Myths of the Mekong – A Critical Review of Water and
Development Concepts, Principles and Policies (Helsinki: Helsinki University of Technology, 2008),
pp. 39-51.

\textsuperscript{564} In some parts of the river, water levels were so low that it was possible to see portions of the
riverbed.
Fears of dam-induced ecological degradation are very real for rural communities reliant on the Mekong, who have witnessed river bank erosion and declining fish catches. In certain areas of Thailand and Cambodia, for example, fish catch has reportedly fallen by up to 50 percent, which is arguably caused by the lower temperatures of water released by upstream reservoirs, as well as sudden water fluctuations caused by the opening and closing of sluice gates to allow for ship navigation. Environmental advocacy groups have also voiced concern over the impact of Chinese dams on sedimentation patterns. Half of the Mekong’s annual sedimentation load is believed to originate from the Lancang watershed. But with the cascade, the dams will likely trap a large proportion of the sediment. Not only would this render the dams less cost-effective – Manwan, for instance, after operating for three years, had its effective storage capacity reduced to levels expected only for fifteen years later – but it also contributes to bank erosion and increased salinity in the delta (contrary to Chinese claims otherwise). What the 1997 Stockholm Water Symposium observed more than a decade ago therefore holds true today: ‘The overriding issue – how to reconcile upstream socio-economic development with downstream protection of ecological services – remains unsolved.

To make matters worse from the perspective of local communities, China’s involvement in the hydro-development of the Lancang-Mekong does not stop at its borders. Apart from taking the initiative in the controversial river navigation schemes (discussed earlier), the Chinese government – through the activities of the China Exim Bank and dam developers like the Sinohydro Corporation (China’s largest dam-building SOE) and the China Southern Power Grid (CSG) – has also become extensively involved in the development and financing of hydropower schemes abroad. Amid the so-called global ‘dam-building boom’, Chinese companies are estimated to be involved in 251 dam projects in 68 countries (of which 107 projects

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565 Somewhat ironically, in an article entitled ‘Xiaowan Dam, A Reservoir for Progress’ featured in the China Daily (16 September 2003), despite its claims that the Xiaowan will have a minimal impact on downstream riparians and riverine ecology, and that it will actually help to improve downstream irrigation and navigation, the article does admit to how ‘warm-water’ fish species in the lower Mekong ‘may suffer’ from the cooler water released from the dam.


567 Known in Chinese, respectively, as Zhongguo shuilishuidian jianshe jituan gongsi and Zhongguo nanfang dianwang.
are overseen by Sinohydro),\(^\text{568}\) making China one of the world’s ‘top five’ large dam-building countries.\(^\text{569}\) Nearly 40 Chinese SOEs and private firms are engaged in more than 60 large hydro-engineering projects at varying stages of development within the Mekong region alone.\(^\text{570}\)

Viewed as part of its ‘Going Out’ strategy\(^\text{571}\) (zouchuqu zhanlue) that places special emphasis on acquiring natural resources overseas to safeguard the country’s energy security, and also derivative of a regional strategy aimed at enhancing Chinese influence in mainland Southeast Asia, the PRC through its national companies has been active in supporting dam development in the Lower Mekong Basin. Such support has taken the form of both financing and contract construction, with ‘tens of projects being either under construction or under consideration in Burma, Laos and Cambodia’ to fuel growing domestic and regional power demands.\(^\text{572}\) Notable among these are the controversial Kamchay Dam (located on the Kamchay River) and Sambor project in Cambodia, the Xeset II project, Pak Beng, Nam Tha and Nam Ou 8 in Laos, as well as the Tasang Dam (Salween River) and Myitsone Dam (Irrawaddy) in Burma. Having been undertaken with either incomplete or questionable EIAs, and with little regard for establishing sound community relations, these projects are generally viewed by locals as representing the collusion between China’s major SOEs and ‘corrupt’ government bureaucracies, serving as instances of where profitable

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\(^{568}\) This number includes projects where only Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) have been signed or where feasibility studies are still being undertaken, as well as schemes which have already been completed or are under construction. Most Chinese dam-building activities are mainly concentrated in Africa and Southeast Asia, though the reach of Chinese enterprises has been expanding to encompass Latin America and the Middle East through to Eastern Europe. Notable Chinese-backed dam projects that have sparked much controversy include the Mphanda Nkuwa Dam on the Zambezi River in Mozambique and the West Seti Hydroelectric project on the Seti River in Nepal. See Anabela Lemos and Daniel Ribeiro, ‘A New Colonial Power in Mozambique’, *World Rivers Review* 22:3 (2007), pp. 6-7; Yuki Tanabe, ‘China Set to Finance Controversial Nepal Dam’, *World Rivers Review* 22:3 (2007), p. 3.

\(^{569}\) According to the World Commission on Dams’ (WCD) report, the world’s top five dam-builders, aside from China, included the United States, India, Japan, and Spain, which collectively account for nearly 80 percent of the world’s large dams. See WCD, *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-making*, Report of the WCD (London: Earthscan, 2000), pp. 1-34; Peter Bosshard, ‘China Dams the World’, *Water Policy Journal* (Winter 2009/10), pp. 43-51. Bosshard claims that China is involved in building at least 19 of the world’s 24 largest hydropower projects.

\(^{570}\) These include, *inter alia*, China National Heavy Machinery Corporation, the China Power Investment Corporation, the Yunnan Machinery and Equipment Import and Export Company, the China Gezhouba Group Corporation, and the Datang International Power Generating Company.

\(^{571}\) Also known as the ‘Going Global’ strategy, it was first enunciated by the CCP’s Central Committee in the 1990s, and was primarily meant to encourage the expansion and intensification of Chinese outward foreign direct investments, especially in the energy and resource sectors.

state-to-state ties have ended up trumping the need for responsible state-to-society relations.\textsuperscript{573}

Accordingly, Chinese claims of ‘sustainable’ and ‘responsible’ dam-building, together with its attempts to expound the positive implications of having upstream hydropower dams,\textsuperscript{574} ultimately fall on sceptical ears, and somewhat understandably so. From the perspective of the river’s local inhabitants, the People’s Republic is anything but a ‘responsible’ power. Unless China exhibits greater transparency in its activities, social opposition will continue to grow against the PRC’s unilateral dam-building on the Lancang, with local NGOs such as the Bangkok-based Living River Siam, the Foundation for Ecological Recovery (TERRA) and the Yunnan-based Green Watershed, working in conjunction with transnational networks like Probe International and International Rivers Network (IRN) to publicise the negative social and environmental ramifications of the Chinese cascade.

The case of the Mekong’s management, in effect, serves as a testament to how water governance issues impinge on regional security, as well as human and ecological security, as ecological threats mesh with man-made ones. And it is precisely in this respect that the Mekong case brings to the fore the politics of responsibility. To further unravel the underlying dynamics of contestation, the ensuing section considers the varied discourses pertaining to the Lancang-Mekong’s governance, as advanced by the major stakeholders in the issue.

\textsuperscript{573} The Myitsone Dam, for instance, became an issue when the China Power Investment Corporation elected to go ahead with investing in the dam’s construction (the latter of which was undertaken by the China Gezhouba Group) despite its own EIA findings that recommended otherwise, having warned of the dam’s potential to ‘heavily disturb’ and adversely impact the rich biodiversity found in the surrounding areas. Apart from displacing around 15,000 people, the provision of inadequate compensation to affected communities further exacerbated local indignation among the Kachin people, culminating in the drastic bombing of the construction site in April 2010 that killed four Chinese workers and left many others injured. Yet, construction still continued, with members of the Kachin group soon arrested thereafter. Marking the end of a 17-year ceasefire, clashes between Burmese government forces and the Kachin Independence Army have persisted, with Chinese-financed hydropower projects frequently becoming the backdrop for these violent confrontations. It would only be under the new leadership of President Thein Sein that the project was finally put to a halt in the middle of 2011, amid much international exaltation, as the dam was, for the first time, recognised as being ‘against the will of the people’. See International Crisis Group, ‘China’s Myanmar Strategy: Elections, Ethnic Politics and Economics’, \textit{Asia Briefing} 112 (2010), pp. 14-15; Ngo The Vinh, ‘Global Ecology and the ‘Made in China’ Dams’ [unpublished manuscript] (2010); ‘A change to believe in?’, \textit{The Economist} (8 October 2011). [On-line] Available at: http://www.economist.com/node/21531498 (accessed 10 October 2011); and Jonathan Watts, ‘Dozens killed in Burma amid clashes over Chinese dams’, \textit{The Guardian} (16 June 2011). [On-line] Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/16/china-burma-hydropower-clashes (accessed 24 September 2011).

\textsuperscript{574} According to this line of argument, upstream dams are expected to have less of an adverse consequence on the river’s ecology when compared to those planned for the Lower Mekong’s mainstream. Needless to say, this claim has been vigorously debated ever since its emergence.
China, Development, and the (Hydro)politics of Responsibility

At the crux of the debate over how to manage transboundary water resources is the question of what constitutes ‘responsible governance’ and ‘good practices’. International Relations scholars working on the Mekong issue have mainly focused on how the asymmetric upstream-downstream dynamics of the Mekong issue have served as the basis for regional security concerns and uneasy relations between China and its Southeast Asian neighbours. Yet, there is another important dimension to the upstream-downstream dynamic – one which extends beyond the interstate level – equally deserving of note: that is, the state-society dimension. Upstream-downstream relations, in this sense, also come to commonly serve as a politicized site of social struggle and normative contestation for a complex set of actors – one ranging from civil society and governments to large hydropower companies operating within the state itself (e.g. China’s Hydrolancang) – and their often diverging group interests.

The Mekong’s governance is fundamentally an ‘issue of scale’, granted how the ‘primary dimensions and scale of conflict over water are more locally and socially than geopolitically constructed’.

It is an issue which invokes multiple, cross-cutting levels of action and as such, renders the idea of responsibility to be especially pertinent. As different agents appropriate varied designations of who should be responsible for what and to whom, not only can such expectations potentially frame an actor’s – or more specifically, China’s – behaviour towards the issue, but they also open up public space for normative contestation between competing notions of responsibility and their respective dialogic entrepreneurs.

As demonstrated in the preceding section, there is no doubt that the most ardent critics of the Lancang dams have been local NGOs and downstream communities. Not to overstate their influence on state policies, but the formal justifications China has given for its cascade can, more or less, be seen as geared towards placating these disgruntled local actors. What this effectively suggests is the emergence of a novel side to Chinese foreign relations, one which sees China having to increasingly respond to non-state actors – and foreign ones at that. This, of course, comes at a time when China is attempting to extend its reach into various countries through trade and investment ties, as well as cultural linkages. To a considerable degree, the idea behind the PRC’s charm offensive is precisely based on the desire to strengthen

(transnational) ‘state-to-society’ relations, aimed at enhancing the ‘social bonds’ between China and the societies with which it has come into greater contact. This is a significant development, not least because it brings into relief the underappreciated role that non-state actors play in framing issues of regional and national security importance.

That said, the popular outpour against dam construction on the Lancang-Mekong’s mainstream has, as noted earlier, been a relatively recent phenomenon, given how knowledge of Chinese dam-building activities has only surfaced in the past two decades or so. More importantly, it was only recently that the river became an issue at all within China, and even then, the impact it has had on Chinese policy remains rather limited, especially when compared to other major rivers like the Yangzi, Yellow, or Nu-Salween Rivers. Management of the Lancang’s water resources continue to fall within the purview of the Changjiang (Yangzi) Water Resources Commission (CWRC), one of seven river basin commissions under the Chinese Ministry of Water Resources. And as its name suggests, the CWRC’s water administrative functions are primarily concerned with the Yangzi River Basin and other rivers that lie west of the Yangzi and the Lancang.\textsuperscript{576} As a consequence, the Lancang’s management has been largely relegated to the provincial Yunnan government, where development remains a priority on its policy agenda because the fulfilment of economic growth targets and investment quotas constitutes the primary requirement for official promotion (and, conversely, insurance against demotions handed out by the central government for low performance).\textsuperscript{577} It has even been suggested that China’s reluctance to share hydrological data might actually stem from the fact that local officials simply do not have such data readily available, given how they themselves have only a remote interest and very limited awareness of the dams’ ecological ramifications.\textsuperscript{578}

The involvement of civil society has been significant in spotlighting and drawing official Chinese attention to the Mekong’s development as a human security and environmental concern. The road that lies ahead for these so-called ‘water

\textsuperscript{576} For more on the CWRC’s functions, see the CWRC official website at: http://node.cjw.com.cn/cjwintro/cjw.asp (accessed 11 June 2011).

\textsuperscript{577} Interview with Professor Huan Qingzhi, Research Institute of Marxism, Peking University, Beijing, China (8 December 2010).

\textsuperscript{578} Interview, Beijing, China (14 December 2010).
warriors\textsuperscript{579} is, however, an arduous one. The case of the Mekong River’s hydro-
development remains rife with contending governance discourses, underpinned by
varying conceptions of state responsibility and understandings of ‘what matters most’.
The following remark (though rather skewed), along with the two epigraphs featured
at the outset of this chapter, epitomises the river’s development dilemmas:

What matters most?...sustaining the fish populations and greater
biodiversity, or providing a better life for the human population (now
and in the future) in two of the world’s poorest countries, Laos and
Cambodia?\textsuperscript{580}

At issue here is the inherent tension between long-standing, traditional
development paradigms – that is, those which see the Mekong as a ‘virgin’ river,
whose natural resources (i.e. hydropower potential) should be used to fuel the region’s
modernisation – and more people-centred discourses that stress environmental
sustainability and conservation, where the river is viewed as the region’s lifeblood.
While there have been overlaps between these two discourses, with those advocating
the river’s development claiming that doing so would not only benefit the region’s
human population but also the river’s ecology, it is in more recent years that a more
nuanced rendition of this discourse has been forwarded (chiefly by IFIs and state
actors) through the concept of sustainability. Ultimately, what these discourses direct
our attention to are two key questions around which heated regional and local debates
have been framed: for what purpose should the Lancang-Mekong be used, and for
whose benefit? In relation to China, this translates into the question of what China’s
rights and responsibilities are as an upstream power vis-à-vis neighbouring riparian
states as well as affected riparian communities.

\textit{Bounding the Mekong for unbounded development?}

The modern water development paradigm of ‘pushing rivers around’,\textsuperscript{581} whilst
characterising current Chinese attitudes toward environmental governance to a degree,

\textsuperscript{579} This term is borrowed from Andrew Mertha, \textit{China’s Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy
\textsuperscript{580} Taken from Chapman and He, ‘Downstream implications’, quoted in Tyson R. Roberts, ‘Killing the
\textsuperscript{581} Conca, \textit{Governing Water}, p. 81. Originally quoted in Donald Worster’s seminal book, \textit{Rivers of Empire}, Conca takes this phrase from a comment made by an American water manager to \textit{Time}
is by no means unique to the PRC, having resonance with most developing countries as well as deep social roots in Western societies. ‘Modernity’, so it seems, has been accompanied by an obsession with economic growth and technological progress, as well as profound faith in the ability of scientific advancements to ‘engineer’ nature. This has arguably engendered a major shift from an emphasis on environmental adaptation to one bent on controlling nature. The result: a ‘frenzy of dam building that involved remoulding the course of rivers’, along with the emergence of large dams as highly-loaded icons of the modern nation-state. According to Gavin McCormack, the Chinese government remains wedded to this “modern” paradigm of water engineering’, despite the fact that it is a discourse that has been largely discarded in the developed world ‘in favour of safer, more economical, and more sustainable options’. Significantly, not only were the majority of the world’s 40,000 large dams built in the latter half of the twentieth century, but half of these dams are located in China, making the PRC the world’s biggest producer of hydropower today.

While it is tempting to view dams as a consequence of modernity, however, dam-building does have precedents in historical attitudes toward the environment. As observed by Ken Conca, ‘The manipulation of rivers and the alteration of watersheds have a long history’, with there being examples of dam construction in Mesopotamia and Egypt from more than 5,000 years ago. Interestingly, the rationale behind

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583 McCormack, ‘Water Margins’, p. 5. The twenty-first century (after a brief disjuncture due to widespread popular opposition) has evidently upheld this legacy with the ongoing ‘dam-building boom’ in the industrialising world, with all being in the name of ‘development’. With the emergence of international financial institutions, most notably the World Bank, in the post-World War II period, coupled with growing technical expertise on water infrastructure planning and dam engineering, as represented by the International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD), the idea of large-scale hydro-development for the sake of improving human well-being was further validated and effectively became integral to states’ development agendas. In fact, it was reported that from 1944 until 1996 the World Bank had lent a total of $28 billion to fund 604 dam projects in 93 countries. And despite a reduction in lending during the late 1990s, the World Bank has recently revived its hydropower financing, seeing an increase from an average of $250 million per year from 2002 to 2004 to $500 million per year in the period from 2005 to 2007, and to more than one billion dollars in fiscal year 2008. (See World Bank Group (Water Sector Board of the Sustainable Development Network), ‘Directions in Hydropower: Scaling up for Development’, *P-Notes (Water Sector Board Practitioner Notes)* 47 (2010), p. 3.) Notably established in 1928, ICOLD designates itself as a ‘non-governmental International Organization’ charged with the task of enhancing and disseminating knowledge on all aspects of dam engineering so as to ‘encourage advances in the planning, design, construction, operation, and maintenance of large dams’. At present, its President is Jia Jinsheng who is also, among other positions, Vice-President and Secretary-General of CHINCOLD. For more on ICOLD’s organisational history, see its official website at: http://www.icold-cigb.net/pagearticle.aspx?ssmenu=110 (accessed 16 October 2010).

modern approaches to water resources management appears to have existed since the twelfth century when the Sri Lankan king, Parakrama Bahu the Great, decreed: 'Let not even a small quantity of water obtained by rain go to the sea without benefiting man'—a sentiment which would be echoed eight centuries later by Stalin, who famously proclaimed that 'Water which is allowed to enter the sea is wasted'.

Especially in the Chinese context (as elucidated in Chapter 3), the narrative of harnessing nature's awesome powers constitutes a long-standing Chinese preoccupation, with water serving as a prominent leitmotiv in Chinese history. Water has the power to bring forth both prosperity, in the form of agricultural abundance, as well as destruction, in terms of heavy floods and relentless droughts. The mythical story of Great Yu, who tamed the floods of the Yellow River and subsequently went on to establish China's first dynasty, reflects the close relationship between state power, legitimacy and nature — especially rivers — in Chinese society. In fact, apart from being the favoured method for managing rivers, dams are also treated oftentimes as symbols of national pride, as well as modern representations of human ingenuity and progress. The official fanfare surrounding the Three Gorges Dam, or the Xiaowan Dam's 'glorification' as a 'reservoir for progress' that surpasses even the U.S.'s Hoover Dam in size, constitute vivid examples of this attitude.

The river of 'terror and hope'

A similar development paradigm also proves pervasive in the Mekong region, having become embedded in state policies ever since the advent of the region's so-called 'peace dividend' during the early 1970s. But what is particularly noteworthy about this knowledge paradigm is the fact that it has been constituted by mutually reinforcing discourses at the global, regional and national levels. As Karen Bakker rightly notes, because hydro-development is more susceptible to becoming a public issue than other types of resource exploitation, the 'public transcript' of hydro-development becomes 'heavily weighted towards international discourses of development' so as to garner legitimacy on the basis of shared norms and

587 This relationship was, of course, discussed at length in Chapter 3.
588 See 'Xiaowan Dam, A Reservoir for Progress', China Daily (16 September 2003).
Economic development, grounded in the reciprocal exchange of interests, has served as a potent narrative within this overarching development discourse, as it is often deemed as the most promising area of cooperation that connects the region’s politically-disparate states. As expressed in a statement by Singkapo Sikhotchounamaly, Chief of the Lao PDR delegation, to the inaugural session of the Interim Mekong Committee in February 1978, ‘La présente réunion montre, une fois de plus que malgré la différence des régimes politiques, nous pouvons toujours nous coopérer dans le domaine économique. [...] Le but principal de la présente réunion est d’adopter à l’unanimité, sur la base du respect de la souveraineté et des intérêts réciproques...les projets de développement de nos pays membres’. 590

The 1960s image of the Mekong River as a ‘River of Terror and Hope’ aptly captures the prevailing climate of ideas, with ‘terror’ representing the threat of war and terrorism, and ‘hope’ as the ‘Mekong Project’ that promised to ‘revolutionize

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590 This meeting demonstrates, yet again [and] despite the differences in political regimes, [how] we can always cooperate with one another in the economic domain. [...] The main objective of this meeting is to unanimously adopt, on the basis of [mutual] respect for sovereignty and reciprocal interests...the development projects of our member countries.’ See Committee for Co-ordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin, ‘Report of the First Session of the Interim Mekong Committee’, MKG/R. 163 (Bangkok: 1978), p. 13 [author’s own translation].
life for millions of Southeast Asians by harnessing the river for power and irrigation'. The organisational history of the Mekong River Commission also reflects the underlying sentiment of 'developmentalism'. It was with the establishment of the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East in 1947 that the notion of harnessing the Mekong's resources was first introduced to the region. In an effort to promote the region's post-war reconstruction, ECAFE's Bureau of Flood Control had published a report in May 1952, proposing the potential to develop the basin's water resources.

Around the same time, in a bid to contain the spread of communism (especially in light of Mao's communist victory in China), the United States also considered using hydro-development as a means to stimulate regional economic development, in hopes of undermining the appeal of communism. In 1955, upon the request of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the U.S. International Cooperation Administration (predecessor of the U.S. Agency for International Development) commissioned the Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) to conduct a survey of possible development pathways for the Mekong. This was shortly followed by ECAFE's own feasibility study in 1957. Crucially, the report had identified the importance of applying an 'international approach' to manage the river, effectively highlighting the necessity of joint planning and consensus-building among the Mekong countries, considering the transboundary implications of proposed hydro-development projects.

It was based on this vision that the Committee for Coordination and Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin (or Mekong Committee) was formally established in 1957. Consistent with Article 4 of its statute, the Committee was

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592 The study was entitled the 'Preliminary Report on Technical Problems Relating to Flood Control and Water Resources, Development of the Mekong – an International River'.
593 Indeed, what had originally attracted ECAFE to the Mekong’s development was the fact that it was an 'intrinsically international' initiative. C. Hart Schaff and Russell H. Fifield, The Lower Mekong: Challenge to cooperation in Southeast Asia (New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand, 1963), pp. 87-88, 83. In its sub-section titled 'Need for International Approach', ECAFE's 1957 report recommended that 'A comprehensive plan for the optimum development of water resources should cover an entire basin, including the tributaries. While planning for water resource development of tributaries is the primary concern of individual countries, such planning needs proper co-ordination and integration to lead to a comprehensive plan for an entire basin. For this purpose it is necessary to establish an international channel or clearing house for the exchange of information and plans and the co-ordination of projects...Ultimately, the process may lead to the signing of a convention and the establishment of a permanent body for the development of the basin'. ECAFE, Development of Water Resources in the Lower Mekong Basin (Bangkok: United Nations, 1957), p. 64.
Photograph 4. UN-ECAFE promotional photos for Mekong development

Harnessing the river ...  ... for power
Dams to provide water ... 

... where there is none

River banks ...

Reservoir full of fish ...

... made accessible

... for the people

BOON TO MAN AND BEAST

In a remote area of Laos, the Nam Ngum dam power house produced 162 million kWh in its first nine months, 116 million kWh being sent to Thailand. Its reservoir is yielding two tons of fish a day. It will provide water for 5,000 hectares, one day 14,000, of Laetian farmlands. It is worth some sacrifice.
To benefit from the gifts of nature and technology

With dams come irrigation and the potential for increased use of farmlands, greater yields, better crop varieties. To anticipate the limits of the soil, the proper use of the waters, the demands of new crops and cropping patterns, the basin's farmers are testing out the new conditions, learning how to get full value from Mekong development.

charged with the task of promoting, coordinating, supervising the planning of hydro-
development projects in the basin. Epitomising the ‘Mekong Spirit’ of hope and
common purpose, the Mekong Project soon became the region’s centre of attention by
the 1970s, with part of its grand design involving the construction of an eight-dam
cascade on the lower Mekong mainstream. Notably, the project elicited support
from such organisations as the World Bank, the ADB, as well as the Asia and Ford
Foundations, whilst cooperating countries included at least eighteen countries –
ranging from Canada, Belgium and the Netherlands to Japan, New Zealand, Iran, and
Israel – with each becoming involved through the provision of economic or technical
assistance. Lesser known was communist China’s participation at the time, and its
contribution in the form of technical assistance by setting up study tours and
providing fertilizer expertise and raw materials like cement and experimental
highlands rice seeds.

Interestingly, in a pamphlet detailing the plans and advantages of the Mekong
Project, the writers had chosen to recount the story of the third-century engineer Li
Bing (mentioned earlier in Chapter 3) in the very first paragraph, the contents of
which were as follows:

Li Ping, the father of them all [...] knew all about criticism. From
the start he was surrounded by critics and carpers who said his
scheme would never work...that – worse still – the gods would be
offended by this meddling with their world and would visit dire
vengeance on mankind. To an extent the critics were right too. Many
people had to move their houses to higher ground. Wildlife species
which had flourished in the unreclaimed plain were either forced to
migrate or disappeared. Also the incidence of malaria increased
alarmingly. Yet the advantages of Li Ping’s project so outweighed its
deletious effects that the latter were quickly accepted or
forgotten...To show their gratitude, the Szechuanese deified Li Ping

594 Note how this bears striking resemblance to the original Chinese design for the Lancang cascade.
The ‘Mekong Cascade’, as envisioned in 1970 and in 1987 (with technical revisions to the elevation of
some of the dams), would include the construction of dams in High Luang Prabang and Xayaburi (Pak
Lay) in Laos; Upper Chiang Khan, Pa Mong, Upper Thakhek, and Ban Koum between Thailand and
Laos; as well as Stung Treng and Sambor in Cambodia (this is not including related plans for the
Mekong’s Delta development). Compiled from Michael Mitchell, ‘The political economy of Mekong
basin development’, in Philip Hirsch and Carol Warren (eds), The Politics of Environment in Southeast
595 See Committee for the Coordination of Investigation of the Lower Mekong Basin, Annual Report
596 Note that this spelling is based on the Wade-Giles romanisation, whereas ‘Li Bing’ is based on
standard pinyin romanisation.
and he is worshipped to this day – the only civil engineer in history to be so honoured for his services to mankind. [...] Mekong Project enthusiasts have no desire to be apotheosized in the manner of Li Ping, but they frequently find themselves the target of criticism.  

Apparently, hydroelectric power, improved flood control and water transport, greater access to water for irrigation and domestic uses, together with the creation of a ‘well-planned human environment’, became justifications that rendered the project necessary. Clearly, this bears semblance to modern-day justifications for hydro-development (i.e. to mitigate and reduce poverty). As argued by P.T. Tan, a former ECAFE official and one of the key architects of the project, ‘poverty is the real enemy of the people...[they] should join hands, pool their resources to fight poverty, and achieve the objective of prosperity for all’. In a similar vein, the U.S. gained interest in the project because of the latter’s promise to ‘inhibit violence’ in the region – a concern which strongly resonated with American policy-makers given the U.S.’s then growing involvement in Vietnam – and stimulate cooperation. Developing the Mekong, in effect, paved the way for a new diplomatic policy, in accordance with the ‘peace initiative’ proposed by President Lyndon B. Johnson earlier in 1965. In the words of Eugene R. Black, advisor to President Johnson on Southeast Asia Economic and Social Development and former President of the World Bank, ‘The vision of Mekong development serves these ends by offering to the international community concrete opportunities to help these countries help themselves’.  

Even with the U.S. and the UN (now through the UNDP as opposed to the defunct ECAFE) pulling out their financial support by the late 1970s, not to mention the withdrawal of Cambodia’s membership, regional cooperation on the Mekong persisted. This existed in the form of an Interim Committee, which similarly

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600 Further from this, according to *The Washington Post*, Johnson’s speech had included a ‘dramatic offer of $1 billion to help finance a Southeast Asian development program...designed to harness regional resources in a vast effort to raise Asian living standards and at the same time reduce Communist pressures on the area’. Needless to say, even in the midst of Vietnam, hopes ran high that this Mekong proposal would provide the ‘spark necessary to set the region for the first time on a concentrated drive toward development and prosperity’. Dan Kurzman, ‘Offer Envisions Harnessing of Mekong’, *The Washington Post* (9 April 1965), p. A22, quoted in Franklin P. Huddle, *The Mekong Project: Opportunities and Problems of Regionalism*, Report prepared for the Subcommittee on National Security Policy and Scientific Developments of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), p.5.  
advocated the construction of a dam cascade on the lower Mekong mainstream as the ‘best option for long-term development of the basin’s water resources’. Two decades later, the Mekong River Commission was established in 1995 to replace the Interim Committee, albeit with a weaker mandate than its predecessors. Rather than serving as a formal institution with direct policy-making influence, the MRC was expected to serve more as an epistemic community, tasked with disseminating technical and scientific knowledge on hydro-development projects. Nevertheless, of importance here is how the rationale underpinning the organisation’s mandate continued to reflect, more or less, the developmentalism of the 1960s and 1970s.

The Mekong as a ‘resource for development’

Significantly, this development mentality has, in recent years, been reinvented and espoused by both the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. The ADB’s Greater Mekong Subregion project, for instance, was established in order to reap the region’s ‘peace dividends’ through infrastructure and trade development schemes, which are meant to strengthen the socio-economic ties between participating countries and encourage regionalism more broadly. By the same token, in March 2005, the World Bank’s Board of Directors voted in favour of providing loans and sovereign risk guarantees to underwrite the construction of the (controversial) Nam Theun 2 Dam in Laos, marking the Bank’s renewed support of so-called ‘high risk, high return’ projects – a move which was soon followed by the ADB’s own decision to provide additional financing for the project. In essence, what this marks is a shift in the Bank’s environmental policy, moving from a ‘do no harm’ safeguard approach to proactive approaches where the environment is seen as a ‘key resource for development’. Although this is subsequently curtailed by a statement explaining how the Bank’s ‘Policy and Economic Team’ will work to ‘ensure that development policy-setting documents integrate the principles of environmentally sustainable development’, it nevertheless underscores the pervasive belief that, to borrow from

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603 Originally, the GMS was comprised of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and China’s southern province of Yunnan. However, since 2005, it has been officially expanded to include China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region as well.
605 For this statement on its Environmental Policy, see the World Bank’s website at http://web.worldbank.org/WEBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/ENVIRONMENT/EXTEEI0,,contentMDK
the words of the Mekong Committee, ‘with careful research and planning [hydrodevelopment] projects can be built with a minimum of dislocation and that such projects must be built so long as people and governments cannot afford to do without them’.606

Closely linked to this focus on economic development have been more general trends relating to the commodification of water, an integral aspect of regional and international development discourses ever since the pronouncement of the 1992 Dublin Principles at the International Conference on Water and the Environment.607 According to Philip Hirsch, a prominent scholar of Mekong water politics, the valorizing of rivers, characteristic of large-scale hydropower projects, invariably falls within this narrative. A key discourse used in the public relations campaign for the Nam Theun 2 – aimed at justifying the project to affected communities – was reportedly devoted to talking about ‘rivers of gold and silver’ that would bring forth wealth and prosperity to the country and its citizens.608 It is also worth bearing in mind how one of China’s planned dams in the cascade – the Jinghong Dam – was originally intended to be a joint venture between Thailand’s GMS Power and Hydrolancang, with the Thai side to contribute 70 percent of the investment for construction and power generated from the plant to be exported to Thailand. Even though the agreement eventually fell through (EGAT’s projected power demands for Thailand proved to be less than expected), Thai investors continue to be involved in plans for the largest dam in the cascade, the Nuozhadu.609 Power from both the Jinghong and Nuozhadu Dams are, moreover, anticipated to connect to the GMS power grid, which constitutes a crucial dimension of the initiative’s broader energy and infrastructure strategies.

606 Mekong Committee, The Mekong Project, p. 3 (emphases in original and emphasis added).
609 With Thailand withdrawing from the Jinghong project, power generated from the dam will instead be exported to Guangdong Province. Further, with regard to the Nuozhadu, it was reported at one point that 1.5m kWh will be exported to Thailand, whilst 3m kWh will be transmitted to power Guangdong. Goh, ‘Chapter Three: Development Cooperation and Regionalism’, Adelphi Series 46:387, p. 31.
Ultimately, what this suggests is a triangulation of influence between China’s hydro-development strategy, regional attitudes toward water governance, and international discourses on water resources management. As previously mentioned, construction of the first of Chinese dams on the Lancang – the Manwan – had already been underway as early as the mid-1980s, with the preliminary design work for the dam completed in October 1984 by the Kunming Survey and Design Institute. This occurred around the same time as when discussions over the Mekong Project and its proposed cascade of mainstream dams were at their height. An unofficial study conducted by the Mekong Committee in 1989 on the potential implications of the Xiaowan Dam (still in its planning stages at the time) on the downstream area where a mainstream dam – the Pa Mong – had been proposed, concluded that the Pa Mong could stand to gain considerably from the Xiaowan’s construction, as the latter’s operation during the dry season could help increase the minimum flow into the Pa Mong, thereby allowing for greater hydropower generation. On a similar note, an official Chinese government paper from the early 1990s had enumerated the advantages of the Xiaowan Dam to be as follows:

The water level of all the mainstream channels of the Mekong will be raised; moreover, sea-water influx into the Mekong Delta will be reduced. As the flow of mud and silt into the Xiaowan Reservoir will be blocked, the volume of sediment in the downstream water channels will be reduced and, as a result, navigation will be much improved…by providing watershed management, the soil and water in the vicinity of the Xiaowan Reservoir will be better preserved and, therefore, the water quality downstream will be improved…the amount of peak flood flow will [also] be clearly decreased.

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610 The Lancang River Manwan Hydropower Plant was officially included into the National Construction Plan in April 1985, and was subsequently labeled as a 'priority project' in 1987.
611 At the time, the Pa Mong Dam was conceived as the major scheme within the Mekong Project. It was one of three large mainstream dams proposed (the other two being the Sambor and Tonle Sap reservoirs), and was officially touted as potentially being 'one of the world's great multi-purpose water resource projects'. Spanning the Mekong between Thailand and Laos, it would provide irrigation to the water scarce provinces of Northeastern Thailand and Laos, generate hydropower, as well as help regulate hydrological flows so as to prevent the reoccurrence of major floods like the one in 1966 that had devastated communities in the Lower Mekong Basin. But like other large dams, its construction was highly controversial. David Jenkins, 'The Lower Mekong Scheme', Asian Survey 8:6 (1968), pp. 456-457.
612 Interestingly enough, claims were even advanced that the potential benefits from the Xiaowan's operation could also lead to improvements vis-à-vis the Pa Mong project's expected social and environmental impacts (which was anticipated to be great considering resettlement and construction costs for such a large project). Hori, The Mekong, p. 210.
613 Quoted in Hori, The Mekong, p. 209.

This also bears some semblance to David Jezeph's Kunming speech. See p. 153 of this chapter.
While the accuracy of these claims have been largely debunked by more recent scientific studies, the way in which they have been politically framed does suggest how China’s policy toward the Lancang-Mekong appears to be derivative of broader global and regional trends that view hydro-development as a necessary feature of modernisation and even of state-building.  

Contending rights, contested responsibilities

Stephen McCaffrey posited in 1993 that ‘equitable utilization is a – and perhaps the – fundamental rule in the field [of water governance]’. The principle of ‘equitable and reasonable use’ of shared water resources (Article 5 of the Mekong Agreement and UN Watercourses Convention) and the principle of cooperation on the basis of ‘sovereign equality and territorial integrity’ (Article 4 of the Agreement and Article 8 of the Convention) have also fed into the region’s overarching development paradigm. Because these principles allow for the legitimate exploitation of water resources, albeit within ‘equitable and reasonable’ bounds, both have been favoured by the People’s Republic in its dealings with other riparian states. The problem, however, is that adherence to these two principles often comes at the expense of the ‘no significant harm’ principle (Article 7 of the Convention), which in the Mekong Agreement, obligates riparians to prevent and/or cease any harmful effects caused by

614 Jeffrey Sosland, for instance, provides a compelling account of the relationship between state-building imperatives and water development in the Jordan River Basin, see Cooperating Rivals, pp. 19-62.
616 According to the Mekong Agreement, parties agree to ‘utilize the waters of the Mekong River system in a reasonable and equitable manner in their respective territories, pursuant to all relevant factors and circumstances’, while the Watercourses Convention stipulates that watercourse states ‘in their respective territories utilize an international watercourse in an equitable and reasonable manner’ and ‘participate in the use, development and protection of an international watercourse in an equitable and reasonable manner’.
617 Under this principle, states are required to ‘cooperate on the basis of sovereign equality and territorial integrity in the utilization and protection of the water resources of the Mekong River Basin’, whilst the Convention obligates parties to ‘cooperate on the basis of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, mutual benefit and good faith in order to attain optimal utilization and adequate protection of an international watercourse’.
618 Article 7 of the Convention calls for states, ‘in utilizing an international watercourse in their territories, [to] take all appropriate measures to prevent the causing of significant harm to other watercourse States’, and also that ‘Where significant harm nevertheless is caused to another watercourse State, the States whose use causes such harm shall, in the absence of agreement to such use, take all appropriate measures, having due regard for the provisions of articles 5 and 6 [equitable and reasonable utilization], in consultation with the affected State, to eliminate or mitigate such harm and, where appropriate, to discuss the question of compensation’.
their activities, being also liable for any transboundary damages incurred.\textsuperscript{619} On this view, the principle of equitable and reasonable use generally operates in favour of upstream states, which can use it to claim their 'sovereign right' to exploit shared water resources within their respective territories, whereas the 'no significant harm' principle tends to be exercised in favour of downstream riparians.

At issue here is the problem of defining and assessing the scope of transboundary issues and, more fundamentally, the problem of balancing between water rights on the one hand, and upstream-downstream responsibilities on the other. This arguably constitutes one of the most controversial aspects of transboundary water governance at both the regional and global levels, as evinced from the extensive diplomatic bargaining over the substantive content of the Watercourses Convention.\textsuperscript{620} Needless to say, the ambivalence in defining what constitutes 'significant' harm or 'equitable and reasonable' use does little to help clarify matters.

Given how China is party to neither the Mekong agreement, nor the Watercourses Convention, these contentious dynamics between water rights and responsibilities are clearly manifest in the contestation surrounding the PRC's activities on the Lancang Jiang. Unsurprisingly, as an upstream power, China has opted to self-designate its duties in terms of its rights to harness the water resources within its section of the river, much to the chagrin of downstream communities. By contrast, local communities have framed the matter so that, should the People's Republic want to be seen as a 'responsible' upstream state, it will have to forego its right to reasonable use and embrace its responsibility to do no harm to the river's morphology and, by extension, to riparian communities.

But while such efforts have not entirely been in vain, considering the relative success of these grassroots actors in prodding the PRC to rehaerse its upstream obligations,\textsuperscript{621} they have also managed to induce negative reactions from certain quarters of Chinese society. Resonating with enduring nationalist discourses, external

\textsuperscript{619} In the Mekong Agreement, this principle is articulated in procedural terms in Articles 7 and 8. Article 7 stipulates that 'Where one or more States is notified with proper and valid evidence that it is causing substantial damage to one or more riparians form the use of and/or discharge to water of the Mekong River, that States or States shall cease immediately the alleged cause of harm until such cause of harm is determined in accordance with Article 8'. Article 8, moreover, requires that 'Where harmful effects cause substantial damage to one or more riparians from the use of and/or discharge to waters of the Mekong River by any riparian State, the party(ies) concerned shall determine all relative factors, the cause, extent of damage and responsibility for damages caused by that State'.

\textsuperscript{620} Conca, \textit{Governing Water}, p. 100.

\textsuperscript{621} This is discussed in the later section of this chapter.
public opposition to the Lancang cascade has been interpreted by some in China as having been orchestrated by the United States in an attempt to deny the PRC its sovereign right to development and the legitimate use of its water resources. Crucially, these accusations were made in view of recent events, where the United States has announced its ‘return’ to Southeast Asia. At the 2009 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phuket, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had notably proposed the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), which would see U.S.-Southeast Asian cooperation on issues ranging from the environment, health, education and infrastructure development, to improving transboundary water resources management. The eventual result was the ‘sister-river’ agreement between the Mississippi River Commission and the MRC. Marking the U.S.’s first major involvement in the MRC since its inception, the agreement seeks to encourage sustainable development in the Mekong Basin, together with the preservation of the basin’s ‘tremendous biodiversity’.  

As to be expected, this partnership came as rather worrying news to the Chinese leadership, forcefully echoed in the comments made by one Chinese scholar I interviewed in 2010. The Lancang Jiang, according to him, is located within Chinese territory and is, hence, a Chinese ‘national asset’. To not exploit the waters that flow out from the Lancang for the benefit the Chinese people is ‘unreasonable’ and a ‘waste’, since the utilisation of the Lancang’s water resources is indisputably within China’s sovereign rights. He further argued that ‘each country should respect each other’s interests’, but that China has ‘no obligation for the transboundary consequences of environmental problems’. Although this constitutes a fairly extreme position, the PRC’s reticence to share information on its dams, as well as its unwillingness to become an official member of MRC for fear of jeopardising its rights to accessing the Lancang’s resources, appears to imply that Beijing sees no legal – let alone ethical – imperative to be accountable to other riparians for its dam-building activities.

The case of water governance in the Mekong River Basin, therefore, seems to attest to China’s traditional, state-centric conceptions of responsibility, where national development, economic growth, and the well-being of the Chinese people are

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623 Again, one is reminded here of the two quotes mentioned earlier from Stalin and King Parakrama.
624 Interview, Peking University, Beijing, China (14 December 2010).
prioritised. China, from this perspective, is simply acting as it should. And as demonstrated in the preceding discussion, this conception of responsibility is one held not only by China, but is shared by other national and international actors as well. Whether it be the policy agendas of the individual riparian states, the MRC, the World Bank or the ADB, their discourses justifying hydro-development have remained fairly consistent over the years. The result is a discernible lack of major contestation at the interstate level over the notion that the Lancang-Mekong needs to be developed.

Here, the idea that ‘some sacrifice’ (see the caption for Photograph 5 ‘Boon to Man and Beast’) must be made for the sake of the common good has proven to be an enduring one. The pursuit of national interests, understood in terms of regional and human development, necessarily trumps any lingering sense of ecological responsibility to preserve and protect the Mekong Basin’s pristine natural environment. Responsibility, as such, is regarded in highly statist terms, with the state acting as the primary agent in defining and delegating responsibility. Indeed, noticeably missing from both the Mekong Agreement and the UN Watercourses Convention, in spite of their recognition of a state responsibility to cause no significant harm to the environment, is mention of those who stand to be most affected under any development scenario: that is, the local communities, both upstream and downstream, whose livelihoods are inextricably connected to the life of the river. And as the ensuing section illustrates, it is the social contestation occurring at the grassroots level that upstream-downstream relations have proven to be most problematic.

Saving the Mekong: bringing the ‘public’ back into the public sphere

Fred Pearce cuts to the heart of the contestation surrounding shared rivers when he observes how ‘all current negotiations begin from the assumption that the river is a pipe carrying water to the sea -- and that the only deal that needs to be done is who can take what from the pipe. Rivers are a bit more complicated than that, and yet nobody is talking about setting aside any of the Nile’s precious flow for nature’. 625

Needless to say, a similar mentality also prevailed in the official push for the Mekong

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Basin’s development. But somewhat different from the Nile case, there is a growing group of committed individuals willing to speak for the Mekong and, in so doing, to ‘speak truth to power’.

It is certainly ironic that the arguments used to justify the building of dams, along with other river development schemes (see the UN-ECAFE Promotional Photos featured in the previous section), have been employed as the very reasons that civil society groups have levelled to oppose such projects. But of even greater irony would have to be the fact that those who are claimed in official discourses to be the major recipients of the benefits of the river’s development and in whose name such schemes are purportedly undertaken, are the ones who turn out to be the most disadvantaged, having little or no say in the policy-making process. Rather than mitigating poverty, the World Bank’s much-celebrated ‘sustainable’ project – the Nam Theun 2 Dam – has been criticised for its potential to exacerbate social inequalities by obstructing communities’ access to vital resources. The hydroelectric dam was accused of potentially threatening, for instance, the fisheries and fishing communities of the Xe Bang Fai River as water was diverted from the Theun River to the Xe Bang Fai, resulting in altered flows and a situation where ‘poverty [was paradoxically] created by “development”’.626 In a similar vein, the benefits of the Three Gorges Dam project have also been extensively disputed by environmental activists like Dai Qing, who point to the massive displacement of communities and the dam’s own operational unsustainability.

Ultimately, what this underscores is how the traditional top-down decision-making model has come under mounting social resistance. Globally, the ‘dam-building boom’ has been met by nationwide movements that exist to challenge the very logic underpinning this boom. In June 2011, for example, Chilean civilians rallied to protest the government’s move to approve the HidroAysén Dam complex in the region of Patagonia, well-known for its natural beauty. Like other governments before it, the reason used by the government to vindicate the dam was founded on an

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expected increase in energy demands and a desire to minimise reliance on external gas suppliers.627

The turning-point for grassroots activism in the Mekong region, more specifically, came with the people-led campaign against the Pak Mun Dam in Thailand. In response to the construction of a hydropower dam on the Mun River – a tributary of the Mekong – by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT),628 aggrieved villagers formed the Assembly of the Poor (Samaccha Khon-jon) in 1995, with the purpose of ‘returning the Mun to our children’.629 They drew public attention to the perverse consequences of the dam, which had been underplayed in official discourses, including declining fish stocks, a higher number of resettlements (than originally estimated), and the lack of appropriate compensation given to displaced communities. After nearly a decade of campaigning, the claims of the Pak Mun communities were further substantiated by the WCD’s report in 2000 that revealed how the dam’s EIA had been inadequately conducted. This eventually culminated in the Thai government’s concession to temporarily open the dam’s sluice gates to allow for fish migration in 2001.630 Even now, the Assembly of the Poor, along with other local and transnational NGOs, continues to call for the dam to be decommissioned. Although the successes of civil society might have proven to be rather limited in this case, the event did nonetheless contribute to the invigoration of grassroots activism in the region – the same kind which has surfaced with the intense contestation surrounding the Lancang’s mainstream dams.

A river ‘threatened’

China’s harshest critics are to be found in what has been referred to as a thriving ‘Mekong civil society’.631 It is at this transnational ‘state-society’ level that normative contestation over China’s water rights and its responsibilities as an upstream


628 The dam was completed in 1994 and was also underwritten by World Bank funding.


630 Soon after, however, the government’s decided to close the gates for eight months each year.

superpower has principally taken place, and where China often finds itself being publicly condemned as an ‘irresponsible’ hegemon. Unlike the mainland Southeast Asian governments, these non-state actors have been far from reserved in opposing Chinese hydropower projects. Here, the politics of responsibility emerges in relation to both asymmetrical upstream-downstream relations, as well as asymmetrical state-society relations.

Local and international NGOs, most notably Living River Siam, the Save the Mekong coalition and International Rivers Network, have been among the most prominent, actively working to disseminate information and raise public awareness. The fear here is that the Yunnan cascade, coupled with the activities of Chinese commercial dam developers in Laos and Cambodia, will irrevocably turn the Mekong into another Yangzi or Yellow River. Together with affected communities, these organisations have engaged in fundamentally disputing the Lancang cascade and its raison d’être by challenging state authority as well as the region’s predominant discourses of development.

Illustration 5. Cartoon featured in The Bangkok Post (10 March 2010)

632 In view of the prospective consequences of Chinese dams, Aviva Imhof, campaigns director at the IRN, has criticized China for ‘acting at the height of irresponsibility’. Quoted in Pearce, ‘The Damming of the Mekong’.
A key trait of this Mekong civil society has been its particularly forceful push for greater ‘democratisation’ of the local commons and greater public inclusion in official decision-making processes. ‘Responsible’ governance and ‘good practices’, it is argued, can only be arrived at through public participation in the formal channels of governance. Only then can there be an accurate representation of the broad spectrum of interests involved. This strongly resonates with recent calls for the MRC to adopt a more inclusive, multi-stakeholder model for the Mekong’s governance. The problem, nevertheless, rests with how this shift away from the well-entrenched, state-dominated model of governance can be generated, so that vested political and economic interests can be transcended.

Given the unequal access to the public communicative space of affected communities compared to the state and dam-building enterprises, the task effectively falls upon NGOs, in particular, to ‘level the playing-field’ and act as norm entrepreneurs responsible for reclaiming the local commons that has since been usurped by state narratives prioritising the ‘national interest’. The mass media of downstream countries (most notably, Thailand’s The Nation and The Bangkok Post) have also played a noteworthy role in provoking debate by bringing Chinese upstream activities into the public eye and serving as a sounding board for local voices.

Collectively, these non-state actors work to reconstitute the ‘social bonds’ that exist between the state and the citizen, performing the ‘important legitimisation function’ of scrutinizing and contesting, when necessary, the state’s exercise of power and authority. Their shared purpose is to make the state and the private sector more accountable by inaugurating a shift from ‘rhetorical action’ to ‘communicative

action’, where verbal promises are transformed into concrete commitments that become reflected in actual practices. In practical terms, this fits with the emphasis on the people’s ‘right to know’ and the responsibility on the part of states and dam developers to provide the information. Indeed, apart from focusing on the negative implications of China’s upstream dams, anti-dam activists have equally spotlighted the PRC’s lack of transparency, calling on the PRC to share more of its current and historical hydrological data. As previously noted, while China has been providing wet-season hydrological data since 2002, it has so far provided the MRC with dry-season information only for 2010 and has said that it will continue to do so for ‘critical’ years only. And despite ongoing drought and low water levels, China has refused to share the hydrological data for 2011, claiming that this year does not fall under the ‘critical’ category.

Paralleling this social contestation of state authority has been the normative contestation of the validity of current development discourses. Through petitions and the hosting of public seminars, as well as the publication of their own impact assessment reports, these so-called ‘water warriors’ have managed to seriously bring into question the purported advantages of hydropower by raising the public visibility of affected groups. In June 2009, for example, the ‘Save the Mekong’ petition was sent to the various governments in the region, calling for a halt to dam-building. More than 11,000 people, most of whom were subsistence farmers and fishermen living along the river, had signed it.

Furthermore, these local actors have also managed to shed light on a plethora of other issues and concerns: how, contrary to Chinese official claims, build-up in sedimentation will soon render most of the Lancang dams incapacitated; how, since the building of the first Chinese dam, a number of species have become endangered, most notably the Mekong dolphin and manatee; how water levels have fluctuated

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636 For more on communicative action, see Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action: the critique of functionalist reason (London: Heinemann, 1989).
637 As part of the agreement reached at the first MRC meeting in Hua Hin, Thailand, in April 2010, China would provide dry-season hydro-meteorological data on the operation of two of its hydrological stations. Moreover, worthy of note is how foreign diplomats from the region were also invited – in what was intended as a display of transparency on the Chinese part – to visit the sites of the Xiaowan and Jinghong Dams, which constitute two of the biggest dams in the cascade.
638 Personal communication with Associate Professor Chaiyuth Sukhsri, Bangkok, Thailand (20 May 2011).
dramatically; and how fish catches are now less than half of what they were before, with the list of grievances going on at some length. But apart from NGOs and local communities, a growing number of scholars have also added to the debate by fundamentally challenging the scientific reasoning behind hydropower. Doubts have been raised as to whether hydropower dams are really the 'climate change-friendly' energy alternative they are heralded to be, considering the methane and carbon dioxide output caused by the inundation of vegetation cover, as well as the fact that the promise of hydropower is attractive energy-intensive industries and can even lead to the construction of coal-fired power stations to compensate for the shortfall in water levels during the dry season. In like fashion, the usefulness of ‘fish ladders’ as a scientific remedy for the impacts of dams on fish migration has now been dismissed, especially in light of how the Mekong has no salmonoid fish species and the fact that their use at the Pak Mun Dam had no mitigating effects. All of this is, of course, accompanied by lingering concerns over the actual capacity of Chinese upstream dams to help regulate wet and dry season flows. Here, we are witnessing how the ‘science’ of hydro-development is now being progressively questioned by local actors as a valid epistemic discourse.

**Saving the Mekong, empowering the people**

Contestation has not been limited to downstream riparian communities. Mass displacement of communities due to dam construction and their inadequate compensation have long been major problems within China. It is estimated that over ten million people were displaced in 2002 alone. Other related socio-environmental issues, such as water pollution, aggravated soil erosion, landslides, industrial debris, and ecological fragmentation due to forest habitat destruction, have also been problematic in the post-dam construction phase. Pioneering work by Chinese scholars


641 According to Ma Jun, this is the case at least for certain areas of Yunnan Province, where the local government is likely to use the hydropower generated from dams (especially those planned on the Nu River) to intensify the region's industrial development, particularly through mineral resource extraction. See Meng Si, 'Hydropower's green excuse', China Dialogue (14 February 2011). [On-line] Available at: http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/4105 (accessed 20 January 2012).

like He Daming and Yu Xiaogang have shown that similar problems have emerged following the construction of the Lancang’s mainstream dams, particularly the Manwan, with advocacy campaigns spearheaded by grassroots NGOs much like the Green Watershed provoking governments to begin to critically reconsider what is at stake. But while the degree of influence that these assessments have had on government policies remains relatively constrained, there are emerging prospects for change that cannot be easily discounted. As detailed in the preceding chapter, greater public awareness and official acknowledgement of the adverse ramifications of dam projects on affected communities have compelled officials to submit to some of the local demands, including the provision of more adequate compensation and even the suspension of certain hydropower schemes, as was the case for the highly controversial Nu Jiang cascade.

Apart from providing glimpses into the increasing pluralisation of China’s environmental governance, the contestation arising from civil society actors in the Lancang-Mekong case demonstrates how a distinctive language of responsibility has been adopted – one framed not in terms of ‘national development’, but in terms of protecting human livelihoods within and beyond one’s borders, and more importantly, preserving ‘nature’ – that is, the river and the intricate freshwater ecosystems it represents. This is reflected in the Save the Mekong coalition’s organisational slogan, where the Mekong River is conceived foremost as a river that ‘feeds millions’. In this regard, the value of the river and the surrounding environment lies not in their ‘commodifisable’ resources, but is instead to be found in the invaluable ecological services that they provide. Needless to say, these referent objects of responsibility are precisely those which have been largely omitted from state-led development discourses.

Corresponding to this language of responsibility has also been the particular narrative of water vulnerability and transboundary harm, which is often articulated in terms of the Mekong depicting a river ‘at risk’ or ‘under threat’. This was the gist of a seminal report conducted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in May 2009 that found the dams on the

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643 The coalition is comprised of both national and transnational NGOs, including Oxfam, IRN, Living River Siam, TERRA (Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance), among others. Its declared objective, however, is much wider in scope, reputedly aiming to bring together ‘non-governmental organisations, local people, academics, journalists, artists and ordinary people from within the Mekong countries and internationally’. The Save the Mekong’s official website can be accessed at: http://www.savethemekong.org/index.php.
river's mainstream as potentially posing a 'considerable threat' to the river, which has since been used as a reference point by anti-dam activists in the Lower Mekong Basin. What this effectively points to is a novel conception of ecological responsibility, one which epitomises the intersection between human and environmental security concerns. Emphasis is placed here on the state's obligation to protect the fragile relationship between humans and the river's natural flows, as based on the principle of 'do no harm'. Clearly, this contrasts with the aforementioned principle of 'no significant harm', which suggests how some 'sacrifices' can be afforded if necessary.

In an effort to popularise this notion of no harm, civil society actors have come to rely on a 'logic of appropriateness' – that is, norm or rule-guided behaviour – to advance a people-centred framework for responsible water governance, as opposed to a 'logic of consequences' which has been more commonly employed by state actors and dam developers. Here, regardless of the actual consequences of the dams – which have yet to be definitively determined at this stage, given how it normally takes years before such consequences manifest themselves and how, in most cases, there are also other factors at play (e.g. climate change or deforestation) – the fact that the cascade is expected to have adverse ramifications on the river is enough to render the scheme unviable. It follows that should the objective of governments truly be to improve people's well-being, then to leave the river 'as it is', to paraphrase environmentalist Pianporn Deetes, would be what is most needed.

Despite the fact that the Chinese government continues to deny the claims and accusations made against its Lancang dams and has far from acquiesced to many of the demands made by downstream activists (though the same can be equally said of the Southeast Asian governments), there are emerging signs that show how the efforts of civil society groups have not entirely been futile. Most notable was Vice-Foreign Minister Song Tao's announcement at the Hua Hin Summit that Beijing has since cancelled the construction of the Mengsong hydroelectric plant, in response to an environmental impact assessment which indicated that the dam would have a negative impact on fish migration (presumably due to its close proximity to the Laotian border). Song also revealed plans to build a counter-regulation reservoir at Ganlanba to prevent abnormal downstream fluctuations in water levels, and to incorporate a $30

million-stratified water intake project into the Nuozhadu’s construction plan to mitigate the dams’ effects on the river’s water temperature.\textsuperscript{645} Crucially, this falls in line with certain of the suggestions proposed by hydro-engineering experts from downstream countries like Chaiyuth Sukhsri of Chulalongkorn University, who has also been an advisor to the MRC.

According to Associate Professor Chaiyuth Sukhsri, dams and hydro-development are not necessarily ‘bad’, but can contribute to people’s well-being. In terms of China’s dams, it has mainly been the lack of transparency and limited information-sharing on China’s part that has been problematic, fuelling doubts and suspicions downstream. However, apart from sharing more hydrological data and information on its dam operations (not just in times of critical drought), should China want to earnestly show itself as a ‘responsible power’, Chaiyuth has argued that the PRC should also consider converting the last of its dams in the cascade from hydropower facilities to readjusting or regulating structures for regulating its upper dams. This would not constitute a major challenge to China’s development plans, but would instead work to demonstrate its benign intentions.\textsuperscript{646} Significantly, this method has since been applied to the Ganlanba Dam.

The case of the Upper Lancang-Mekong River Navigation Improvement Project is likewise instructive in this regard. As noted in an earlier section, under the Quadripartite Economic Cooperation mechanism, the four countries of the Upper Mekong – China, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand – had agreed in 2000 to improve river navigation in order to develop the region’s water transportation (although plans for waterway modifications had already been proposed by China since 1992), with China pledging $5 million toward the project. Apart from being officially touted as a means to ‘reduce accidents and the attendant loss of property and life’ as well as prevent oil spills and resulting environmental damages, safe commercial navigation was primarily promoted in terms of the benefits of trade and tourism for riparian states.\textsuperscript{647} The blasting of rapids and shoals deemed to be impediments to navigation was to be

\textsuperscript{645} See Song Tao, ‘Work Together for Common Development’.

\textsuperscript{646} Personal Communication with Assoc. Prof. Chaiyuth Sukhsri, Bangkok, Thailand (20 May 2011).

conducted in three phases, with the first phase involving the removal of 10 major rapids, one shoal and ten scattered reefs, so as to secure the almost year-round passage of vessels up to 100-150 DWT.\textsuperscript{648}

The first phase of the project, which lasted two years from 2002 to 2004, however, soon ran into strong opposition from communities, who argued that its consequences had been disastrous, as evinced from dramatic fluctuations in water volume. A report published later by the IUCN in 2006 further highlighted the threats to biodiversity that had been imposed by the blasting of rapids and shoals.\textsuperscript{649} Equally prevalent were (continuing) fears over an industrial or oil tanker spill, despite official assurances, from increased water traffic.\textsuperscript{650} But not only were these rapids a central part of the river’s diverse ecosystems, but without them, river currents were also believed to have become stronger and faster, helping to accelerate the erosion of river banks. According to an official in the Lao Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, ‘Without the reefs, the flow in the Mekong is likely to be much stronger, and big waves caused by huge ships would destroy the country’s river banks’.\textsuperscript{651} And there is, indeed, reason to these fears. In August 2002, more than 113 Laotian households were forced to evacuate their village of Don Sawan (located in Bor Kaew District) and had to resettle in neighbouring villages due to considerable river bank erosion. The village was situated in close proximity to a Thai construction site for the Chiang Saen port. Alterations to that section of the Mekong’s morphology were apparently to blame for swifter currents and a redirection in the currents’ course. Another village (Huay Xay) in the same district, located near to yet another Thai construction site for the Chiang Khong port, was also faced with similar problems of erosion and strong currents, which had washed away sections of the newly-built roads in the area. Thai villages situated along the river (such as the Don, Pak Ing, and Huay Luek villages) have also had their share of social grievances stemming from substantial bank erosion. In 2003,

\textsuperscript{648} The second phase was expected to involve the removal of 51 rapids and shoals to allow navigation by vessels up to 300 DWT, while the third phase would purportedly include canalization for navigation by vessels of 4x500 DWT. P. 413.


\textsuperscript{650} The environmental damages caused by the spillage of a massive load of sugar from a (presumably negligent) shipping vessel in June this year into the Chao Phraya River – a major waterway of central Thailand – attest to these fears.

for example, the Mekong’s currents had reportedly destroyed an area worth seven rai \(^{652}\) in the Thai village of Hat Bai. \(^{653}\)

Local and transnational civil society actors subsequently directed attention to how the EIA for the project’s first phase was fundamentally flawed and lacking in credibility. \(^{654}\) As argued in a study by Naho Mirumachi and Mikiyasu Nakayama, the assessment had grossly underestimated the environmental, social and economic implications of the project, especially with regard to its long-term consequences, and had failed to give due consideration to the project’s effects on downstream countries. \(^{655}\) Independent reviews of the EIA sponsored by the MRC in response to local concerns also presented similar results, with the assessment being further criticised for not taking into account the project’s wider context, for its flawed methodology, and for the lack of public consultation. \(^{656}\)

Even though the project was undertaken by China in conjunction with three other Southeast Asian governments, public admonition and calls for accountability centred primarily on the PRC, as the latter was deemed to be the most culpable for its role in spearheading and financing the project. The prevailing attitude was that Beijing should, at the very least, be ‘leading efforts to find out what is happening on the Mekong’. \(^{657}\) A manifestation of this sentiment came in March 2003, when Chiang Rai residents, along with representatives from the Chiang Khong Conservation Group, a Thai NGO, gathered in front of the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok to protest the Mekong’s abnormal water levels. Demands were put forward for the governments involved in the navigation project to place the protection of the rights of communities before concerns over improving trade relations. \(^{658}\) The fact that local news media

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\(^{652}\) The rai is a Thai unit of area. One rai is equivalent to approximately 1600 m\(^2\).

\(^{653}\) The Dhammayathra Project [โครงการธรรมยิ่ง], วิทยาลัยน้ำใจ – ล้นน้ำ พุ่มพันธุ์ ริมขนานแย่ง สะเทิน [Protecting the Khong River – the ‘Khon Phi Luang’: home to fisheries, plants, and peoples of the Khong] (Bangkok: Sukhaphap Jai, 2004), pp. 138, 140.


\(^{657}\) ‘Response from Beijing needed’, *The Bangkok Post*.

dramatically reported on how this gathering had effectively halted river commerce in northern Thailand, thereby ‘threatening’ the country’s economy, further added to the issue’s sense of urgency.

Under growing public pressure and in light of evidence demonstrating the (presumably unintended) consequences of the project, the first phase of the navigation scheme was eventually suspended, a development that had been preceded months earlier by news of the QEC’s disbandment. In spite of the confluence of interests found between the parties involved, the Thai government became the first to announce in April 2003 that it would withdraw from the initiative, with the Thai cabinet also requesting a new EIA to be conducted for the Khon Phi Luang rapids on
the Thai-Lao border. This was followed one year after by China’s own announcement. Yielding to downstream demands, China affirmed the discontinuation of further plans to clear the rapids between Chiang Saen and Luang Prabang. Needless to say, the main trigger for these decisions is directly attributable to the strong opposition voiced by communities, as well as to the concerns raised by neighbouring Cambodia and Vietnam over changes to the Mekong’s flow that could negatively impact both the vital Tonle Sap and the Mekong Delta.

The resolution of the Mekong navigation issue goes to underscore how the notion of ecological responsibility has become fundamental to the Mekong’s governance not just in terms of outcomes, but also in terms of process. By framing the issue in terms of human and ecological security imperatives, it contributes to the formation of an integrated multi-stakeholder governance mechanism that takes into account public demands. The normative contestation generated by this Mekong-focused civil society has clearly been one driven by a paradigm where ‘upstream power’ necessarily comes with downstream responsibilities, and where the exercise of responsibility on the part of state actors ought to bring forth the empowerment of peoples.

'Meeting the Needs, Keeping the Balance'

Aside from emerging signs of greater sensitivity and ‘responsiveness’ on China’s part, the deeper involvement of the public sphere in ecological governance has also encouraged gradual conceptual shifts in how development is being understood and pursued by states. Although the PRC has yet to fully embrace the notion of ecological responsibility – put simply as the notion that socioeconomic development concerns should not come at the expense of environmental considerations – there is reason to believe that the situation is gradually changing. In recent years, there have been discernable efforts on China’s part (as well as that of other actors involved in the

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659 Apparently, this decision was also made in view of the Thai military’s findings that a faster flowing Mekong could possibly alter the country’s border with Laos. Hensengerth, ‘Transboundary River Cooperation and the Regional Public Good’, pp. 334-335.


Mekong’s governance, including the World Bank and the ADB\textsuperscript{662} to adopt the evolving language of sustainable development, a discourse which promises to reconcile the social and economic imperatives of states with their prevailing environmental concerns. As previously elucidated in Chapter 2, Hu Jintao’s concepts of ‘scientific development’ and ‘harmonious society’ illustrate the growing resonance of this idea within China, as emphasis has been increasingly placed, at least at the rhetorical level, on the necessity of ecological sustainability and the need for ‘harmony’ in modern human-nature relationships.

Regarding water governance in the Mekong Basin more broadly, the import of the idea of sustainable development has been reflected in such projects as the (earlier mentioned) Basic Framework of ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation and the GMS Biodiversity Conservation Corridors Initiative, both of which share the common purpose of safeguarding the region’s irreplaceable natural resources and ecological services in order to offset environmental threats brought about by vigorous economic and infrastructure development.\textsuperscript{663} It also deserves note that the 1995 Mekong Agreement does contain a passage relating to sustainable development, whereby states party to the agreement reaffirmed their commitment to ‘sustainable development, utilization, conservation and management of the Mekong River Basin water and related resources for...social and economic development and the well-being of all riparian States, consistent with the needs to protect, preserve, enhance and manage the environmental and aquatic conditions and maintenance of the ecological balance exceptional to this river basin’.\textsuperscript{664} Indeed, the MRC’s core concept of integrated water resources management can be viewed as an attempt to practically

\textsuperscript{662} See as examples the ADB’s Environ\textit{ment} Policy (November 2002) and its \textit{Sustainability Reports} (2007, 2009 and 2011); and the World Bank’s report for the IV World Water Forum: David Grey and Claudia W. Sadoff, ‘Water for Growth and Development’, in Thematic Documents of the IV World Water Forum (Mexico City: Comisión Nacional del Agua, 2006). Also noteworthy is the ADB’s more specific projects that include the Tonle Sap Initiative (2002) and the Tonle Sap Basin Strategy (2003), which are both described as ‘pro-poor strategies’ aimed at enabling access by rural communities to the lake’s rich natural resources to help sustain livelihoods, as well as putting in place effective governing mechanisms to manage the Tonle Sap’s complex ecosystems, particularly those represented by the wetlands that emerge from the lake’s seasonal reverse flows.

\textsuperscript{663} As one passage in the ADB’s 2005 GMS-BCI ‘Strategic Framework and Technical Assessment’ report tellingly observes, ‘Some of the Mekong River’s watersheds will be affected by the planned development associated with the GMS economic corridors. Conservation of the hydrological processes will be essential to maintaining the ecological communities and dynamics of the subregion, and to ensuring continued provision of ecological services for economic sectors and the numerous human communities that depend, either directly or indirectly, on the river network and its resources.’ ADB, ‘Strategic Framework and Technical Assessment’, p. 3.

apply principles of sustainable development to transboundary river governance, as it seeks to combine environmental protection with economic development, while advancing a multilevel and inclusive decision-making framework.

This discourse of sustainability has, moreover, become curiously attached to a climate change narrative, where the consequences of climate change have been used (primarily by governments) to justify the implementation of large-scale dam projects in an effort to placate public resistance to such schemes. As Hirsch and Rosalia Sciortino poignantly observe, ‘Rather than emphasizing the benefits of dam construction for trade and economic growth, the importance of hydropower for climate change adaptation and mitigation is stressed with increasing frequency’.665 This attitude can clearly be evinced from a statement made by former CEO of the MRC Oliver Cogels, who commented on how:

[the MRC’s] position on hydropower development in the Mekong Basin, including in China, has always been one of reflecting, on the one hand, the increasing need for electricity for poverty alleviation and economic growth and, on the other hand, the concerns regarding environment and social aspects in the scope of an integrated sustainable development approach at basin level. [...] Hydropower has the big advantage of producing electricity without carbon emissions and the respective impact on global warming.666

China, in particular, has actively employed the discourse of ‘hydropower as clean energy’ to legitimize its ‘dam-building boom’ at home and abroad.667 Especially with the recent nuclear disaster in Japan that has effectively discredited nuclear power as a more viable alternative to fossil fuels, hydropower has become all the more attractive particularly for states with an abundance in water resources. The following statement made by a senior Chinese official resonates well with this new framing of

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hydro-development: ‘We are sensitive to considerations of the environment and the importance of the conservation of nature, but we must have power; coal is dirty, water clean and abundant, a rich and unused resource, we have no alternatives’.  

The PRC’s claim that its upstream dams will help in mitigating the effects of climate change by regulating the river’s run-offs during the dry and wet seasons also corresponds to this line of reasoning. Of significance, however, is how this claim has been likewise supported – and, in that sense, legitimated – by the MRC itself, which has steadfastly attributed both the 2008 Great Floods and the 2010 ‘regional drought’ to erratic and extreme rainfall induced by climatic irregularities. The MRC’s constant reiteration of China’s ability to contribute to flow regulation not simply suggests a markedly conciliatory attitude toward the regional hegemon, but is a stance that again has roots in regional sentiments of developmentalism. Speaking in Kunming in 1999, UN-ESCAP’s regional advisor for water resources David Jezeph argued that by regulating seasonal flows, ‘the construction of dams on the Lancang will actually bring major benefits to the lower Mekong countries...provide[ing] additional hydropower benefits for the proposed MRC “run-of-river” projects under consideration...as well as more water for domestic consumption, industry, irrigation, navigation and deferring salt intrusion in the Mekong Delta’.

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669 Apparently, this was the central message contained in the MRC’s Annual Flood Report for 2009, which had prominently highlighted the implications of climate variability on both the Upper and Lower Mekong Basins’ hydrological regimes. See MRC, Annual Mekong Flood Report 2009 (Phnom Penh: MRC Office of the Secretariat, 2010).

670 Quoted in McCormack, ‘Water Margins’, p. 17. In a similar vein, the MRC’s incumbent CEO Jeremy Bird has also, on many occasions at public forums, reassured dam critics that the Lancang dams are not to blame for irregular water levels. See, for instance, his following presentations: ‘Contemporary Challenges: dams, drought, floods and climate change’, presentation delivered at the Public Forum on Sharing the Mekong Basin, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand, 1 April 2010; and ‘International Rivers: The Case of the Lancang-Mekong’, presentation at the 2010 Beijing Forum on ‘The Harmony of Civilization and Prosperity for All – Commitments and Responsibilities for a Better World’, Peking University, Beijing, China, 5–7 November 2010.
While these are promising signs in the sense that China is, at least, motivated to publicly address and validate its dam-building activities vis-à-vis growing environmental concerns at home and abroad, and given how one cannot deny the very real effects of climate change that have become manifest in the region’s variable rainfall patterns and the occurrence of saline intrusion, there remains a significant risk in how this climate change discourse is officially used and propagated. Not only can it serve as an ‘excuse’ for outdated development paradigms, but it can also provide certain actors with the normative language needed to legitimise their vested interests. Indeed, concerns over the misappropriation of this discourse have undergirded heated debates on such hydropower projects as the Nam Theun 2, which was publicised by the World Bank as a ‘model of sustainable development’. This is, of course, not to mention more recent scientific studies that have cast doubt over the rationale behind large dams, revealing them to be based on inherently flawed technology, and less economically and ecologically cost-effective than expected.671

There also exist sizeable limitations on the extent to which the concept of ecological sustainability can coexist with the imperative to develop in national agendas. At risk of stating the obvious, to ‘meet the needs and keep the balance’ is undeniably a difficult task, especially for industrialising nations. A recurring problem centres on how one can ensure that such laudable rhetoric gets translated into practice. China is by no means the only country facing major impediments in doing so, but the other developing states of Southeast Asia are likewise going through a similar ‘learning curve’. And to be fair, these are also issues facing the global community as a whole. Although the notion of sustainable development dates back to the late 1980s with the publication of the Brundtland Commission’s influential report, *Our Common Future*, it did not gain international prominence until the 1992 Earth Summit, when its key principles were further elaborated. And whilst this critical turning-point in global environmental governance later paved the way for the World Commission on Dams (established in 1998), which subsequently introduced the concept of sustainable development to the business of large-dam construction, the degree to which the WCD has had any effect on state politics and decision-making remains highly debatable.

In fact, China’s reaction to the WCD’s report could be characterised as almost ‘hostile’, despite the fact that most would agree that the principles outlined in the WCD’s framework collectively represent the core values of human rights and sustainability. In 2001, the Chinese National Committee on Large Dams (CHINCOLD) dismissed the report on the grounds that it would ‘stop any dam construction in the future’, arguing that it was ‘not reasonable to force developing countries to accept all the guidelines proposed by the WCD’, as dam construction should be undertaken according to a country’s local conditions. The reasoning used by CHINCOLD was simply that as a country which frequently suffers from ‘catastrophic flood and drought disasters’, the role played by dams in China’s development during the past 50 years cannot be substituted, and that dams will necessarily continue to be a part of the country’s development.\(^672\)

As with its behaviour in other issues, China’s stance toward water governance continues to be mired in mixed signals. The CSG’s environmental policy, while promising, remains lacking in more detailed and specific regulatory guidelines as to how its projects will meet social and environmental standards. CHINCOLD’s rebuke of the WCD principles can also be strikingly juxtaposed with the China Exim Bank’s adoption of an official Environmental Policy three years later, so as to ensure that international environmental standards, particularly vis-à-vis environmental management and monitoring responsibilities, were being applied to its project financing.\(^673\) And this is, of course, not to mention the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ consistency in reiterating the government’s pledges to protect the Lancang-

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\(^672\) The full text of CHINCOLD’s response to the WCD’s report (dated 15 February 2001) can be accessed at the UNEP’s Dams and Development Project website: [http://www.unep.org/dams/documents/default.asp?documentid=464](http://www.unep.org/dams/documents/default.asp?documentid=464) (accessed 20 June 2011). Nevertheless, it deserves note that again this attitude is by no means characteristic of China. Despite having garnered much support from civil society organisations, implementation of the WCD’s recommendations continues to be weakly enforced and riddled by the lack of compliance among (multinational) dam-building companies and their host states, particularly those located in the developing world. Moreover, as publicized by major transnational NGOs like the IRN, attempts have ostensibly been made on the part of the hydropower industry to supplant the WCD’s guidelines with less stringent social and environmental standards, such as those contained in the ‘Hydropower Sustainability Assessment Protocol’ (HSAP) proposed by the International Hydropower Association (IHA).

\(^673\) Equally worthy of note is how, later in 2007, the Bank also devised the ‘Guidelines for Environmental and Social Impact Assessments of the China Export and Import Bank’s Loan Projects’, which are seen to be a corollary improvement to its 2004 environmental policy. The guidelines enforce the implementation of SIAs and EIAs for overseas projects, and were formulated in line with national Environmental Impact Assessment and Environmental Protection Laws, as well as the Ordinance on the Management of Environmental Protection for Construction Works.
Mekong’s natural environment in response to downstream concerns. In terms of the Mekong’s governance, this diplomatic tango – whereby China oscillates between ‘sustainability’ and ‘national development’ narratives – is one that is likely to persist. Much of the problem lies in the tension between the multiple referents of responsibility at stake: namely, the Chinese people, downstream communities and the river itself.

Being a country well-known for prioritising social stability above all else, Beijing’s foremost responsibility lies with its citizens and, by extension, to the development essential to ‘meeting their needs’. By the same token, Southeast Asian governments, especially Laos, view hydro-development as both a means to address rising regional power demands and ease their reliance on volatile international oil prices, as well as an opportunity for them to reduce poverty and relieve national debts. In light of these considerations, the river along with the ecological services it provides tends to be neglected, having yet to be afforded enough value in the policy agendas of riparian states. As such, the resulting situation continues to be one where the very discourses that have been at the source of normative contestation within the region have neither been actively, nor fundamentally, contested by those actors with the most ‘power’.

Conclusion: Going beyond hydropolitics – a shared responsibility?

So does the issue of water governance in the Mekong River Basin constitute an instance of responsibility failure in which notions of responsibility have neither a regulative nor a constitutive effect on China’s foreign-policy behaviour? I argue that this is not entirely the case. Being an upstream power and having built dams on the river’s mainstream, China certainly has ‘greater’ perceived responsibilities than other riparians. And this is a fact that has been recognised by Beijing itself. In the words of Vice-Foreign Minister Song Tao at the 2010 MRC Summit, ‘As a responsible

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675 A former Cambodian Minister of Transportation, Khy Tainglim, was once quoted as saying in 1996: ‘Water is our oil, our mines of gold, our main natural resource, and we should use our water to export and get foreign currency to develop the country’. ‘Water is Our Gold’ – The Battle of Words Begins’, Phnom Penh Post (8-21 March 1996); quoted in Goh, ‘Chapter Four’, p. 42.
676 As a reminder, ‘power’ is used here, in accordance with its usage in other parts of this thesis, to refer to political clout and capacity to act.
upstream country, we will never do anything undermining the interest of downstream countries'. 677

As this chapter has demonstrated, the Mekong issue is one rife with contending responsibility claims, due to the presence of diverse referents of responsibility. To characterise China as being either responsible or irresponsible would, therefore, constitute a gross simplification of an inherently complex issue. China’s failure to comply with certain expectations of ecological responsibility is better seen as an example of responsibility derogation, in which Beijing has stressed the imperative of national development to distract attention away from its other obligations, rather than an outright case of ‘responsibility failure’, where notions of responsibility exert no influence over state behaviour. As such, it is possible to view China as not actively denying the idea of responsibility per se, but rather as resisting the substantive implications of particular conceptions of responsibility. In spite of the normative commitments the PRC has made in support of environmental sustainability, official discourses continue to centre on the state prerogative to development, with Chinese interpretations of responsibility still couched in the inward-looking language of national interest.

It is, nevertheless, important to bear in mind that the PRC is by no means the sole actor accountable for the region’s water governance, nor is it the only actor harbouring ambitious plans for the river. Indeed, the long-standing discourse of development is one to which most governments in the region have subscribed, as was evident from the interests that converged around the QEC mechanism. Even transnational organisations like the World Bank or ADB have, to varying degrees, supported this paradigm, with the cause of regional development now heralded as a major feature of the proposed ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) to be established by 2015. 678 For this reason, water governance in the Mekong River Basin would be more accurately deemed as a ‘failure’ of collective governance and shared responsibility.

There are three interrelated factors that have contributed to this outcome: first, the weak and unclear definition of responsibilities under existing water governance

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677 Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN Office, ‘Vice Foreign Minister: China Is Ready for Pragmatic Cooperation with the MRC’. Song Tao also reaffirmed towards the end of his speech how China ‘firmly pursue[s] the diplomatic policy of “being a good friend and good partner of the surrounding countries’ and remained committed to the mutually beneficial cooperation with the Sub-region countries in order to achieve common development’.

678 For more on the AEC, see ASEAN’s official website at: http://www.aseansec.org/18757.htm.
frameworks; second, the presence of ‘thin’ institutionalisation within the region; and third, the lack of adequate public participation in the formal channels of governance. As explained above, the case of the Mekong’s governance attests to how multiple referents of responsibility have led to competing responsibility claims and heightened tension between upstream-downstream rights and responsibilities. This largely stems from the weakness of the region’s existing environmental governance structures. The MRC, in particular, has been quite explicit in pointing out that it is a downstream river basin organisation and that, in any case, its mandate falls more within the scope of providing scientific and technical knowledge on the river, and to facilitate transparency via information-sharing between members.

Accordingly, the MRC’s governance capacity remains circumscribed by a self-imposed commitment to working with governments at the technical – as opposed to policy – level, despite its recent attempts to play a greater advocacy role. This is, of course, not to mention the organisation and its members’ reticence to openly criticise the PRC’s practices, as they tend to elect a more ‘low-key’ engagement strategy towards the Chinese. In addition to a weak institutional framework to enforce compliance, the lack of an effective mechanism to enhance participatory representation – in spite of efforts by the MRC to implement the concept of IWRM to basin governance – has further meant that civil society groups have yet to be sufficiently empowered to exact responsibility from state actors – or in this case, from the Chinese government.

However, this is not to suggest that change is impossible. With non-state actors growing in influence over the past few years, this has allowed for ideas relating to environmental protection to gradually filter into the public sphere, as mounting pressure is placed on governments to shoulder more stringent duties and obligations for the welfare of local communities and the surrounding environment. And as evinced from the successful protests against the Mekong navigation scheme, it is at the grassroots level that processes of normative contestation have been most ubiquitous and forceful, with these civil actors playing an indispensable role in challenging state authority and the legitimacy of extant knowledge structures.

Having said this, water governance challenges in the Mekong River Basin are not confined only to hydropower development. Water pollution, rapidly-increasing urban water supply demands, large-scale water diversion projects, coupled with ‘water-grabbing’ behaviour on the part of energy-intensive industries, serve as potent
indicators of how the region’s water resources will come under even more stress in the years to come. Regional cooperation, in this regard, becomes all the more vital. As former Foreign Minister Marshal Chen Yi once wrote in a poem celebrating Sino-Burmese relations in 1957:

*I live in the upstream and you live in the downstream,
Our friendship flows with the river we both drink.*

Should this river become polluted, or its resources depleted, then there is little doubt that the friendship it so vitally sustains will be likewise affected. Certainly, this prospect alone should already suffice to urge governments on both sides of this shared river to act on their common responsibilities.

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CHAPTER FIVE

A Global Responsibility? China and the Politics of Disaster Governance

Gone are the days during which we reacted to disasters as they occurred, living from one catastrophe to another. Gone too are the days in which communities stand alone to cope with local hazards, receiving little (if any) acknowledgement or support from the outside world. Today we live in a globalised world, in every sense of the word: what impacts one community impacts us all.

Sálvano Briceño, Senior Advisor to the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

Lives are the most valuable things on this planet. As the bodies of eight of China’s UN peacekeepers who lost their lives in faraway Haiti earthquake [sic] return to their homeland, the whole nation is immersed in deep sorrow and grief. Besides heavy hearts, what fills our breasts to a great extent are strong feelings of respect for them and pride in what they had done for those they did not know.


Consistent with the previous chapter, the central purpose of this chapter is to examine how China’s involvement in global disaster governance has evolved over time. More specifically, it seeks to uncover to what extent a language of responsibility has been appropriated in Chinese discourses relating to the

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management of natural disasters occurring within and beyond its borders. Accordingly, the chapter is motivated by the following three questions: first, how has the issue of disaster governance been conceptualised globally and in the Chinese context? Second, how has China interpreted its responsibility to mitigating and preventing disasters, and third, to what extent has its conceptions been debated or challenged by other actors?

In drawing attention to major Chinese discourses framing political responses to disasters, the chapter highlights the contestation surrounding international norms on humanitarian action. It also reveals how climate variability and widespread environmental degradation have combined to hasten complex processes of ecological breakdown, as well as heighten the vulnerabilities of peoples to the common risks posed by natural hazards. It is in this regard that 'responsible' disaster governance – a concept which encompasses the efficient provision of relief assistance, along with the effective reduction of disaster risks and mitigation of the socio-economic and ecological repercussions of disasters – relates directly to efforts at governing nature.

Following from this, I pursue a line of argument presented in preceding chapters that stresses the significance of both state-to-state and state-to-society relations. A multilevel and inclusive approach to disaster management is deemed as central to the realisation of responsible disaster governance. Particularly critical to the effectiveness of disaster relief and mitigation measures is the inculcation of a culture of disaster resilience among local populations in tandem with the understanding that natural calamities are not preordained 'acts of God' – a perception which can lead to a fixation on engineering post-disaster responses\footnote{It is possible to separate the process of disaster governance into two interrelated phases: the response (or disaster proper) phase and the early recovery (post-disaster) phase. Both of these can entail the application of both structural and non-structural solutions, with the latter in particular speaking to the oftentimes contentious process of social and cultural reconstruction. See Second report on the protection of persons in the event of disasters, Sixty-first Session of the International Law Commission, UN Doc. A/CN.4/615 (2009), para. 64.} – but are occurrences that can be prevented or, at the very least, mitigated through constructive remedies and human intervention.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first section provides a global context for understanding the mounting significance of natural disasters to human security, as well as to regional stability within the Asia-Pacific. It explores ongoing debates over the application of the 'responsibility to protect' principle to disaster relief and prevention at the international level, with attention directed at how disasters
have gradually become internationalised as a result of the notion that states have a duty to cooperate and respond to the suffering of others. The second section then considers China’s own experiences in dealing with natural calamities and environmental crises. Focus is afforded to how the Chinese state and its people have conceived of their political and social obligations toward those experiencing substantial hardship and distress, and to what extent these conceptions have been informed by evolving international norms on disaster relief and reduction. The devastating 2008 Sichuan Earthquake is identified here as a critical turning-point. The final section investigates China’s contemporary engagement with the extant architecture of global disaster governance. Paralleling conceptual changes that surfaced following the Sichuan Earthquake, Beijing’s responses to the Indian Ocean Tsunami, the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, and the 2010 Pakistan Floods are examined to gauge how the People’s Republic interprets its responsibility toward those living beyond its borders.

Moving between international and domestic levels of analysis, I demonstrate how a complex triangulation of international, regional and national discourses grounded in the politics of responsibility remains relevant to China’s performance in disaster governance, just as it is equally important for the PRC’s engagement with water governance arrangements in the Mekong River Basin (Chapter 4). In spite of an apparent willingness on China’s part to become more involved in international disaster relief, normative contestation over the exact role that China should play persists. This is evident from the heated debates over the strategic interests that purportedly underlie Chinese contributions to international relief operations, as well as the bigger question of whether disaster relief can be seen, if at all, as a politically-neutral act of humanitarianism. To talk about the politics of responsibility is, thus, to inevitably touch upon the politics of disaster governance, and more precisely, on China’s evolving ‘disaster diplomacy’.


Beyond Charity? Natural disasters and the emergence of a common responsibility

In the wake of the Indian Ocean Tsunami, which ravaged various coastal areas of Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka and India back in 2004, then UN Secretary-General Kofi
Annan gave a press conference in which he made the following ‘call-to-aid’: ‘[t]his is an unprecedented, global catastrophe and it requires an unprecedented, global response’. Nearly a decade has passed since the ‘Boxing Day’ Tsunami, and yet the threats posed by natural disasters to global security have been all but unremitting. Experiences in recent years have not only revealed an exponential increase in the number and severity of disasters occurring in disparate parts of the world, but they also underscore the cascade of ‘unprecedented’ challenges in disaster governance and risk reduction that individual states and the international community at large now face as a result. In almost four decades, the number of natural disasters has increased at least threefold, affecting some of the world’s most vulnerable and poorest areas. Between 2008 and 2010, over 80 reported disasters and so-called ‘mega-disasters’—both geophysical and climate-related—were estimated to have triggered the displacement of at least 100 million people. A report by the Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) suggests that the number of people displaced by disasters in 2010 alone had far exceeded that of people displaced by wars and conflicts, with the estimate reaching over 40 million people. Needless to say, the implications for human security are profoundly grave.

Asia, in particular, has been among the hardest hit. Since the mid-1970s, the Asia-Pacific region has putatively experienced a disproportionate share of the world’s disasters. At present, it also holds the highest total for resulting human displacement each year. In 2008, almost 99 percent of people killed by natural disasters worldwide had originated from Asia, whereas from 2000 to 2009, the total averaged at around 85 percent. It was, moreover, in this region that we witnessed the occurrence of some of the most devastating natural catastrophes (for example, the 2010 Pakistan Floods

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685 These ‘mega-disasters’ included such occurrences as the Sichuan Earthquake, the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, the 2010 Chile Earthquake, as well as the 2010 Pakistan Floods.
686 Disaster casualties for 2010 were notably deemed to be ‘above average’, as human losses totalled more than 350,000 lives.
687 Ninety percent of those were found to be victims of climate-related disasters, which came in the form of critical droughts, acute flooding, and destructive storms. See the NRC-IDMC’s report, ‘Displacement due to natural hazard-induced disasters: Global estimates for 2009 and 2010’ (June 2011).
and the 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake), with China, India and the Philippines being among those worst affected in terms of the frequency and scale of the disasters experienced. Of the ‘top ten’ disasters (by number of deaths) that had taken place in 2008, nine had taken place within the Asia-Pacific.

According to the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, ‘disasters’ are defined as a ‘serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts’. Natural disasters (rendered into Chinese as ziran zaihai), in consequence, are understood here as those which are brought about specifically by exposure to natural hazards — whether biological, geological or hydrometeorological — and resultant conditions of vulnerability. More often than not, these are further exacerbated by the limited adaptive capacities of affected societies to cope with the disaster and its aftermath. They can be distinguished from man-made disasters (renhuo) that have been induced by social or human processes (e.g. oil spills and environmental degradation), although in reality it would be difficult to draw sharp distinctions between these two types because both natural and man-made hazards exist in a mutually reinforcing relationship. This corresponds with the view frequently propounded by those who frame vulnerability as contextually contingent. By emphasising the societal, cultural and historical determinants of natural hazards, advocates of this perspective stress how hazards may well be natural, but disasters are not always so.

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690 These nine are comprised of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar (May), Sichuan Earthquake in China (May), floods in India (June-August), extreme winter conditions in Afghanistan (January), Typhoon Fengshen (Franck) in the Philippines (June), Hurricane Hanna in Haiti (September), mass movement wet or landslides (September) and extreme floods (June) in China, and another round of flooding in India (September).
691 This is adapted from the ISDR’s comment following its official definition of the term ‘disaster’, and is one which bears close semblance to the definition of hazard advanced by the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015. See ISDR, 2009 UNISDR Terminology on Disaster Risk Reduction (Geneva: UNISDR, 2009), p. 9.
692 The relatively new concept of ‘socio-natural hazards’ aptly reflects these changing times and circumstances, essentially denoting the ‘phenomenon of increased occurrence of certain geophysical and hydrometeorological hazard events, such as landslides, flooding, land subsidence and drought, that arise from the interaction of natural hazards with overexploited or degraded land and environmental resources’. See ISDR, 2009 UNISDR Terminology, pp. 27-28.
For this reason, it is fair to say that apart from changes in geoclimatic conditions, human intervention can be equally blamed for the wider spatial scale and heightened severity of modern-day disasters. Earthquakes serve as an apt example of this, given how poorly-built buildings (as was the case for the Sichuan Earthquake), rather than the earthquake itself, often serve as the proximate cause of most of the human casualties, as victims are buried under deep piles of debris. The Great East Japan Earthquake, which caused extensive damage and human losses in Japan’s Tōhoku region, epitomises yet another sobering reminder of how natural hazards can interact with man-made ones, giving rise to what has since been dubbed as one of the gravest disaster crises in the country’s modern history. Referred to colloquially as Japan’s ‘3-11’, the event was marked by the almost simultaneous occurrence of three megacatastrophes: a 9.0-magnitude earthquake that had hit the Japanese coast triggering a tsunami with 40.5-metre high waves, which in turn inundated at least 400km² in four prefectures and precipitated major explosions and meltdowns at three nuclear reactors in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant complex. Despite how Japan has generally been lauded as an exemplar of disaster preparedness, the government had not anticipated such an unprecedented level of devastation, nor were they prepared for the complex humanitarian emergency that ensued. The Japanese government was particularly ill-equipped to resolve the then unravelling nuclear crisis that would continue for several months later and which, as a result of radioactive contamination found in the soil, water and food supplies of nearby prefectures, would have harmful, long-term effects on both the afflicted population and the surrounding environment.

With human activity pinpointed as a major factor behind the rather ‘unnatural’ occurrences of natural disasters today, this works to underscore a latent nexus between environmental change and extreme weather events, as well as the interrelatedness of human beings to the natural environment. As indigenous ecosystems are rapidly encroached upon by thriving human settlements, not only has social development in the form of skyscrapers, complex infrastructural networks (e.g. highways), and expanding cities with growing population density come at the

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694 In addition, disasters can be classified according to their intensity or magnitude, as well as the speed of their onset, among other measures. Unlike sudden-onset disasters like earthquakes or tsunamis, slow-onset disasters such as floods, drought and desertification can take time to develop over a period of months.

695 Although those living near to the Fukushima nuclear complex were soon evacuated, government mishandling of the situation, combined with a lack of transparency in its actions, still managed to drastically frustrate relief provision and mitigation efforts.
detriment of the ‘natural barriers’ provided by forests, open fields, wetlands, and crisscrossing canals which serve to regulate environmental processes, but recent studies have also shed light on possible causal connections between anthropogenic climate change and the onset of weather extremes. As posited in a special report by the IPCC released in late 2011 on ‘Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation’, global warming has now been scientifically linked to the amplified frequency and/or magnitude of natural calamities, which range from deadly heat waves that have swept over Europe in recent years to snow storms, cyclones, droughts, as well as tropical monsoon and storm surges from rising seas levels that have affected many parts of East Asia. And according to the report, this is a trend ‘very likely’ (i.e. at least a 90 percent probability) to worsen over time, posing a sizeable threat to local communities and livelihoods that could subsequently be forced to evacuate or, in more extreme scenarios, to relocate permanently. Climate change, in this sense, clearly emerges as a key variable driving the advent of disasters and, by extension, the exigent need for collective action to mitigate underlying risk factors.

Different regions, however, will be susceptible to different types of disasters and to varying degrees of intensity, with certain areas in the developing world being especially at risk from such climatic variations due to their geographical topography, limited economic resilience, as well as the lack of disaster preparedness of existing infrastructure and governance structures. In the Asian region alone, it is predicted that South and Southeast Asia will witness a two-fold increase in the regularity of heavy precipitation, whilst strong rainfalls associated with tropical cyclones are also predicted to increase with global warming. At the same time, in East Asia severe heat waves will likely become a more ‘normal’ occurrence, as temperature rise in the region could potentially peak at around 2.0 degrees above the base-line year by 2050 and possibly around 4.0 degrees by the end of the century. This is, of course, not to

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697 That said, limitations in data availability and difficulties in discerning statistically significant trends from relatively small datasets still allow for some uncertainties in these scientific forecasts. The report was, for instance, hesitant to attribute the frequency of acute floods directly to patterns of greater precipitation.

mention the recurrence of massive earthquakes which have led to much more devastation in the contemporary period. Although most accounts of earthquake disasters focus on the man-made factors (e.g. buildings or dams built on fault lines) responsible for exacerbating the situation, preliminary scientific studies have now suggested possible correlations between climate change and earthquakes. While this causal link is by no means a definite one, scientists are nevertheless beginning to acknowledge how long-term climate change – or changes in climate patterns over several millennia – has the potential to modify the motion of the earth’s tectonic plates in continuous feedback mechanisms, where certain geologic processes at plate margins can likewise work conversely to influence climate dynamics.699

Dealing with recurring disasters, as such, requires building adaptive capacities and promoting preparedness at multiple levels to reduce the likelihood of social vulnerabilities and ecological hazards from escalating into fully-fledged cataclysms. Common measures proposed to achieve this end can range from raising public awareness through community participation and education; implementing rigorous environmental protection, land-use planning and poverty eradication schemes; developing infrastructure to enhance early warning systems and emergency preparedness for efficient response and recovery; to mainstreaming adaptation strategies into existing institutional and legal frameworks to ensure the heightened policy visibility of these issues.700 Learning from indigenous knowledge on environmental sustainability and adaptation has, in particular, been recognised as integral to successful disaster management strategies, as it works to complement the

http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gnFfFmSa8KzeJhDWMkLUjl5zpSw?docId=CNG.c770bd78ee6f2e104d86c0139d85cd9e.151 (accessed 26 November 2011).


700 These are identified under the main priorities for action outlined by the Hyogo Framework. See ISDR, ‘Hyogo Framework Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters’, extract from the final report of the World Conference on Disaster Reduction (UN Doc. A/CONF.205/6), pp. 2-6.
technical understanding gained from scientific research with practical strategies, and thereby help to translate the former into action on the ground.\textsuperscript{701}

\textit{Humanising natural disasters: evolution of a global regime}

Aside from their unprecedented scale and severity, another noteworthy trait of modern-day disasters lies with their transnational dimension. Disasters can – and often do – have ramifications that reach beyond the afflicted society to affect other communities, especially those in neighbouring countries, or even the international community more broadly. In most cases, the occurrence of large-scale disasters will be found to have as profound an effect on the national economy as on the global economy. It is, for instance, worth recalling again how the explosions at the Fukushima nuclear complex following the Tōhoku tsunami quickly fuelled fears among Japan’s neighbours of radioactive contamination in Japanese food imports, and how Thailand’s floods, having inundated large swathes of croplands and industrial complexes, culminated in what commentators dubbed as an impending global rice shortage and a major blow to the world’s technology supply chain. By the same token, some reports have warned how chronic droughts and floods stemming from climate change within East Asia have already taken a considerable toll on the region’s agricultural output and food security – a trend which, if left unabated, has the potential to produce serious food shortages within and beyond the region.

The 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action on disaster governance has precipitated the emergence of international norms that recognise the ‘human’ face of natural disasters, and the corresponding need for more potent, people-centred understandings of state responsibilities in disaster events. At the global level, disaster governance has succeeded in drawing attention to the idea of responsibility as a value-laden normative concept. Viewed in this light, natural calamities serve as apt reminders of both the deepening ties of ecological interdependence between states, as well as the complex webs of responsibility that have developed between states and between peoples as a result.

This is not to suggest, however, that the broader notion of states having a moral obligation to respond to those in need is an entirely modern artefact. For like most of

the ideas explored in this thesis, the conception of a collective responsibility to others also has its own historical precedents. Founded upon visions of a shared humanity, it is an idea that has been deeply rooted in many of the world’s religions, and one which has long been at the crux of the humanitarian ideal, of which empathy, compassion and duty are identified as integral components. At least since the late eighteenth century, this sentiment was prominently mirrored in the writings of such influential thinkers as the legal philosopher Emer de Vattel. Often described as the ‘father of modern international law’, de Vattel expressed this notion well in the following oft-quoted passage taken from his canonical work *Le Droit des Gens*:

> Each state owed to every other State all that it owes to itself, as far as the other is in actual need of its help...when the occasion arises, every Nation should give its aid to further the advancement of other Nations and save them from disaster and ruin, so far as it can do so without running too great a risk...if a Nation is suffering from famine, all those who have provisions to spare should assist in its need, without, however, exposing themselves to scarcity...To give assistance in such dire straits is so instinctive an act of humanity that hardly any civilized Nation is to be found which would refuse absolutely to do so...Whatever be the calamity affecting a Nation, the same help is due to it.\(^{702}\)

For Vattel, the obligation to assist amounts to a binding responsibility imposed unto states by virtue of their social bonds. Prominent here are both concepts of ‘moral reciprocity’\(^{703}\) and legitimacy. Together with responsibility, these concepts form the foundation of global disaster governance which works to inform how countries ought to react and behave towards one another in times of dire need.\(^{704}\) From this perspective, responsible behaviour coloured by ‘bounded altruism’ (i.e. striving to help others but not to the extent of risking one’s own well-being) becomes a signifier of the ‘civilised’ nation, while concomitantly serving as the basis for interstate cooperation.

By the same token, the conviction that one has a moral imperative to extend care to those in need has also constituted the *raison d’être* of charitable and

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\(^{703}\) Many thanks to Dr. Luigi Tomba for suggesting this phrase to me.

\(^{704}\) Needless to say, this observation is closely modeled on the global governance triptych forwarded in the first chapter.
humanitarian organisations like the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, ever since the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) by Henri Dunant in 1863. Despite extolling the principles of neutrality and impartiality as two of the seven ‘Fundamental Principles’ informing its code of conduct, the designated task of the Red Cross was to be anything but ‘neutral’ and ‘impartial’ to human suffering. Having witnessed the social devastation in the aftermath of the 1859 Battle of Solferino, Dunant pushed for the creation of a voluntary relief agency to aid those injured during armed conflict, irrespective of their socio-economic or political background. Significantly, his efforts would not only empower the ICRC through its mandate of supplementing the government’s role in safeguarding human welfare, but his ideas would further serve as the basis for the First Geneva Convention adopted in 1864, which laid the groundwork for the substantial corpus of international humanitarian norms in existence today.

And so the first organised attempt at realising humanitarian assistance and the protection of vulnerable peoples was carried out with war as its backdrop. Even though this specific instance relates more to the issue of *jus in bello*, it remains instructive in terms of how this particular conception of a common responsibility was diffused at the international level, and how it gained practical nuances in the process. The introduction of civil society actors was clearly central to the organisation and effectiveness of aid provision, whilst strict adherence to the principles of neutrality and impartiality was perceived to be requisites for reaffirming the ‘universality’ of humanitarian efforts, as based on the understanding that one’s responsibility should be ideally directed towards humanity as a whole.

Civil society movements and non-state actors also played a key role in thrusting disaster relief onto the international agenda as security priorities demanding urgent attention. It was at the Second International Red Cross Conference held in 1869 that the mandate of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies was formally expanded to encompass the provision of assistance to those afflicted by disasters during peacetime as well, with members encouraged to build on the experience of providing humanitarian assistance in non-conflict situations as a means to enhance

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705 The other five principles are: humanity, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality.
706 The convention was originally signed by the representatives of twelve states and kingdoms comprised of: Baden, Belgium, Denmark, France, Hesse, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Prussia, Switzerland, Spain, and Württemberg.
their preparedness in the event of actual armed conflict. Needless to say, this was a major step forward. Disasters were now positioned on the same level of importance as wars, with the onus of responsibility apportioned to the state as well as other relevant actors to orchestrate immediate responses for when such calamities eventuated.

Yet it would only be at the turn of the nineteenth century that international disaster relief began to gain much greater prominence within the spheres of international law and global governance. Two important events marking this development were the creation of the League of Red Cross Societies in 1919 (renamed as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in 1991), and the formation of the International Relief Union (IRU) later in 1932 under the auspices of the 1927 ‘Convention Establishing an International Relief Union’. Particularly worth considering is the case of the IRU, whose task it was to broaden the scope of humanitarian operations and deepen cooperation between the Red Cross and the League of Nations in coordinating relief and assistance. Financial difficulties and insufficient scientific knowledge to prepare for disaster relief, however, soon coalesced with lingering suspicions over the political implications of receiving and giving assistance, ultimately contributing to the organisation’s repeated failures in orchestrating immediate relief. As was apparent from the Indian government’s refusal to accept direct assistance from the IRU in spite of its acceptance of that channelled through the Red Cross, fears over there being ‘political strings’ attached to the relief provided by states were among the most prominent issues featuring in the considerations of the IRU’s member-states, having merged with traditional sovereignty concerns. What this effectively prompted were unresolved questions regarding the degree to which the provision of humanitarian aid to afflicted states amounted to an act of interference in the internal affairs of another country.

Its eventual demise notwithstanding, the IRU in its brief existence did manage to underscore how imperative international cooperation was to effective disaster governance. And though questions surrounding the politicised trappings of disaster relief would continue to pose as recurring impediments to the development of comprehensive regulatory mechanisms and standards for overseeing the various aspects of international humanitarian assistance, intensified efforts have been made to

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create frameworks for global action which have, in more contemporary times, been supplemented by a considerable body of UN resolutions and multilateral agreements committing the world community to preventing and mitigating natural disasters. In fact, with the 6.9-magnitude Spitak Earthquake that struck the Armenian town of Spitak on 7 December 1988, the challenges presented by natural disasters became all the more 'internationalised'. The degree of devastation suffered by the Armenian people had alerted the international community to the urgent need to improve existing institutional arrangements facilitating relief coordination on a global scale – a point which would feature prominently as one of the main objectives stressed in UN resolution 43/131, which was circulated immediately after the earthquake. Humanitarian actors were not simply urged to abide by the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality, but were also requested to collaborate closely with pre-existing UN instruments for coordinating international disaster relief.709

Soon after, these efforts aimed at promoting international cooperation in disaster prevention and reduction were further solidified with the establishment of the UN 'International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction' (IDDR) in January 1990.710 Aimed at increasing awareness on the preventability of natural disasters and spotlighting the specific responsibilities to be shouldered by both state and non-state members of the international community, the IDDR notably afforded importance to environmental protection for the implementation of effective disaster mitigation strategies.711 Significantly, this served as an impetus for a gradual shift from an emphasis on relief to a focus on prevention. Consistent with the objectives articulated in the 1994 Yokohama Strategy for a Safer World, governments were now being sensitised to the necessity of encouraging sustainable development practices for the

709 See UN Resolution 43/131 on ‘Humanitarian assistance to victims of natural disasters and similar emergency situations’, 75th Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly (8 December 1988). It does deserve note, however, that the terms of this resolution was made in accordance with an earlier UN resolution promulgated in 1987, which similarly recognised ‘the responsibility of the United Nations system for promoting international co-operation in the study of natural disasters of geophysical origin and in the development of techniques to mitigate risks arising therefrom, as well as for co-ordinating disaster relief, preparedness and prevention, including prediction and early warning’. See UN Resolution 42/169 on the ‘International decade for natural disaster reduction’ of the Forty-second Session of the General Assembly (11 December 1987).

710 The decade was set to last from 1990 until 1999. Every second Wednesday of October was also officially designated as the ‘International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction’. In 2009, the date was changed to 13 October instead and was renamed as the ‘International Day for Disaster Reduction’.

711 Up until then, attention had been mainly directed to the disaster relief phase, with the humanitarian imperatives of disaster governance being of greatest concern. See UN Resolution 44/236 on the ‘International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction’, Forty-fourth Session of the General Assembly (22 December 1989).
sake of mainstreaming risk reduction, disaster preparedness and community resilience in national policies – an awareness that was subsequently reinforced by the establishment of the IDDR’s successor, the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, in 1999, which would become the impetus behind the 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action.\textsuperscript{712}

Notably, it was around the same time as the Hyogo Framework that the idea of a ‘responsibility to protect’ was first formally articulated at the 2005 World Summit. Since then, heated debates have mainly centred on the principle’s operational scope. Originally devised with ‘genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity’ in mind,\textsuperscript{713} some commentators have now questioned the concept’s utility in view of its neglect of other circumstances where lives are equally in imminent jeopardy. To critics of the principle’s current formulation, the case of Cyclone Nargis-stricken Myanmar, which had been marked by government intransigence, was one where the R2P principle should have been applied, but was not, ultimately to the detriment of the country’s citizens.\textsuperscript{714} Resonating with these sentiments, a recent UN report has suggested how ‘the protection of persons [in disaster situations] may be located within contemporary reflection on an emerging principle entailing the responsibility to protect’. It is proposed here that the idea of R2P be progressively expanded to encompass state obligations to ‘prevent, react and rebuild’ as well, paralleling the phases of a disaster event and its aftermath.\textsuperscript{715} In this regard, the responsibility to protect becomes tantamount to a responsibility to assist and to prevent, as states are tasked with averting their citizens from harmful hazards.\textsuperscript{716}

I would contend that this notion can likewise be extended to cover the challenge of governing nature. Considering the interrelatedness of human and ecological security concerns, the idea of R2P fits logically with the need to protect peoples as well as the environment within a disaster context. Even the UN’s special report on the


\textsuperscript{713}See Stanley Foundation, \textit{Actualizing the Responsibility to Protect}, Forty-third Conference on the United Nations of the Next Decade (June 2008).


\textsuperscript{716}Protection of persons in the event of disasters, para. 24.
protection of persons in disaster events has recognised how the protection regime can be justifiably employed in relation to the protection of property and the environment, effectively harking back to the inherent connection between humans and their surrounding environment, not to mention the ecologically-induced causes of most disasters seen today.\textsuperscript{717}

To be sure, expanding R2P remains a highly problematic task. Applying the concept to the protection of peoples and the environment in disaster events would undeniably constitute a considerable deviation from the idea’s original purpose. And as adamantly maintained by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, ‘Extending the principle to cover other calamities, such as HIV/AIDS, climate change or response to natural disasters, would undermine the 2005 consensus and stretch the concept beyond recognition or operational utility’.\textsuperscript{718} But putting aside questions of ‘operational utility’ for now, I would still contend that the responsibility to protect can be justifiably employed in relation to disaster governance, at least in conceptual terms. It appeals directly to the broader need for concerted action on the part of affected states and the international community as a whole, without altering the understanding that the primary onus of responsibility still falls on the affected state itself. Accordingly, the political utility of doing so lies in how it can help to sharpen focus on the rights (i.e. the right to request and receive assistance) and responsibilities (i.e. the duty to offer and provide assistance) of stakeholders, and by implication, strengthen the rights-based obligations that states have toward disaster victims and those vulnerable within and beyond their borders.

\textit{The 'responsibility-politics' of disaster governance}

Reflecting the normative contestation derivative of the politics of responsibility, debates surrounding the application of the responsibility to protect principle to disaster contexts also raises longstanding questions about whether ‘helping others’ amounts to an act of charity, or is based instead on a conception of duty. Given that a comprehensive legal regime to regulate the provision of international disaster assistance is not yet in existence, existing policy frameworks are better characterised

\textsuperscript{717} Preliminary report on the protection of persons in the event of disasters, para. 53.

as 'soft law' (i.e. non-legally binding) rather than 'hard law' provisions, a fact which undoubtedly raises a number of operational challenges. As aptly pointed out by Michael Walzer,

We think of humanitarian aid...first of all as a form of philanthropy...an act of international benevolence. But there is a puzzle here, for helping people in desperate need is something that we ought to do; it would be wrong not to do it – in which case it is more like justice than benevolence...international humanitarianism seems more like duty than kindness, or maybe it is a combination: two in one, a gift that we have to give.

The answer Walzer provides us is that the provision of assistance to distant others constitutes an act of 'obligatory charity',\(^{719}\) a conception which clearly resonates with the prevailing climate of ideas (ever since the late nineteenth century) where states and the international community at large are deemed to have an obligation to help others in the spirit of humanitarianism and moral reciprocity (i.e. helping others as you would have them help you), as opposed to merely being legally compelled to do so. I would, nevertheless, argue that it is possible to make certain distinctions between charity on the one hand, and duty on the other. Bearing in mind the context at hand, 'charity' can be associated with the act of voluntary giving on the part of individuals within a society or civil society organisations, whereas 'duty' (like the idea of responsibility) moves beyond a spirit of voluntarism to impel actors to act on shared expectations by virtue of a normative sense of 'compelling necessity'.

Attributable to the increased prevalence of international norms and values dictating how countries ought to behave in relation to the onset of disasters, these bonds of obligation are arguably more potent at the interstate level than at the domestic level. In this regard, state participation in disaster relief would be better depicted as a fulfilment of expected duties, rather than an act of charity, given how they are bounded by crisscrossing webs of interdependence that necessarily oblige them to contribute to alleviating the suffering of their own citizens as well as those of distressed strangers. An illustration of this is the 1998 Tampere Convention on the Provision of Telecommunication Resources for Disaster Mitigation and Relief Operations, where signatory states are required to respond to assistance request and

\(^{719}\) Michael Walzer, 'On Humanitarianism: Is Helping Others Charity, or Duty, or Both?', *Foreign Affairs* 90:4 (July/August 2011), pp. 69-70.
indicate 'whether it will render the assistance requested, directly or otherwise, and the scope of, and terms, conditions, restrictions and cost, if any, applicable to such assistance'.

Here, the role of the state proves to be an exceedingly important one. While the myriad challenges posed by disasters might have led some to bemoan the inadequacies of states to deal with such problems which are, at once, localised and internationalised, the state remains a key conduit of change. It acts, in essence, as a link connecting the fulfilment of global commitments to the mobilisation of local action. This, of course, accords with existing international legal frameworks on the protection of persons in the event of disasters, whereby the primary responsibility for dealing with natural calamities and relieving human suffering rests with the state itself. Similar to the conditions attached to offering humanitarian assistance and intervention in other contexts, the provision of international disaster relief is consequently predicated upon the receipt of formal consent or a request from the affected state (this condition is especially pertinent given how provider states usually offer to send their relief teams into afflicted areas within the host state). As has been officially articulated by the United Nations ever since the early 1970s,

While a Government should be able to count on the help of the international community, provided through Governments, the League of Red Cross Societies and other voluntary agencies or the United Nations organizations, in its preparations against or its efforts to meet such emergencies, the primary responsibility for protecting the life, health and property of people within its frontiers and for maintaining the essential public services rests with that Government.

The passage goes on to clarify how 'international assistance can only supplement, and will depend very largely for its effectiveness on, the efforts of the country itself through its Government or through such organizations as its national Red Cross society'. Grounded in a more 'positive and affirmative' interpretation of 'sovereignty as responsibility', this conception of a state's responsibility to its

\[720\] Tampere Convention (18 June 1998), art. 4(3), cited in Protection of persons in the event of disasters; para. 61.

\[721\] 'Assistance in Cases of Natural Disaster', Comprehensive Report of the Secretary-General, UN Doc. E/4994 (15 May 1971), para. 100.

\[722\] 'Assistance in Cases of Natural Disaster', para. 100.

\[723\] 'Secretary-General Defends, Clarifies 'Responsibility to Protect'.

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people also serves as the underlying rationale behind the concept of R2P itself. Put bluntly, it spells out the tacit understanding that before expecting help from others, one needs to first help oneself. As will become clearer as this chapter progresses, conceptions of responsibility, especially when it comes to natural disasters, tend to be founded upon a mixture of communitarian and cosmopolitan tendencies that emanate in concentric circles from one’s home, one’s society, one’s country to that of others. However, whilst our foremost responsibility might be to our closest peers, the fact that we are ‘global citizens’ bonded by a common humanity invariably necessitates us to act in response to the plight of not-so-distant others.

In keeping with the various UN resolutions mentioned earlier, states’ responsibility to mitigating disasters and ameliorating suffering can, therefore, be seen to translate more broadly into a ‘duty to cooperate’, as founded upon an evolving collective conscience imbued by sentiments of global solidarity. Based on this view, necessarily complementing cooperation among states is cooperation between states and other non-state actors (i.e. international, regional and civil society organisations). For it is from the crisscrossing networks forged from such interactions that a global partnership is at all possible – the same partnership deemed to be so vital to efforts at both governing nature and the globe.

It is, nevertheless, important that we do not lose sight of some of the major obstacles that continue to hinder the effectiveness of extant disaster governance arrangements. Four stand out in particular. First, aside from the contestation surrounding the ‘responsibility to protect’ principle, the politicisation of disaster relief has emerged as a major concern in recent years. Adherence to the inviolability of sovereignty under certain circumstances can be seen as a reflection of this. Although the principle of sovereignty epitomises the existence of a much-needed global consensus, serving to enforce the primary responsibility of states to respond promptly to disasters occurring within their respective territories, and helping also to safeguard the territorial integrity of vulnerable states (that is, preventing humanitarian assistance from becoming a mere ruse for political interference), it can nonetheless be

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724 This notion is originally spelled out in UN Resolution 53/101, which expressed it as follows: ‘States have the duty to cooperate with one another, irrespective of the differences in their political, economic and social systems, in the various spheres of international relations, in order to maintain international peace and security and to promote international economic stability and progress, the general welfare of nations and international cooperation free from discrimination based on such differences’. See UN Resolution 53/101 on ‘Principles and guidelines for international negotiations’, Report of the Sixth Committee of the General Assembly, Fifty-third Session, UN Doc. A/RES/53/101 (20 January 1999).
manipulated to impose sizeable limitations on the international community’s mandate to provide assistance to affected states. As was evident from the international outrage that surfaced with the Burmese military regime’s poor handling of the catastrophic aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, and the ensuing pressure placed on China and India to persuade the junta into fully opening the country to international relief assistance, the conditions of sovereignty served as a convenient excuse for the Burmese government not to fulfil its obligations to its people, with the very right to receive and refuse aid becoming politicised and eventually turned into a double-edged sword.

This further casts a doubtful light on the other key principles of neutrality and impartiality. Identified by both the UN and the IFRC as fundamental precepts to which humanitarian actors must adhere, these two principles supposedly form the basis for validating the legitimacy of international relief operations. However, fulfilling these operative values can prove to be fairly problematic in practice. Like other complex humanitarian emergencies, natural disasters take place in social settings laden with moral, cultural and political significations. Particularly with states as the primary agents of disaster governance, this can lead to a paradoxical situation where fault lines within a society or those existing between countries are exposed and exacerbated (as evinced from the political debacle that surfaced with the Bush Administration’s mishandling of Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath or the contention surrounding post-Yushu Earthquake reconstruction efforts), just as state-to-society and interstate ties are conversely reinforced through displays of solidarity, with international disaster cooperation and the provision of assistance becoming diplomatic tools that can help to enhance a state’s soft power appeal.

Second, policy gaps remain in terms of the degree of recognition formally afforded to the interconnections between environmental protection and disaster governance in national disaster strategies. Of note is how this is in spite of growing awareness at the international level of this linkage. In fact, to foster ecological resilience and manage climate adaptation, the 2005 Hyogo Framework called not only for the adoption of a more people-centred approach in socio-economic development practices to aid in risk reduction, but also highlighted responsible environmental stewardship as a key area of cooperation that can contribute to the enhancement of global, national and local capabilities. Apart from implementing ‘structural’ measures (i.e. physical constructions and infrastructure) to guard against hazards and
vulnerabilities, ‘non-structural’ measures such as building multi-stakeholder partnerships at all levels and stimulating dialogue between a diverse cast of stakeholders were likewise viewed as essential to the institutionalisation of an integrated model for the management of natural resources and fragile ecosystems and, ultimately, to disaster risk reduction.\textsuperscript{725}

Notably, the importance of responsible environmental management to disaster governance, and vice versa, were similarly underscored in both the UN Millennium Declaration, where, under the sections on ‘protecting our common environment’ and ‘protecting the vulnerable’, states pledged to ‘intensify cooperation to reduce the number and effects of natural and man-made disasters’ and to give assistance and protection to affected civilian populations,\textsuperscript{726} as well as the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, whose Principle 18 required states to ‘immediately notify other States of any natural disasters or other emergencies that are likely to produce sudden harmful effects on the environment of those States. \textit{Every effort shall be made by the international community to help States so afflicted}'.\textsuperscript{727} The 2002 Johannesburg Plan of Implementation adopted at the World Summit on Sustainable Development went on to develop this linkage further, with commitments relating to disaster and vulnerability reduction through the protection of the ‘natural resource base of economic and social development’ having been incorporated as ‘essential elements of a safer world in the twenty-first century’.\textsuperscript{728} A year later, the theme of disaster management and vulnerability was identified as one of the main issue-areas in the Eleventh Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), and was to be reviewed in the CSD’s fifth cycle (2014-2015) as part of its Multi-Year Programme of Work.\textsuperscript{729} However, as stated above, these international developments have yet to be sufficiently transposed to the national and local spheres. As the next section explains, even with emerging shifts in attitude, this has remained largely the case for China as well.

\textsuperscript{728} ’Protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development’, in Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002), para. 37.
\textsuperscript{729} For more on the CSD Multi-Year Programme of Work, see the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs’ official website for the Division for Sustainable Development at: http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/csd/csd_multyearprogwork.shtml#2014 (accessed 22 December 2011).
Third, translating rhetorical commitments to disaster prevention and reduction into actual policy action remains yet another taxing challenge. Reminiscent of the problems encountered in attempts to apply an extended version of the R2P concept to disaster governance, deficits in implementation stemming from the lack of adequate provisions and enforcement mechanisms at the global and national levels have continued to pose considerable impediments to the realisation of state responsibilities and the overall effectiveness of disaster management approaches. As previously mentioned, there has yet to be a comprehensive, legally-binding framework to oversee all aspects of disaster management at the international level – a fact which makes it difficult to set definite standards and codes of conduct for actualising emerging norms on global disaster governance.

In institutionalising disaster management at the national level, problems in implementation have likewise persisted, despite the stronger mandate of national disaster agencies and the greater coverage that relevant regulatory frameworks and policy initiatives have in most vulnerable countries. These problems are particularly endemic to developing states (which also happen to be among the most disaster-prone), with the lack of preparedness frequently to blame for unnecessary loss of life and damage to property and the environment. Even in countries like the Philippines and Indonesia that generally exhibit a high level of awareness, conflicts of interest between state actors and civil society in the funding and provision of relief continue to act as significant obstacles, having also combined with structural inadequacies to render the public infrastructure of these countries ill-equipped to deal with the sudden onset of weather extremes. And as seen from the case of Typhoon Ketsana that hit the island of Luzon in 2009, to promote awareness campaigns to heighten disaster preparedness among communities only once the disaster has already struck is simply not enough. What is needed here is a shift away from the traditional focus on providing relief to one that emphasises the importance of DRRM strategies.

Finally, what these various issues underscore is the broader contestation of humanitarian space. Resonating with the underlying politics of responsibility, this process of contestation has primarily centred on defining the content and scope of an agent’s duties and obligations, as well as designating who exactly is to be held responsible and to whom. Of course, this has led definitions and designations of responsibility within the realm of global disaster governance to remain mired in ambiguity, which in turn accounts for the weak regulatory mechanisms in place to
monitor disaster relief and assistance. In part, the existence of a multiplicity of actors in disaster management, together with the localised nature of disaster events (i.e. the fact that they take place within a particular country and, hence, do not always warrant concerted international action), constitute important factors influencing the process of contestation. It certainly goes without saying that for DRRM measures to be effective and enforceable on a global scale, this would entail compliance from a diverse cast of actors, most of whom are inclined to harbour contending – if not conflicting – interests. The fact that tension continues to underlie the interactions between government agencies and civil society actors in countries like Japan, for instance, where the legal mandate of humanitarian organisations remain subject to certain limitations imposed by the Japanese government speaks to this reality.\footnote{This also applies to the countries which these organisations can provide material aid, and is especially the case for humanitarian organisations that are receiving financial or institutional support from the Japanese government. The provision of (unofficial) assistance to North Korea, for instance, is generally discouraged and treated with official apprehension. Clearly, this goes against the principles of impartiality, neutrality and universality in the provision of humanitarian aid. Yukie Osa, ‘Japanese Humanitarian Perspectives’, paper presented at the ‘Cultures of Humanitarianism’ workshop, The Australian National University, Canberra, 10 August 2011.} By the same token, ongoing debates over the extent to which conceptions of a state’s responsibility to other states differ from those arising between states and the ultimate beneficiaries of assistance – that is, the people in need of protection – further exemplify the difficulties involved in assigning duties and obligations to relevant actors.\footnote{Indeed, recent calls for the application of a people-centred approach to disaster governance – based on the understanding that vulnerable and/or affected peoples should logically be the ultimate recipients of relief and assistance – have been made precisely in response to the conventionally state-centric nature of existing institutional arrangements.}

To this effect, the process of demonstrating responsibility has also proven to be riddled by practical and conceptual difficulties. Here, too, the lack of a comprehensive framework for action renders the process of assessing whether the actions of a humanitarian agent can be considered satisfactorily effective and ‘legitimate’ (i.e. internationally acceptable) highly problematic. This is additionally complicated by the purported politicisation of humanitarian motives. As such, it is for these reasons that the politics of responsibility becomes a useful lens through which the politics of disaster management can be understood.

Having said this, there is arguably a degree of ‘responsibility acceptance’ to be found among states when it comes to disaster governance – or to be more precise, to the notion that states have a basic duty to assist all peoples severely affected by natural catastrophes. Although one still needs to be mindful of the fact that this
acceptance of responsibility continues to be offset by contestation on the manner in which such assistance is to be provided in the first place, it is fair to say that the majority of countries have, at least in rhetoric, ascribed to this sense of responsibility. As elaborated in the ensuing section, even the People’s Republic has now come to garner an international reputation as a major provider of relief and assistance to its disaster-stricken neighbours, with this newfound role simultaneously gaining important strategic value in relation to China’s soft power diplomacy.

‘Yiwan younan, bawan zhiyuan!’ Chinese perspectives on disaster governance

Being among the most disaster-prone countries in the world, China is well-acquainted to the devastation wreaked by natural catastrophes. In fact, with the exception of volcanic activity, the country experiences almost every known type of natural disaster, ranging from meteorological, geological and marine disasters to earthquakes and forest fires. The figures speak for themselves. Roughly one-seventh of the Chinese population is affected by disasters annually, while more than 70 percent of Chinese cities and 50 percent of the population are located in areas vulnerable to serious disaster hazards. In economic terms, Fan Yida, chief engineer with the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), has estimated that, for the past twenty years, the onset of natural calamities has cost 2.38 percent of China’s GDP on average. In human terms, by the first half of 2010 alone, over 3,500 people were killed by a cascade of natural hazards, including earthquakes, acute floods, landslides, and snowstorms, with at least 6.44 million people forced to migrate or evacuate their homes. More recently, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) has revealed even more startling statistics: only in the first quarter of 2011 alone, disasters affected 170 million people across China, resulting in direct economic losses worth nearly US$8 billion. This is not to mention the structural damage inflicted onto the

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country’s infrastructure and croplands, or the psychological toll suffered by the Chinese public after each catastrophe.

The Chinese government clearly has a strong incentive and, indeed, an exigent responsibility, to improve its disaster management strategies. In recent times, it has become increasingly cognisant of how its political legitimacy, together with the stability of Chinese society, is predicated on the effectiveness of disaster responses and reduction efforts. Drawing on international developments in this area, the Chinese leadership is now in the process of intensifying efforts at disaster governance, designing rapid response strategies for relief assistance and investing extensively in the institutionalisation of comprehensive coping mechanisms to enhance disaster preparedness. Within a five-year period (from 2005 until 2010), the central government reportedly allocated over US$700 million of annual relief funds, whilst more than thirty DRRM-related laws and regulations have been issued since the promulgation of the country’s first specialised disaster plan in 1998,\(^{733}\) including the 11\(^{th}\) Five-Year Plan on Comprehensive Disaster Reduction released in 2007.

Needless to say, the primary role of the state in managing natural disasters clearly resonates with historical Chinese experiences. As elucidated in Chapter 3, such disasters have long held a prominent place in the course of modern Chinese history, such that it is possible to speak of a Chinese ‘culture of disaster’, where natural calamities have gained a dialogic dimension, acting as powerful agents of socio-cultural change.\(^{734}\) Interpreted as heavenly portents signalling the decline of a dynasty’s moral mandate, the onset of disasters never failed to pose onerous challenges that tested the political and ecological resilience of the Chinese state and its people.

One instructive example of this was the Great Tangshan Earthquake. In July 1976, an 8.3-magnitude earthquake struck the industrial city of Tangshan in Hebei Province, leading to record-high casualties. The earthquake itself was soon followed by an equally devastating 7.1-magnitude aftershock, with official estimates putting the

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\(^{733}\) The plan was officially known as the ‘Disaster Reduction Plan of the People’s Republic of China, 1998-2010’. See ‘Statement by the Chinese Delegation under the Theme on Strengthening Disaster Laws at the 31\(^{st}\) International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent [sic]’ (2 December 2011). [On-line] Available at: http://www.china-un.ch/eng/hom/t883877.htm (accessed 3 February 2012).

final death toll at around 240,000 to 250,000 people. Not surprisingly, the earthquake was viewed by the public as an omen prophesising drastic political change—a belief that was seemingly corroborated by Zhou Enlai’s death months earlier and the death of Chairman Mao himself two months after the earthquake in September. Yet, at the same time, the resulting destruction from the earthquake had also, in part, contributed to realigning the power configurations within the CCP itself. Just as the political authority of Mao’s chosen successor Hua Guofeng was bolstered thanks to his well-publicised visit to Tangshan to survey the actual extent of the devastation and to comfort victims, this would conversely signal the Gang of Four’s weakening hold on party and state affairs. The fact that early warnings for the earthquake were largely unheeded by the government, and official relief efforts were marked by slow response rates and frustrated by operational hindrances, only worked to further underscore the lack of preparedness, if not outright ineptitude, of a factionalised government.

In the contemporary era, how disaster crisis situations are managed continues to impinge directly on the perceived responsibilities of the Chinese state. Here, the idea of responsibility proves intrinsic to the very idea of humanitarianism, being grounded in a logic of appropriateness that compels actors to behave in accordance with the normative expectations attached to them. It is in this sense that political legitimacy comes to rest firmly with the Chinese government’s ability to meet human needs under crisis situations. The Sichuan Earthquake (also known in Chinese as ‘The Great Wenchuan Earthquake’ or Wenchuan dadizhen), which hit the country’s southwestern province of Sichuan on 12 May 2008, would pose as one of the most taxing tests of this capacity.

*Old Thinking, New Responsibilities? The case of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake*

The adage of ‘一方有难，八方支援’ (or ‘when disaster strikes, help [will] come from all quarters’) is one that has become popular in recent years, having been cited widely in the aftermath of the devastating 2008 Sichuan Earthquake. Regarded as China’s worst earthquake in 30 years (since the Tangshan Earthquake) and registering at a magnitude of 7.9 on the Richter scale, the disaster resulted in the deaths of nearly

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735 Other figures estimate the toll to be at approximately 750,000 people.
736 A more literal translation would be ‘[when] a thousand people experience hardship, eight thousand [more] will [be there to] offer help’. There are also alternative renditions of this adage, including the following which affixes the ensuing statement to the original axiom: ‘Disasters have no mercy, [but] people do’ (灾害无情，人有情).
90,000 people, leaving around 400,000 injured and five million homeless. Apart from human casualties, the catastrophe also had impacts on the surrounding environment, adversely affecting the region’s biodiversity, most notably the habitats of wild giant pandas located in the South Minshan region (adjacent to the earthquake’s epicenter) which were left considerably fragmented.\textsuperscript{737} Economically, the country sustained an estimated US$20 billion in direct financial losses, with the central government having to appropriate US$10 billion as post-disaster reconstruction funds.\textsuperscript{738} Material costs aside, however, the disaster was equally significant for its effect on the national psyche and the conceptual and policy changes it engendered.

Serving as a turning-point in how disasters are socially and politically framed in China, the Great Wenchuan Earthquake precipitated significant shifts in the PRC’s approach to disaster governance. In fact, it would be from this event that a stronger language of responsibility became prevalent in public and official discourses on disasters within China. Significantly, the event also brought to light how China’s disaster management strategies, together with its so-called disaster diplomacy, interact with evolving international norms. What we witnessed, in effect, was how the idea of a global responsibility to protect came to be grafted, albeit incrementally, onto preexisting Chinese conceptions of what constitutes ‘responsible’ behaviour in the realm of disaster governance.

With regard to the major conceptual shifts generated by the Sichuan Earthquake, five stand out. First, as reflected in the profound sense of national solidarity that emerged in the aftermath of the disaster, the destruction caused by the earthquake worked to visibly strengthen social and political ties of responsibility. Of course, the compassionate act of helping others is by no means a modern phenomenon, but is one which underlies a long tradition of ‘giving’ in Chinese society – a social value informed by both Buddhist and Christian understandings of charity. During the Great Famine of 1877-1878, for example, alongside the Qing state’s efforts at disaster relief, private citizens from the Jiangnan region (located to the south of the lower Yangzi River valley) were also engaged in humanitarian activism. Having resulted in the deaths of approximately 13 million people in North China, the drought-induced


famine notably laid the foundations for what is commonly regarded as the beginnings of organised charity relief in the late Qing dynasty. Spearheaded by Jiangnan’s gentry, these elite philanthropists helped in raising funds to relieve the suffering of their fellow ‘compatriots’, with some even travelling to the famine-struck northern provinces themselves to help distribute grain, rebuild schools, and bury the dead, among other altruistic activities.  

What was significant about the Sichuan Earthquake was how it awakened sentiments regarding a moral responsibility to assist disaster victims and ameliorate human suffering. According to Gu Qinghui, the Regional Disaster Management Delegate for the IFRC in East Asia, people were contributing to relief work not simply on the basis of charity, but more on the basis of a reciprocal duty to help others (i.e. as grounded in the notion that one day others might come to your aid in times of need as well). Images of parents weeping for their children buried under the ruins of collapsed school buildings, and of Chinese rescue workers carrying lifeless corpses amid piles of rubble and debris, brought the devastation into people’s homes, effectively turning the personal suffering of victims into a public affair. Indeed, the fact that the earthquake managed to trigger such a flood of donations and other forms of relief contributions from private individuals, businesses and NGOs within China, as well as from the international community, was unprecedented.

Second, and closely related to the above point, the Sichuan Earthquake serves as a telling instance of how natural disasters can have the effect of empowering civil society actors by virtue of the latter’s vital role in mobilising resources and coordinating local relief efforts. Jessica C. Teets has observed how active participation by Chinese civil society groups in disaster relief has enabled them ‘to

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739 In addition, historical records have documented how the Jiangnan region itself was soon flooded with disaster victims seeking refuge. According to one estimate, it was recorded that more than 200,000 victims were living in various towns and cities in Jiangnan by the end of 1876. Notably, in a display of solidarity, intermingled with a sense of moral responsibility, the then governor of Jiangsu province responded to this influx by ordering the establishment of factories outside Suzhou city to take in more disaster refugees and allotting daily rice and porridge rations to families commensurate with their respective sizes. The expectation, however, was not that these refugees should relocate permanently to Jiangnan, but that they should simply be ‘assigned rice and sent back to their hometowns’ once winter passed. Zhu Hu, ‘Jiangnan gentry’s responses to “The great famine in 1877-1878”: The famine relief in north Jiangsu’, *Frontiers of History in China* 3:4 (2008), pp. 615-616.

740 Interview with Gu Qinghui, IFRC Regional Delegation for East Asia, Beijing, China (13 December 2009).

741 It tends to be the case that such instances of social mobilisation occur as a direct reaction to the devastation precipitated by natural disasters, being unlikely to gain as much impetus when it comes to those caused by human error or misconduct.
build trust with local governments and citizens' to foster cross-cutting partnerships.\textsuperscript{742} On a deeper level, I would argue that these grassroots actors have also been central to processes of contestation, as they help to redefine state obligations to affected and vulnerable communities, and in so doing, emerge as an alternative locus of authority. As was evident in the wake of the Sichuan Earthquake, the grievances voiced by families whose children had been killed by poorly-built school buildings were key to pressuring the central government into taking action against those culpable for the construction of these buildings,\textsuperscript{743} and prompting the enforcement of building regulations as specified in the ‘Law on Precautions Against Earthquake and Relief of Disaster’.\textsuperscript{744}

Through their involvement in disaster governance, not only do these societal actors spotlight the socially and politically-derived causes of vulnerabilities, but their efforts in demanding a ‘right to competent government responses’\textsuperscript{745} have also helped to reinforce the overarching notion that the government has an absolute responsibility to protect peoples (if not the environment outright), reminiscent of the reinvented R2P discourses currently under debate in the global public sphere.\textsuperscript{746} Even the Chinese leadership has slowly come to recognise the necessity of integrating an inclusive, multi-stakeholder approach into existing disaster governance arrangements.

\textsuperscript{742} Jessica C. Teets, ‘Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction Efforts: The Emergence of Civil Society in China?’, \textit{The China Quarterly} 198 (2009), p. 331.

\textsuperscript{743} However, it deserves note that early treatment of this issue by the government was marked by a characteristic lack of transparency for fear of it stirring up social or political dissent at a time when instability was already rife. The detention of Sichuan Earthquake activist, Tan Zuoren, under subversion charges corroborates this (Tan was responsible for drawing public attention to the school collapses). See Sky Canaves, ‘China Sentences Earthquake Activist’, \textit{The Wall Street Journal} (10 February 2010). [On-line] Available at: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704820904575054824114074304.html (accessed 16 January 2011).

\textsuperscript{744} Largely in response to these grievances, the Chinese government has launched a three-year programme in 2009 that reportedly aims to monitor every school building for safety flaws, especially those in disaster-prone areas. This policy was further complemented by an amendment to the Law on Precautions Against Earthquake and Relief of Disaster, which required school buildings to be able to withstand at least 8-magnitude earthquakes.


\textsuperscript{746} Interestingly, assessing the government’s response to the Sichuan Earthquake, a veteran who was once dispatched to Tangshan after the destructive earthquake there made the following comment, ‘In 1976, the only thing the government offered the people was treatment for diarrhea...Little by little, things have gotten better’. Quoted in Howard W. French, ‘Chinese disaster relief proves swift, and inclusive’, \textit{The New York Times} (5 June 2008). [On-line] Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/05/world/asia/05iht-letter.1.13486359.html?_r=2 (accessed 15 September 2009).
According to its pioneering white paper on disaster relief and prevention, government agencies now attach ‘great importance to public participation in disaster prevention and reduction’.\(^{747}\) This, of course, falls in line with broader global trends, considering how the roots of the international disaster relief movement can be likewise traced back to the Red Cross, which constitutes an early example of a civil society organisation. It is through these deepening state-society partnerships and the formation of a broader volunteer base that the forging of deeper social bonds and stronger webs of responsibility is at all possible.

That said, this is not to suggest that the role played by the Chinese state has become any less important; even now it continues to act as the main arbiter of governance. In fact, this shift towards a stronger sense of social duty among the Chinese people supports the emergence of a more binding discourse centred on the official responsibilities held by both the central and local governments to enhancing disaster governance. In particular, with the implementation in September 2010 of a set of disaster relief regulations clarifying the expected duties of governments at all levels,\(^{748}\) this has worked to improve the efficiency and transparency of disaster-related work, as administrative bodies were required to establish a supervisory system to oversee operations and publicise all donation-related information. Also noteworthy was the release of the State Council’s inaugural white paper on ‘China’s Actions for Disaster Prevention and Reduction’ in May 2009 (marking the anniversary of the Sichuan Earthquake), which constituted a major step forward in terms of integrating formal structures of responsibility within existent disaster governance arrangements. Indicative of the Chinese leadership’s greater awareness of the pressing obligations it owes to its citizens, the white paper reaffirmed the government’s commitment to ‘always placing people first’, before proceeding to make the following remarks:

...the Chinese government has all along put the security of people’s lives and property on the top [sic] of its work, and has listed disaster prevention and reduction in its economic and social development plan as an important guarantee of sustainable development. In recent years, China has been comprehensively implementing the Scientific


Outlook on Development, further strengthened legislation as well as the building of systems and mechanisms on disaster prevention and reduction, committed to building on disaster-prevention capacities, encouraged public contribution, and actively participated in international cooperation in this respect [sic].

Of special interest is how this statement feeds, more broadly, into the third conceptual shift that became apparent during the Sichuan Earthquake, epitomised by the explicit appropriation of environmental concerns in official discourses on disaster governance. No longer viewed as unavoidable omens, natural disasters are now recognised as manifestations of a fragile environment and a changing climate. Attention, as such, has been reoriented to discourses stressing ‘disasters of nature’. Indeed, a striking feature of the rhetoric featured in the wake of the Sichuan Earthquake was its emphasis on the natural causes of the catastrophe. It is worth quoting President Hu Jintao here, when at a memorial service in the town of Yinxiu, he had pledged to intensify support for disaster prevention and reconstruction, as well as strive towards a ‘more harmonious relationship between man and nature’.

But while this seems to be an obvious connection, some commentators have questioned whether it could be seen as amounting to an attempt to downplay the man-made hazards (i.e. sub-standard buildings) responsible for exacerbating the severity of the earthquake as well. The purported presence of such political undertones notwithstanding, it is important that we do not hastily dismiss this emerging narrative, especially considering how it resonates closely with evolving international discourses that have similarly refocused attention on the ecological determinants of natural calamities. As evinced from the policy guidelines set out in the 2005 Hyogo

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751 Interview with Dr. Lei Zhang, School of Environmental Science, Renmin University, Beijing, China (15 December 2011). Interestingly, more recent scientific research has suggested how the Sichuan Earthquake could have been triggered in part by the Zipingpu Dam, a large-scale reservoir that was constructed just 500 metres away from the earthquake’s fault lines, having been located 5.5 kilometres from the quake’s epicentre. See Gautam Naik and Shai Oster, ‘Scientists Link China’s Dam to Earthquake, Renewing Debate’, The Wall Street Journal (6 February 2009). [On-line] Available at: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123391567210056475.html (accessed 11 February 2009).
Framework, particularly in light of the effects of climate change and the advent of extreme weather events, understanding the nexus between environmental protection and disaster management has proven to be necessary for a better appreciation of how disasters might be prevented, or at the very least, mitigated. As an increasing number of observers have warned, processes of ecological degradation can — and does — reduce the resilience of ecosystems, rendering them more susceptible to climate change and the increased risk of disasters. What is needed are initiatives focused on regulating these ecological services to enhance the adaptability of communities. As such, there appears to be sufficient reason to argue that this shift towards an environmentally-informed outlook has been equally inspired by emergent global norms on disaster governance.

Fourth, the experience garnered from the Sichuan Earthquake has further underscored the importance of mainstreaming preventative measures in approaches to disaster governance. It is conventionally held that disaster management consists of four main phases: prevention, preparation, response, and recovery/reconstruction. Accordingly, any ‘responsible’ model of disaster governance would have to address each of these phases. Although the Chinese government was praised by the international community for the speed and efficiency with which it responded to the Sichuan Earthquake, its disaster management strategies have, however, been criticised for their tendency to fixate on the response phase, often at the expense of disaster preparedness and the resilience of local communities. To use the apt words of Zhang Qingfeng and Melissa Howell Alipalo, ‘China does not prepare for climate-related disasters; it only reacts to them’.

Without a comprehensive national policy that obligates local authorities to proactively deal with natural hazards, China is likely to become more vulnerable to disaster occurrences. Crucially, this issue was highlighted as a major concern in a recent ADB study, which acknowledged that while the PRC had an agile disaster

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753 In other variations of these four phases, ‘prevention’ has been substituted by ‘mitigation’ or ‘reduction’. See Yajie Song, Youfei Zheng and Jian Li (eds), Urban Environmental Crisis Management (Beijing: Science Press, 2009), p. 57.


755 Zhang and Alipalo, ‘How to fight natural disasters’.

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response system, the lack of a comparably effective system of risk reduction had aggravated the severity of the disasters it experienced. The problem lies largely with the fact that even with the introduction of more inclusive and proactive governing arrangements, China’s method of managing disasters continues to be exercised in a top-down fashion, such that local governments often limit their responses until a state of emergency is officially declared.\footnote{The report came out in 2011 and was primarily concerned with China’s approach for drought management. Among the main problems identified with the system currently in place was the PRC’s lack of a separate disaster risk management agency.}

Nevertheless, this is not to detract from the strides China has taken to address this policy gap. The past few years have seen the PRC reinvigorating efforts at developing a more integrated approach to disaster management, with government funds increasingly channelled into initiatives aimed at building local capacities and improving risk assessment technologies (e.g. the use of satellite technology to monitor unusual geologic and meteorological changes). The development of early warning systems and encouragement of stakeholder participation through public awareness campaigns were also classified as priorities. Taken together, these measures are expected to help in facilitating relief operations, while also promising to reduce post-disaster recovery costs. Apparently this, again, accords with prevailing international discourses stressing the necessity of taking preventative action for the sake of minimising the structural and non-structural damages wrought by natural catastrophes.\footnote{One might even argue that the rationale behind this bears semblance to the precautionary principle as applied to environmental governance.}

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, the Sichuan Earthquake served as a critical turning-point in changing Chinese perceptions of its responsibilities to disaster governance at the international level. Although Chinese involvement in international disaster relief can be traced back to the 2003 Indian Ocean Tsunami and beyond, it is arguably from the post-2008 period that we see a strengthening of this role in the conduct of Chinese foreign policy.

As explained earlier, the traditional Chinese perspective on humanitarianism was one fundamentally ensconced in a communitarian outlook where one’s social and political responsibilities were seen to emanate outwards in concentric circles starting with one’s closest of kin and one’s country. In this regard, responses to the suffering of distant strangers beyond one’s country were made chiefly on the basis of those
others being identified as members of the same moral community. Without doubt, this process of inclusion and exclusion is an inherently politicised one, where allies are recognised as members of this community, whilst adversaries are excluded. Arguably, this mentality influenced Chinese foreign policy well into the late twentieth century, as was evident from the PRC’s staunch opposition against the deployment of UN humanitarian forces to Macedonia in 1999 as a result of the latter’s recognition of Taiwan’s sovereign status. From this perspective, the imperative to save strangers essentially depended on whether those ‘strangers’ were deemed to be of a similar ilk.

However, the outpour of sympathy and assistance from the international community in the wake of the Sichuan Earthquake served as a potent reminder of China’s status as a member of an evolving world society. Within a matter of days, the disaster was internationalised, as the extent of damages gained extensive coverage in world news media. Not only did this help to accelerate the speed of which international responses were mobilised, but images of the devastation also reinforced the underlying sentiment of a global responsibility to alleviate the suffering of the Chinese people.

Although there is a long history of European humanitarian relief to pre-1949 China, having started with the introduction of Christian missionaries in the early nineteenth century, relief to the People’s Republic has been much more limited. In fact, it was only in 1980 amid Deng Xiaoping’s reforms that the PRC first opened up to external assistance, notably inviting a team from the United Nations to observe disaster relief operations in the drought and flood-hit provinces of Hebei and Hubei. The Sichuan Earthquake marks the second occasion since 1949 where the Chinese government has formally accepted international assistance for the purposes of disaster relief, but constitutes the first instance in which the People’s Republic

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requested aid. This clearly constitutes an important step forward in terms of China’s socialisation into the global community. From the perspective of the Chinese individual, the fact that countries – ranging from the United States, Germany, Japan and South Korea to Australia, India, Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan – were voluntarily pledging millions in emergency relief funds and supplies, with a number also offering to send in rescue teams and provide technical assistance, amounted to a profound display of global solidarity.\(^{762}\) Mass donations received from private individuals, businesses and organisations from across the globe further added to this sense of ‘we-feeling’, exemplifying how transnational society-to-society relations can likewise contribute to deepening ties between states.\(^{763}\) As reflected in the words of Vice-Foreign Minister Wang Yi, commemorating the Chinese government’s receipt of financial contributions from the UN’s Central Emergency Response Fund,

Today is a special day in this [sic] history of China-UN relationship...The assistance contributed by the UN to the Chinese people represents the common aspiration of the international community and the people all over the world...Under the strong leadership of the CPC and the Chinese government, with the united


efforts of the Chinese people, and with the strong help from the international community, the Chinese government and people will be able to win the battle against the natural catastrophe and the Chinese nation will continue to march toward the goal of modernization.\textsuperscript{764}

Equally noteworthy was the highly-normative language used by state leaders in expressing their condolences to the Chinese people. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s declaration to the People’s Republic that ‘[t]he whole world stands behind you and supports you’\textsuperscript{765} appositely conveys how China now belongs to a ‘globalised’ moral community. While it tends to be the case that explicit references to responsibility are not generally made in such rhetoric, upon closer inspection it is possible to find the notion that natural disasters constitute a common threat to the international community and, as such, demand a common obligation to mitigate them embedded within these discourses.

As the first country to dispatch official aid and rescue teams to China’s quake-hit areas (effectively becoming the first foreign rescue team permitted into China), the example of Japan’s relief assistance is particularly instructive. Japanese relief teams were well-received by the Chinese public, praised for their efficiency as well as the empathy they showed to victims. Images depicting Japanese rescue workers bowing their heads in respect to the dead were widely disseminated by state-run news media, having also been popularly circulated among Chinese netizens, some of whom

\textsuperscript{764} Also noteworthy was how Wang Yi went on to make the following remarks:

‘An anonymous friend wrote two lines on the Internet, “...a small mercy, multiplied by 1.3 billion, will become a love of the ocean; an enormous difficulty, divided by 1.3 billion, will become insignificant.” [...] The world has a population of more than 6 billion. If we replace 1.3 billion with 6 billion, I believe the world will become a better and more harmonious place. This is not only the lofty goal pursued by the United Nations, but also the historical mission of every member state of the United Nations including China.


\textsuperscript{765} Ban was also the first world leader to visit Sichuan’s disaster zone. See ‘Ban praises China quake response’. In like fashion, White House spokesperson Dana Perino has remarked on how ‘We [the U.S.] have a good relationship with the Chinese and that in times of need like this we can come together and help each other’. See ‘Bush: US ‘ready to help’ China after quake’, AFP (12 May 2008). [On-line] Available at: http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gUqe5pJTQ28seVVBLhK5sAeAgtmC (accessed 20 December 2008).
‘thanked’ the Japanese for their ‘respect for life’. Not only did these sentiments help in assuaging (historical) tensions in the Sino-Japanese relationship, but they would reappear again in the wake of the devastating Tōhoku Earthquake that struck Japan’s coastal areas. In what could be seen as a display of solidarity and neighbourly goodwill, China was among the first to offer material and financial aid, as well as the first to dispatch a fifteen-member search-and-rescue team to help in Japanese relief efforts.

Constituting the first instance in which China has provided official assistance to Japan, the Chinese contribution is even more significant when considering the political circumstances at the time. Tensions had been running high in earlier months as a result of Japan’s detention in September 2010 of a Chinese fishing trawler and its crew near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. As to be expected, what ensued were highly-nationalistic, diplomatic exchanges from both sides, as each claimed territorial and maritime rights to the resource-rich islands and its surrounding waters. All of this is not to mention the fact that, just one day before the Tōhoku disaster, China’s own southwestern province of Yunnan was struck by a 5.8-magnitude earthquake that caused considerable damage to infrastructure and residential buildings, and which left 26 people dead and more than 250 injured. In spite of these circumstances, the Chinese government still sent more than US$165,000 in aid to its distressed neighbour, with pledges to dispatch additional relief supplies, including 20,000 tonnes of fuel. Notably, the provincial government of Wenzhou also pledged to donate approximately US$300,000 to Ishinomaki, its sister-city in disaster-stricken Miyagi Prefecture, while the municipal government of Changchun likewise pledged a little over US$80,000 to the municipal government of Sendai.

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Photograph 8. Group of Japanese relief workers bowing in a show of respect to a victim of the Sichuan Earthquake

Source: Du Wenjuan, ‘Japanese rescue team applauded for efforts’.

Photograph 9. Japanese relief volunteer paying his respects to an earthquake victim being carried out by Chinese rescue workers

Source: Unknown
For this reason, while some may question the motives behind the Chinese contributions, this by no means undermines the symbolic import of this act. In essence, what Chinese responses to the Tōhoku Earthquake reveal are strong sentiments of moral reciprocity. As lucidly captured in one Chinese commentary,

In the face of overwhelming natural calamities, human bodies may be weak, but human souls are strong. In this global village, a disaster inflicted on any segment of the world population is a mobilization order to the entire international community...Many Chinese still remember that after a magnitude 8.0 earthquake struck China’s Sichuan province in 2008, Japanese rescuers offered valuable help, ordinary Japanese people lined up to make donations, and even some mayors and municipal legislators took to the streets to solicit contributions. The willingness and readiness to help each other is just a natural reflection of the time-honored friendly bond between the two neighboring Oriental civilizations. The virtue of returning the favor after receiving one runs in the bloods of both nations.\(^{769}\)

As the People’s Republic is gradually socialised into the normative folds of an emerging world society,\(^{770}\) this has arguably impelled it to look beyond its borders and, in so doing, embrace a more cosmopolitan understanding of its roles and responsibilities. With regard to the realm of disaster management, this process of integration has sensitised China to evolving global norms on disaster relief and risk reduction, effectively prompting Chinese leaders to reformulate the country’s disaster management strategies to accord more with international expectations. More importantly, it speaks to the PRC’s newfound role as a provider of humanitarian


\(^{770}\) For a treatment of this issue, see Chapter 2 of this thesis.
assistance, and more specifically, as a major contributor to international disaster relief. Interestingly, this has led some commentators to contend that, given the increased frequency of disasters, China is now presented with the unique opportunity to assume a more prominent leadership role in global disaster governance — one which would complement the country’s identity as a responsible power.

Thinking without Borders: China’s engagement in global disaster governance

Prologue: China and the Thailand Floods
From late July until early December 2011, around two-thirds of Thailand was effectively submerged under water. I returned only days before the deluge, which had originated from the country’s monsoon-hit northern provinces, reached neighbourhoods near to my own home in Bangkok, severely inundating major industrial centres, other densely-populated residential areas (particularly those located in close proximity to the Mekong and Chao Phraya Rivers), as well as the capital’s second airport at Don Muang along the way. Dubbed as Thailand’s worst flooding disaster in almost 50 years, the widespread inundation is estimated to have resulted in the deaths of more than 500 people and caused more than US$20 billion worth of property losses and infrastructure damage. As with most natural disasters occurring in the present day, factors contributing to the severity of this national catastrophe were, at once, ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’. Compounding the effects of anthropomorphic climate change were man-made hazards that worked to aggravate an already precarious situation. Similar to the other cases explored in this chapter, bureaucratic mismanagement derived from a lack of preparedness on the government’s part, together with human-induced impediments that helped to disrupt natural environmental flows (i.e. those ranging from ‘development’ structures like large dams to poorly-built dwellings located along major canals and riverfronts), had also contributed considerably to the flood’s exacerbation. Deforestation was similarly highlighted as another likely factor, as the country’s remaining forest areas in its northern regions were incapable of absorbing the (abnormally) high volume of rainfall; a notion which brought attention to bear on Thailand’s endangered forests that had

771 Interview, Beijing, China (22 January 2011).
long been threatened by illegal logging and which were gradually being replaced by illicit large-scale resorts or wide expanses of cultivated farmland.

The 2011 Thailand Floods were also illustrative of another key feature that has become characteristic of many of the calamities seen today – that is, the development of sentiments of solidarity at both the societal and transnational levels. Daily news broadcasts dedicated to spotlighting the extent of human suffering and destruction invariably gave rise to a ‘we-feeling’ among those who were affected as well as those unaffected, with television networks, government agencies and military regiments coming together to organise charity events, rally public donations, and spearhead local relief efforts. Reports on the assistance provided by Thailand’s neighbours, most notably China and Japan, became particularly prominent, as footages were shown of Japanese individuals holding up banners and placards to ‘cheer on’ Thai disaster victims, whilst the PRC was lauded as the first foreign country to pledge official support to the Thai government.  

The Chinese government had initially offered approximately US$1.6 million worth of emergency humanitarian aid material, which included rescue boats, tents, clothing, sandbags, and water purification equipment, along with US$1 million in relief funds. This was shortly followed by a second pledge of an increased amount of material assistance that totalled at around US$4.7 million. A team of water management experts, headed by Chinese Vice-Minister of Water Resources Liu Ning, was also sent to observe and assess the situation so as to help Thai authorities devise possible solutions to mitigate the flooding and establish a more effective flood prevention system. This was further coupled by a display of ‘friendly feelings’ between China and Thailand, with Premier Wen Jiabao extending his condolences to the Thai people, taking special note of how ‘China and Thailand are one family’,

With regard to the Japanese, special ‘bonds of empathy’ were depicted as having been formed earlier in the aftermath of the 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake, when the Thai public through nation-wide donation campaigns organised by private corporations, banks and other charitable organisations (including the Thai Red Cross) raised well over $12 million worth of quake relief funds (separate from the Thai government’s pledge of $6.6 million in relief assistance that included, among others, 15,000 tons of rice, canned foods and clothing, as well as the deployment of medical and relief teams to help with search and rescue operations). This has since been viewed as a display of Thai-Japanese solidarity, meant to ‘reciprocate’ Japanese generosity to the Thai people following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami.
while President Hu Jintao likewise expressed his sympathies to King Bhumipol Adulyadej, confirming the PRC’s willingness to continue providing support to Thailand in the relief and post-disaster reconstruction phases.774

Similar to the case of the Tōhoku Earthquake, Chinese contributions to relief efforts during the Thailand Floods can likewise be viewed as derivative of a broader foreign-policy trend which, as discussed in the preceding section, emphasises the PRC’s growing humanitarian role in global governance. Even though contention remains as to the degree of responsibility that China ought to shoulder in terms of protecting people beyond its borders, examples in recent years have indicated China’s increasing willingness to participate in humanitarian efforts abroad, limited not only to UN peacekeeping operations. As one Chinese scholar wrote in a commentary on the Tōhoku Earthquake featured in the People’s Daily, ‘We can never forget the aid provided by Japan during 2008’s enormous Wenchuan earthquake...China will not decline to shoulder its burdens as a neighbor’.775 It goes without saying that this notion of ‘shouldering a burden as a neighbour’ feeds directly into the idea of responsibility.

China’s initial foray into the realm of global disaster governance can be traced back to its membership of the International Relief Union in May 1935,776 whilst instances of bilateral cooperation on disaster-related issues can be seen as early as 1947, when an agreement on the provision of relief supplies was struck between the Republic of China and the United States.777 Decades later in 1989, the PRC under Deng Xiaoping joined the UN’s International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction programme, effectively signalling its maturing role in global disaster governance. The founding of the Red Cross Society of China (Zhongguo Hongshizihui) more than a hundred years ago also represents a major development vis-à-vis China’s sense of

776 Notably, the United States did not become a member of the IRU. Even when the dissolution of union was announced, China still did not formally withdraw its membership.
777 The U.S. had pledged to provide assistance to China on condition that they be ‘distributed by the Chinese Government and voluntary agencies without discriminating as to race, creed or political belief’. See Article Two of the ‘Agreement between the Republic of China and the United States of America Concerning the United States Relief Assistance to the Chinese People of 1947’; cited in Protection of persons in the event of disasters, fn. 54.
humanitarian obligation. Exalted as a ‘profoundly’ Chinese institution (i.e. having been set up by the Chinese themselves), the government-backed Chinese Red Cross (RCSC) can be seen to reflect an ‘overwhelming desire to be included in the great international movements of the last 150 years’, including the international humanitarian movement.\(^{778}\) In what can be seen as a landmark event for the country’s humanitarian movement, the RCSC formally joined the IFRC in 1919, becoming one of the federation’s earliest members.

The Chinese Red Cross remains a key non-state actor today when it comes to the provision of relief assistance both at home and abroad. For instance, apart from acting as a channel for public donations, the RCSC allocated more than US$950,000 and US$50,000 as a ‘token of friendship’ to assist in the recovery of affected areas devastated by the Tōhoku Earthquake and the Pakistan Floods, respectively.\(^{779}\) Around the same time, it donated another US$1 million worth of humanitarian aid to areas in East Africa hard hit by severe drought.\(^{780}\) Of special note is how these activities by the RCSC have all been well-publicised in the state-run media in their coverage of Chinese contributions to international disaster relief, as the RCSC’s role was seen to complement that of the Chinese government.

Yet, it was only in more recent times that China’s deepening engagement with global disaster governance became explicitly manifest in its policy directives. The PRC’s aforementioned 11\(^{th}\) Five-Year Plan on Comprehensive Disaster Reduction, together with its white paper on disaster relief and prevention, stand out in this respect, with both articulating at length China’s continued commitment to international cooperation in this area. The white paper had notably devoted one entire section to

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outlining the extent of the PRC’s participation in international disaster relief, highlighting in particular its growing engagement with the United Nations and the latter’s agencies in enhancing the organisation’s existing DRRM framework. In so doing, the paper reaffirmed how, in ‘[a]dopting an open and cooperative attitude, China takes an active part in international efforts in the area of disaster reduction, in the construction and improvement of an international cooperative disaster-reduction mechanism, in building up a worldwide capacity in this regard, and in providing mutual aid with other countries in major natural disasters’.\footnote{Information Office of the State Council, ‘VI. International Cooperation in Disaster Prevention and Reduction’, in China’s Actions for Disaster Prevention and Reduction. [On-line] Available at: http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2009-05/11/content_17754964.htm (accessed 20 May 2009).}

Crucially, these policy developments were further solidified with the State Council’s publication of an inaugural white paper on the country’s foreign aid policy in April 2011, which had notably alluded to such issues as climate change and natural disasters, among more conventional concerns. Under the rubric of ‘emergency humanitarian aid’, the paper enunciated China’s commitment to providing ‘materials or cash for emergency relief’ and dispatching ‘relief personnel of its own accord or at the victim country’s request, so as to reduce losses of life and property in disaster-stricken areas and help the victim country tackle difficulties caused by the disaster’. It also took note of how ‘[o]ver the years, China has taken an active part in emergency relief operations in foreign countries, and has been playing a more and more important role in international emergency humanitarian relief’, specifically referencing the formal establishment in September 2004 of a response mechanism for the provision of international emergency humanitarian aid.\footnote{Information Office of the State Council, China’s Foreign Aid (April 2011). [On-line] Available at: http://www.scio.gov.cn/zxbd/wz/2011104/t896900.htm (accessed 23 June 2011).}

Of special significance here is the integral role the People’s Republic has come to assume in building organisational platforms to encourage information exchange on the subject of disaster reduction. The 2011 Chengdu Declaration for Action constitutes one good example of this, considering how it places special emphasis on the incorporation of disaster-resilience measures into urban planning and the raising of awareness among cities about disaster reduction.\footnote{The declaration was the result of the Second World Cities Scientific Development Forum and the First Mayors’ Summit on Disaster Risk Reduction, both of which were held in Chengdu, China, in August 2011. The events were organised jointly by the World Cities Scientific Development Alliance, Sister Cities International, the UN-ISDR, and the government of Chengdu. See ‘Chengdu Declaration

\footnote{783} Other instances include China’s
hosting of a developing nations’ ministerial conference on disaster response management in September 2007, along with its close cooperation with the UN-ISDR in setting up the International Centre for Drought Risk Reduction in 2007 and establishing a Beijing office for the UN’s Platform for Space-based Information for Disaster Management and Emergency Response (UN-SPIDER).

At the regional level, China’s leadership proved vital to the success of the first Asian Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (ACDR) held in September 2005, which was aimed at facilitating the exchange of ‘best practices’ and lessons learnt vis-à-vis DRRM experiences between participating countries. Culminating in the adoption of the ‘Beijing Action Plan for Reducing Disaster Risks in Asia’, pathways were identified through which the Hyogo Framework could be operationalised nationally and transnationally. With the Beijing Action Plan laying the foundations for further regional collaboration, it would subsequently develop into the 2007 ‘Delhi Declaration on Disaster Risk Reduction in Asia’ and the 2008 ‘Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Disaster Risk Reduction’. China reportedly played a constructive role in the formulation of both declarations.

What extensive Chinese involvement in these initiatives point to, in effect, is yet another important feature of the PRC’s disaster diplomacy: its support for regional efforts at disaster management. International trends in disaster governance have been largely matched with developments at the regional level, which has witnessed the steady proliferation of multilateral agreements on effective disaster management. ASEAN, in particular, has revisited and strengthened some of its early commitments to regional disaster governance, as set out in the 1976 ‘Declaration for Mutual Assistance on Natural Disasters’. Exemplary of this is the ‘Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response’, which was adopted by the ASEAN member-states in July 2005, largely as a response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004. The agreement was officially lauded as a promising development in


785 Another instance of this can be seen from the Special ASEAN Leaders’ Meeting in January 2005, which had concluded with the promulgation of the ‘Declaration on Action to Strengthen Emergency Relief, Rehabilitation, Reconstruction and Prevention on the Aftermath of Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster of 26 December 2004’.
contemporary thinking on disaster risk reduction and international response coordination, effectively laying down the groundwork for subsequent cooperation in the policy and technical fields. Significantly, it was also around the same time that Wen Jiabao announced the PRC’s decision to help ASEAN countries in founding the Strong Earthquake and Tsunami Warning Network.786

Equally noteworthy is China’s role in spearheading intergovernmental cooperation in disaster relief among the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), as embodied in the signing of the ‘Inter-Governmental Mutual Aid Agreement among SCO Member States’ in October 2005 and the adoption of the ‘2007-2008 Action Plan for Mutual Aid in Disaster Relief among SCO Member States’ in November 2006. These policy directives were followed up a couple of years later with the creation of the SCO Centre for Prevention of Natural and Man-made Disasters, which was tasked primarily with orchestrating emergency relief.787

Needless to say, international relief operations constitute another area characterised by active Chinese participation. When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, for example, the Chinese government promptly provided financial assistance totalling US$5 million, along with emergency relief supplies. Similarly, with the onset of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the government dispatched a medical team and US$1 million worth of relief materials, not to mention financial assistance that amounted to nearly US$5 million. But aside from the weight of its contributions, it is also interesting to note how throughout these past few years, China has almost always been the first to respond to the advent of natural calamities abroad. This was the case for the Tōhoku Earthquake, the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, the 2011 Pakistan Floods, as well as the 2011 Thailand Floods, among several others. Compared to the PRC’s early experiences at giving assistance during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, where it was neither the biggest contributor nor the fastest, this is indicative of an important new phase in Chinese diplomacy.

China has, of course, won considerable praise from the international community for its ‘generosity’ in distributing relief supplies and funds to its ‘friends’ in times of

need. Particularly striking here is the language employed. Compared to its engagement with the institutional dimension of disaster governance, China’s involvement in aid provision tends to be blatantly ‘subjectivised’, with rhetoric on the part of both donor and recipient habitually replete with empathetic expressions that spotlight the prevailing sense of amity and altruistic duty. Evident from the case of Chinese assistance to Pakistan, when in immediate response to the latter’s chronic flooding in 2010, the PRC became the first country to offer aid to the Pakistani government by pledging an initial US$47 million in relief goods, the provision of aid is commonly tied to potent displays of ‘we-feeling’. An editorial in the *China Daily*, for one, took note of how ‘[a]s old neighbours, China and Pakistan help each other in times of difficulty’, and how ‘Pakistan [had] immediately provided aid when an earthquake struck Yushu county [in Qinghai Province]’ earlier in April. Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbhani Khar even went as far as to declare the People’s Republic as a ‘true friend’. Similarly, China’s assistance to Cambodia in the wake of its disastrous floods one year later in 2011 was welcomed with comparable sentiments, with the Cambodian Vice-President of the National Committee for Disaster Management Nhim Vanda thanking the Chinese government and wishing that ‘the friendship and cooperation between Cambodia and China to be stronger [sic] and to last forever’.

These exchanges have, however, been the subject of scepticism, especially given that both recipient countries are known to be among China’s close allies. This consequently begs the question of whether these ‘humanitarian’ gestures can be read...

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789 ‘China pledges $250m flood aid’, *China Daily* (18 December 2010), p. 3.

790 ‘True friends: China first country to offer flood aid’, *The Express Tribune* (11 September 2011). [On-line] Available at: http://tribune.com.pk/story/250086/true-friends-china-first-country-to-offer-flood-aid/ (accessed 21 October 2011). Soon after, the Chinese government pledged a further US$200 million in ‘unconditional’ aid, and stated its intention to participate in Pakistan’s post-flood reconstruction. This was met with proclamations from both sides on how ‘a good neighbour is a blessing’ as well as how ‘Pakistan and China are one family’. Notably, this aid package has also been publicised as China’s largest contribution of assistance to a foreign country. See Li Xiaokun and Ai Yang, ‘Wen delivers on flood aid as visit to Pakistan begins’, *China Daily* (18 December 2010), p. 1.

as sincere expressions of altruism, or whether they are better viewed as laced with political self-interest. Certainly, the fact that Chinese pledges to Pakistan coincided with Wen Jiabao’s three-day state visit to Islamabad (during which deals worth over US$16 million were signed) does little to allay doubts. It is, however, important that we do not quickly dismiss these diplomatic gestures as purely strategic. Although no explicit references to ‘responsibility’ are being made here, this does not denote the complete absence of sentiments of responsibility. The use of such normative language undeniably feeds into the broader notion of a duty to respond to the suffering of others. Indeed, one might even argue that these sentiments of ‘we-feeling’ can work to further reinforce existing bonds of obligation, not least through the dynamics of rhetorical entrapment.

In the case of disaster governance, it is fair to say that far from being a rule-breaker, the People’s Republic has exhibited a high degree of compliance as an innovative rule-taker. In other words, while its actions have largely accorded with prevailing international discourses and expectations, China has also taken the initiative in spearheading novel mechanisms to deal with issues of pressing, collective concern. Chinese agencies at the ministerial level (such as the China National Committee for International Disaster Reduction (CNCIDR) and National Disaster Reduction Centre of China (NDRCC), along with the China Earthquake Administration and China Meteorological Administration), more specifically, have made perceptible progress in learning and integrating novel DRRM approaches into the country’s domestic and foreign policies. As reflected in the disaster white paper, the central government, in tandem with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, has rearranged its priorities to focus more on disaster preparedness and risk reduction measures in keeping with emerging global trends. At the same time, government collaborations with UN agencies, regional organisations, as well as transnational and local NGOs (e.g. Oxfam, Save the Children, and the IFRC) have increased especially in the post-2008 period.

Intensified participation in global disaster governance can be attributed to the growing awareness of ‘international disasters’ following the occurrence of the Indian Ocean Tsunami (otherwise formally known as a the Sumatra-Andaman Earthquake)
on 26 December 2004.\textsuperscript{792} Arguably serving as a turning-point in how natural disasters are perceived at the global level, the Boxing Day Tsunami, as it is colloquially known, incurred an unprecedented scale of devastation and loss of life. The catastrophe was precipitated by a 9.15-magnitude earthquake off the West coast of Sumatra, which in turn triggered a series of tsunamis along areas bordering the Indian Ocean. The earthquake, in particular, was deemed to be unusually large in terms of its geological and geographical scope. Resulting in the deaths of more than 23,000 people and injuring over 500,000 people, not to mention displacing millions from their homes, coastal communities in the affected region were inundated by waves that reportedly reached up to thirty metres high, as large expanses of land were destroyed in the process, along with the livelihoods of those who survived.

Labelled as one of the deadliest disasters in recorded history, the Indian Ocean Tsunami affected a total of thirteen countries, including Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Myanmar Sri Lanka, Thailand, and the Maldives.\textsuperscript{793} It posed one of the greatest challenges to the international community in terms of meeting human needs under circumstances where most of the infrastructure had already been destroyed.\textsuperscript{794} In the words of then UN Resident Coordinator Khalid Malik in Beijing, China was among a number of leading countries that ‘rose to the challenge’.\textsuperscript{795}

Immediately, in response to the disaster, the Chinese government mobilised medical teams from the People’s Armed Police to be dispatched to the affected locales. With respect to coordinating relief work, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, together with the Ministry of National Defense, became the key agencies tasked with doing so. Local fundraising rallies were soon underway, while Premier Wen Jiabao made pledges to assist affected countries – having offered, for instance, to share earthquake-monitoring expertise and send epidemic prevention experts – at an emergency summit held in Jakarta to deal with the aftermath of the earthquake.\textsuperscript{796} In what has since been touted as the PRC’s largest-ever international aid operation, the

\textsuperscript{792} By using the term ‘Indian Ocean Tsunami’, do note that I am also referring here to the undersea megathrust earthquake that subsequently produced the tsunami.

\textsuperscript{793} This is excluding those countries indirectly affected, such as Australia, Germany and Sweden whose nationals had been vacationing in the devastated areas.


\textsuperscript{795} United Nations, Tsunami response, p. 3.

Chinese government provided over US$200 million (or RMB1.3 billion) in humanitarian aid, also contributing US$19.5 million – with US$13.5 million in the form of relief materials and US$6 million in funds – through the United Nations. Remarkably, this constituted the first time in which China worked with a multilateral agency to distribute emergency relief assistance.

As an article in the *China Daily* explains, China’s contributions to the tsunami relief efforts ‘shows that Chinese people are...true friends and also shows that China is a responsible big country’. The sentiment expressed here notably falls in line with Wen’s speech at the emergency summit, whereby he committed the PRC to providing ‘unselfish assistance within our capacity [with] no added conditions’. On Even though it is tempting to explain the PRC’s involvement in the tsunami relief efforts as a result of a desire to expand its interests in Asia, at least rhetorically, China clearly saw an imperative to demonstrate its ability to act as a responsible great power.

*Politicising aid, corrupting responsibility?*

While it might appear to be the case that pressing ethical imperatives trump political or strategic considerations in the provision of international relief assistance, this is not to suggest that humanitarian action can – or is – divorced from politicised motives. As mentioned previously, this constitutes a fundamental tension in state-led humanitarian efforts. Although international organisations like the IFRC have advocated neutrality and impartiality as key principles in humanitarianism, in actuality, there is an underlying tendency for political and strategic interests to be grafted onto humanitarian imperatives, albeit presumably in a more nuanced fashion.

The dynamics of normative contestation centre on the politicisation of aid, or to be more precise, on the process of demonstrating responsibility. The Haiti Earthquake, for one, appositely reveals these dynamics. After a 7.0-magnitude earthquake struck Haiti on 12 January 2010, more than 300,000 people were killed according to official estimates, with the area around Port-au-Prince also sustaining heavy and extensive damage. As in other cases, China was lauded as the first country to officially respond to the unravelling crisis, offering assistance to the Haitian government (even before the United States, as some Chinese commentators like to point out). It sent a 60-

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member search-and-rescue team to engage in relief work, and announced a financial package of US$4.4 million, whilst the Chinese Red Cross pledged another US$1 million. Harking back to the notion of moral reciprocity that permeated official discourses in the aftermath of the Wenchuan Earthquake, the Chinese government reiterated yet again how China’s contribution to international relief efforts in Haiti were to be taken as a genuine gesture of altruism, motivated by a strong sense of empathy with those affected. Yet despite these assurances, doubts soon arose over the sincerity of China’s actions. In large part, this stems from the fact that Haiti remains one of the 23 countries that continues to maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, having yet to transfer official recognition to the People’s Republic. As posited by certain observers, this gives Beijing a special incentive to provide assistance to Haiti as a means to demonstrate the benefits of being a ‘friend’ of China, and thereby convince the Haitian government into establishing diplomatic ties with the PRC instead.798

Similar suspicions also surfaced in relation to Chinese contributions to Pakistan and Taiwan in 2011 and 2009, respectively. As stated earlier, with the sudden onset of severe flooding in Pakistan, China soon became again the first and biggest donor to the country’s relief operations. To some, extensive involvement in the Pakistan Flood relief merely amounts, at best, to China strategically supporting an ally in need, as opposed to engaging in an apolitical act of humanitarianism. By the same token, China’s prompt offer of aid to Taiwan following the devastation caused by Typhoon Morakot in 2009 similarly raised concerns as to whether disaster relief simply became a guise for the pursuit of strategic interests in the region. Indeed, in appropriating aid to Taiwan, not only would this symbolic act help to improve cross-strait relations and the PRC’s image in the eyes of the Taiwanese, but from the perspective of Taiwanese sceptics, it could also give the PRC reason to exert even more claim over the island (in the sense that assistance is being provided to fellow Chinese). As Drew Thompson notes, Chinese disaster diplomacy is by no means a new phenomenon. Ever since 1986, cross-strait disaster relief has served as a political tool to assuage uneasy

relations. In terms of China’s regional strategies more broadly, as was supposedly evident during the Indian Ocean Tsunami, the provision of humanitarian assistance then seemed to correspond with the PRC’s foreign policy of widening its interests and expanding its soft power attraction through constructive engagement with the region’s governments.

Aside from the politicisation of aid, concerns have likewise emerged over China’s residual attachment to such principles as sovereignty and non-intervention. Although reflecting traditional humanitarian discourses at both the international and regional levels, where a state’s ability to give aid to another depends on the receipt of prior consent from the host state, China’s reticence in pressuring the Burmese military regime into opening the country to foreign assistance, for instance, has come under considerable international criticism, especially in light of the novel reinterpretations of the R2P principle that have surfaced in recent years, where emphasis is placed on ensuring the security of peoples before that of states. At the same time, others have forwarded the observation that by proffering assistance to the Burmese military regime in the wake of the Indian Ocean Tsunami, for example, China was attempting to enhance its affinity with these problematic states by concomitantly abiding by the principle of sovereignty in its aid provision. In other words, Chinese assistance became more attractive than those from, say, Western countries, since it came with ‘no political strings’ attached and with the guarantee that China would not intervene in any way in the internal affairs of its aid recipients.

In this sense, the political dimension of humanitarianism is at once constrained and ever-present in the dynamics of disaster relief. The politics of responsibility therefore remains highly pertinent to the realm of disaster governance. Having said this, it is important to bear in mind that the People’s Republic has displayed a level of consistency in both its actions and justifications for participating in international disaster relief. Here, the language and not simply the actions of responsibility remains relevant. Chinese discourses continue to stress the bonds of sympathy and reciprocity that purportedly motivate its responses to the suffering of distant others. It should also be noted that, when compared to the case of China’s involvement in the governance of the Mekong River, Chinese engagement with the extant architecture of global

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disaster governance proves to be comparatively less contentious, with processes of normative contestation largely confined to the global debate on R2P and the public sphere within China itself. As such, it is fair to say that the PRC’s participation in global disaster governance has, on the whole, exhibited a degree of ‘responsibility acceptance’ – that is, an acceptance of existent norms and values on disaster governance, and the consistent application of these norms to its practices. Indeed, one could very well argue that, irrespective of the political or strategic intentions underlying Chinese contribution to international disaster relief, this does not negate the fact that material assistance given by China has, at the very least, worked to ameliorate the suffering of those in dire need.

**Conclusion: Responding to disasters as a global responsibility**

Changes in geoclimatic conditions have, by and large, corresponded to the greater frequency of natural disasters in the contemporary period. China is particularly disaster-prone and well-attuned to the devastation and suffering that natural calamities inevitably cause. Consequently, some observers have argued that the PRC is ‘better equipped than most’ to engage in international disaster relief efforts. And as this chapter has sought to illustrate, just as a sense of duty has been progressively imposed onto states to contribute to global efforts at reducing hazards and providing relief, so has the PRC responded to these calls, more or less, in earnest.

As seen from Chinese reactions to the Great Wenchuan Earthquake and the Indian Ocean Tsunami, major shifts in China’s domestic attitudes toward natural disasters have been analogous to stronger engagement at the global level. Compared to the government’s response to the Tangshan Earthquake when it refused external assistance outright (much to the dismay of the international community), the People’s Republic accepted and even requested external aid during the Sichuan catastrophe. It is also significant that, within the past five years, the Chinese

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800 It deserves note here that, in terms of the global debate on R2P, while China is unlikely to support expanding the scope of the concept per se (although China did endorse the principle during the 2005 World Summit and, as discussed above, the notion of protecting people from disasters is manifest in Chinese international behaviour), this should not be equated to a denial of responsibility, as the general opinion among other states also tends to be not to be in favour of extending the principle to cover natural disasters.

government has given foreign humanitarian aid on nearly 200 occasions, ranging from the provision of technical assistance to Southeast Asian countries for the prevention and treatment of avian influenza to the provision of material assistance to Haiti, Iran, Turkey and Indonesia after a series of large-scale earthquakes.

It is precisely in this regard that China’s participation in international disaster relief can be viewed as an example of responsibility acceptance, whereby the Chinese government implicitly recognises an obligation to protect its citizens as well as peoples beyond its borders. From this perspective, by contributing to global disaster governance, China is not simply saving ‘strangers’ but is actively identifying them, at least dialogically, as members of the same moral community. To quote Chinese ambassador Lu Fan in the wake of Chile’s 8.8-magnitude earthquake, which killed more than 400 people and left around 500,000 homeless on 27 February 2010, ‘people from China and Chile, although geographically far from each other, [share] close ties and deep friendship’.

That said, elements derived from the politics of responsibility continue to persist, as the exact intentions underlying demonstrations of responsibility prove difficult to definitively ascertain. It tends to be the case that the provision of international humanitarian assistance can never be entirely divorced from political considerations. As evinced from the PRC’s participation in disaster relief in Haiti, Taiwan or Pakistan, despite claims to the contrary, political strings were visible, whether for the purposes of improving existing bilateral relations or enhancing Chinese soft power. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that recognition of this political dimension of disaster assistance does not necessarily discount the underlying sense of responsibility imbued in such acts. As was evident from Chinese participation in the Indian Ocean Tsunami or the Tōhoku Earthquake, the People’s Republic has indeed shown a willingness to abide by its responsibilities to provide relief and contribute to global efforts at governing disasters. In the words of an editorial on China’s relief contribution to the Haiti Earthquake featured in the Beijing Review:

The Wenchuan earthquake is a pain that still hurts the Chinese people. Because of this, we now feel the heartbreak and despair of people on the other side of the globe. Lives of Chinese peacekeepers were lost. To best remember them, the international community

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802 This reference is to the Chinese peacekeepers who had been killed by the sudden onset of the Haiti Earthquake.
shall finish the task they had not finished; that is, to pull people in Haiti through the catastrophe and help restore peace and stability in the country.\footnote{Ding Zhitao, ‘The People of Honor and Duty’.}

If anything, it is this sentiment of a ‘global responsibility’ that matters most.
CONCLUSION

The Power of An Idea: Global Governance and the Politics of Responsibility

The fact that we can’t solve all the problems of the world does not absolve us of the responsibility of solving the ones we can.

Robert C. Macauley, Founder of ‘AmeriCares’

中国已经成为一个负责任的国家。

China has become a responsible country.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (2006)

When asked by a journalist how China was to assure other countries of its benign intentions and convince them of its newfound identity as a responsible great power, Premier Wen gave the following reply: ‘China adheres to the road of peaceful development, [as] dictated by traditional Chinese culture, [the country’s] development needs and [its] national interests. China has become a responsible country.’ 804 The premier went on to expound the country’s various contributions to world affairs, making special reference to the PRC’s ‘independent foreign policy of peace’ based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and its role as a ‘defender’ of the international system and a ‘major force for safeguarding world peace’, as evinced from its involvement in over a hundred international organisations and participation in international relief activities during the

Indian Ocean Tsunami (notably stressed as China’s largest ever contribution). Of equal interest is Wen’s second point which came as a reassurance that China’s development would not adversely affect the world, with the country remaining committed to environmental protection and the concept of scientific development.\textsuperscript{805}

Wen’s statement is but one illustration of how a language of responsibility has become inextricably wedded to Chinese foreign-policy discourse. Indeed, as mentioned earlier in the thesis, the Chinese leadership has been aware of the country’s unique responsibilities as a ‘major power of influence’, to quote Jiang Zemin, ever since the late 1990s. Significantly, this accords with broader trends taking place in the international realm which, according to a UN report, is witnessing ‘the emergence of various concepts related to the responsibility of States’.\textsuperscript{806} Based on this, it is fair to say that global governance in the twenty-first century is as much characterised by the ties of interdependence that bring states together, as by the bonds of obligation that connect state and non-state actors in a complex web of responsibility. In light of these developments the question of how notions of responsibility feature in China’s international engagement proves all the more pertinent.

This concluding chapter starts by revisiting the thesis’ central arguments on the role that the concept of responsibility plays in global governance. This is followed by an elaboration on the findings gained from the study’s empirical cases, particularly as they relate to the politics of responsibility. The final section then provides some concluding remarks on the implications of this study’s findings for Chinese foreign policy and, more broadly, for efforts at governing the globe.

\textit{Responsibility as a powerful idea}

As China grows as a global power, so have expectations for it to behave ‘responsibly’. Having at its crux the idea that power exacts responsibility, the central purpose of this thesis was to examine how China understands and acts upon notions of responsibility in the realm of global governance. It considered, in particular, the PRC’s engagement with extant structures of ecological governance, with special focus being on Chinese practices vis-à-vis the management of natural disasters and transboundary water resources. Governing nature was spotlighted here as an important dimension of global governance, given the pressing environmental challenges facing China and the

\textsuperscript{805}’Premier Wen Jiabao replies to Chinese and Foreign reporters’ questions’.

\textsuperscript{806}Preliminary report on the protection of persons in the event of disasters, para. 55.
international community as a whole, as well as the growing ecological interdependencies between states and peoples.

In unpacking this question, a deeper understanding of how the idea of responsibility has developed, how it is presently articulated, as well as the extent of its influence in shaping Chinese foreign-policy behaviour is warranted. However, existing perspectives on global governance have largely neglected the importance of responsibility as a key idea in international life, effectively rendering them unsuited to addressing the questions raised in this study. To address this gap in the literature, the thesis outlined a conceptual framework that located ‘responsibility’ as a fundamental idea underpinning the normative architecture of global governance. In so doing, it directed attention to four important features of the concept: first, how it constitutes a longstanding idea in international relations; second, how it resonates widely with the experiences of both Western and non-Western states (i.e. China) in the conduct of their affairs; third, how it is not static but amenable to multiple interpretations, contingent upon the context within which it is articulated; and fourth, how it constitutes an inherently political idea, grounded in the social dynamics of power prevalent within both the domestic and international spheres.

According to Adam Watson, ‘responsibility implies accountability for one’s actions, for their consequences’. However, this statement presents only one facet of responsibility. As suggested in the definition of responsibility used in this study, the idea encompasses the notion that actors ought to be accountable for their actions, and that they have certain duties and obligations to fulfill. Responsibility, in this sense, conforms to a rational logic of consequences as well as to a norm-setting logic of appropriateness. Indeed, as was evident from China’s involvement in water and disaster governance, elements of both came through in how expectations and conceptions of responsibility were framed in each case. Especially when it comes to those conceptions still under contestation, having yet to be mainstreamed or ‘officialised’ (as in the discourses put forward by anti-dam activists in the Mekong River issue), these are often undergirded by a logic of appropriateness that dictates how agents designated with the burden of responsibility ought to behave.

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808 For this definition, see Chapter 1, p. 45 of the thesis.
It is precisely in this regard that, taken together with the concepts of reciprocity and legitimacy, the idea of responsibility is seen to exert both a regulative and constitutive ‘power’ over actors – or in this case, China – as it constrains state behaviour by delineating actors’ identities and the parameters of legitimate action. Put simply, it imbues action with a sense of purpose that underlies the socio-political bases for governance. Behind this argument is the underlying notion that the concept of responsibility can work to legitimise and constrain the possession and use of political power (effectively turning it into ‘authority’), whilst serving as an important manifestation of it. In other words, responsibility is as much an element of power, as power is a constituent of responsibility.

As this thesis has sought to illustrate, the idea of responsibility within the context of international relations is founded on the fact that states operate within a social setting, where ‘conscious of certain common interests and common values’, they ‘conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another’.\(^{809}\) Being sovereign entities, they bear a responsibility for managing their own affairs, but also being members of international society, they are expected to shoulder certain responsibilities to other members and to global order more generally as well. By the same token, as a rising power, China is faced with a diverse range of duties and obligations commensurate to its unique position as a major power in the international system.

Whilst tensions can certainly be seen between China’s national and international responsibilities, I would argue, however, that based on the insights drawn from this study, China’s domestic and global responsibilities can be viewed as mutually reinforcing to a degree. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of disaster governance, where the common challenges posed by natural disasters have resulted in a perceptible convergence of interests and values. Here, the PRC’s own experience in dealing with the devastation wrought by calamities has helped to progressively sensitise it to the suffering of others as well as to evolving norms on disaster governance. Even in the case of climate protection where the PRC remains hesitant to shoulder more binding commitments to cut emissions, the increasing pressure being placed on the Chinese government from grassroots organisations within China have

brought about a gradual shift in official attitudes toward one that is more attuned to the necessity of environmental sustainability.

That said, it is not simply that expectations for the People’s Republic to behave responsibly have been exclusively imposed from the outside; internal factors have also been central to shaping how China has come to conceive of itself as a responsible country. Contrary to conventional explanations that tend to characterise Chinese norms and values as being either internally derived or externally imposed, the cases explored in this thesis have shown how Chinese conceptions of responsibility and responsible governance have been informed by a complex triangulation of international, regional and indigenous discourses. It is also this triangulation which, in turn, works to influence how the PRC actualises its normative obligations. The Mekong River issue serves as a case-in-point. As elaborated at length in Chapter 4, contending interpretations of responsibility – as advanced by the region’s governments, an emergent Mekong civil society, and multilateral institutions like the Mekong River Commission – cut to the heart of ongoing contestation over how the Lancang-Mekong’s water resources are best managed. Similarly, China’s participation in global disaster governance, though not marked by as much contention, also illustrates how international discourses on disaster risk reduction and management have begun to filter through to effect shifts in the country’s attitudes and policies toward disaster relief and prevention.

Furthermore, what this additionally points to is how indigenous perspectives on responsibility and responsible governance more specifically, as derived from historical Chinese thought on statecraft and environmental stewardship, have been equally important in framing how the People’s Republic understands and delivers on its responsibilities. Far from being a purely ‘modern’ concept, Chapters 2 and 3 have illustrated how notions of responsibility can be found to have deep roots in the Chinese past. In this regard, certain contemporary articulations of the idea (as reflected in the concepts of harmonious world or ecological civilisation) can be feasibly viewed as manifestations of indigenous Chinese traditions that have subsequently meshed with international discourses. Both endogenous and exogenous factors, as such, matter here and should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Considered in tandem, they promise to reveal important insights into the interactive dynamic that undergirds Chinese conceptions of responsibility.
The politics of responsibility revisited

Understood in terms of the political processes involved in defining, designating and demonstrating responsibility, the politics of responsibility has been applied throughout this thesis as an analytical prism for making sense of the myriad interpretations derived from this fluid idea. It also constitutes a means through which competing notions of responsibility can come to influence how delegated agents behave. I argued in Chapter 1 that the political and social import of any conception of responsibility largely rests with the processes of normative contestation underpinning the politics of responsibility. As stressed before, notions of responsibility do not exist in a normative vacuum. It follows that the degree to which a particular conception of responsibility is contested by other actors (and their ideas) will invariably have an effect on the extent to which those designated with responsibility will act in a compliant manner.

Based on the findings of this thesis' empirical cases, three broad observations can be made with regard to the relevance of the politics of responsibility to China’s engagement with structures of global governance. First, contestation constitutes a recurrent – almost omnipresent – dynamic in governing processes. Even in the case of disaster management where China appears to engage with prevailing understandings of responsibility, contestation could still be seen at the global level, as reflected in debates on whether the principle of the responsibility to protect should be applied to disaster events. Domestically, contestation in the Chinese context was manifest in the public disapprobation following the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, which had subsequently prompted the Chinese government to realign its policies to focus more on ‘governing’ disasters rather than merely responding to them (for which it already has a credible track record).

Following from this, it is possible to identify two major sites of normative contestation within the realm of global ecological governance: one revolving around questions to do with the proper locus of authority and the other concerned with questions on what constitutes a valid knowledge paradigm. The outcomes engendered from these sites of contestation are significant as they feed directly into the substantive content of responsibility claims. How political authority is validated and how problems of collective concern are interpreted will affect which

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810 See Chapter 1, p. 71 of the thesis.
conceptualisations of responsibility gain meaning, and by extension, the degree to which they become intersubjective and impinge on actors’ behaviours. In particular, given how governance arrangements are typified by intersecting centres of authority at multiple levels, this significantly complicates the process of delegating responsibility to agents to deal with context-specific issues. Who exercises the foremost right to act (that is, to delegate responsibility), and who should be held accountable for the consequences of certain practices, decisions, or events? Indeed, while the Chinese state has generally acted as the primary agent of responsibility, non-state actors, especially civil society organisations, have also begun to emerge as key agents involved in the apportioning of responsibility.

The existence of contending knowledge paradigms further mirrors the existence of competing notions of responsibility. As demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4, apart from acting as potential impediments to efforts at collectively managing the global environment, ongoing gaps in political and scientific knowledge have tended to likewise serve as major sources of contestation, at times contributing to the creation of new epistemic communities and, more frequently, the dissemination of discourses sanctioning alternative forms of ‘legitimate’ knowledge. Accordingly, the overarching task facing members of the international community becomes one of establishing intersubjective knowledge paradigms, commonly held by all relevant stakeholders.811

This point in turn relates to the second one, which is that processes of contestation are confined not only to the international sphere, but can be equally pervasive at the national and local levels. Here, societal pressure constitutes an important variable in determining Chinese responsiveness, with local actors shown to play a critical role in defining the contours of responsibility and in delegating obligations to the Chinese state. The PRC’s involvement in ecological governance clearly attests to this, with grassroots activists working to systematically challenge official attitudes by presenting alternative discourses on environmental responsibility that accord more with prevailing global norms on environmental protection. By the same token, local communities and anti-dam activists became major actors in the Lancang-Mekong’s governance, as they called for greater community rights whilst

811 This point, of course, bears semblance to Jürgen Habermas’ notion of discourse ethics, which posits that newly arrived at norms and institutional arrangements are deemed to be valid insofar as they are accepted by those who will be affected by them. Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 151.
attempting to impose more stringent responsibilities onto China to ‘do no harm’ to the river’s ecology. Although their successes remain relatively tempered, these actors have managed to bring public attention to bear on the PRC’s dam-building activities on the Lancang Jiang and, by extension, have compelled the Chinese government to, at the very least, attempt to account for its practices. The diagram below depicts how processes of normative contestation inherent in the politics of responsibility are subsumed within multiple layers of action.

![Diagram showing the politics of responsibility operating at multiple levels](image)

**Figure 8. The politics of responsibility operating at multiple levels**

Apparently this notion of multileveled action corresponds directly to the triangulation effect mentioned previously, as contending local, regional and international discourses are largely generated, channelled and reinforced through the iterated actions of agents operating at these varying levels. Moreover, exemplifying how state-to-society relations can be as important as state-to-state relations, these dynamics also speak to how, at least in the realm of ecological governance, non-state actors have steadily become more prominent and outspoken within an embryonic
global public sphere, joining with states to help shape the rules, norms and values that dictate how the responsible exercise of power is to be undertaken.

Third, processes of normative contestation, in a similar vein to demonstrations of responsibility acceptance, can work to reinforce the overarching sense of there being an obligation or imperative to act. Contrary to what one would expect, even though contestation can weaken the potency of certain conceptions of responsibility, this does not necessarily detract from the sentiment of responsibility writ large. As evinced from the Mekong River issue, just as the predominant paradigm of development was fundamentally challenged by civil society actors, alternative conceptions of responsibility were concurrently introduced and strengthened in its stead. The result was that China still remained bound to obligations, albeit those defined in terms of emergent norms of sustainability. Just as the idea of responsibility matters in international life, fundamentally serving as a building-block for global governance, so do conceptualisations of responsibility gain meaning when they impinge on actors’ behaviours.

**Governing the globe responsibly? Implications for Chinese foreign policy**

I mentioned at the outset of the thesis that, through the practical application of the politics of responsibility, it was hoped that this could shed light on when and why ‘responsibility’ matters (i.e. the circumstances under which certain conceptions of responsibility gain meaning), as well as why China, as a global power, seeks recognition as a responsible power. In relation to these questions, the study offers three key observations. First, responsibility matters to China. No longer an outlier of international society, the PRC has progressively shown a willingness to move beyond its preferred mode of self-governance to adopt a more integrative outlook on its roles and responsibilities as a fully-fledged member of an evolving world society. Being a relative ‘newcomer’ to global governance, China has been anxious to solidify its status as a great power, and understandably so: for the past two decades, the Chinese leadership has been preoccupied with allaying fears of Chinese revisionism and reassuring its neighbours that the country’s re-emergence as a major power will not adversely impact the stability of the international order.

It is precisely in this respect that the responsible exercise of power proves exceedingly crucial to China’s efforts at global and regional confidence-building, as doing so can assist in improving its international reputation. As several scholars have
observed, extensive participation in international institutions has now become a favoured means through which the People’s Republic can gain greater clout in global decision-making processes and, in so doing, increase its influence abroad. To reiterate an earlier point, portraying itself as a responsible state is no longer a matter of laudable rhetoric for China but a necessity, as this feeds directly into Beijing’s broader strategy of enhancing the country’s soft power appeal to accommodate its expanding global interests. It is for this reason that China’s self-image as a responsible power should not be taken lightly by other actors. This is an identity that warrants serious consideration and sustained encouragement from the international community – most of all from China’s neighbours – as it presents a pathway through which the PRC’s actions can become rhetorically entrapped and, ideally, regulated for the benefit of the collective good.

Having said this, it deserves note that while there is a degree of value congruence between existing global governance structures and longstanding Chinese traditions of governance, factors influencing China’s embrace of ‘responsible’ behaviour will tend to be more contingent and issue-specific. Indeed, contrasting the PRC’s performance in the Mekong River issue with its involvement in international disaster relief missions, it is possible to detect a degree of variation in its ‘responsible’ behaviour at the regional and global levels. Despite how both cases of water and disaster governance are typified by the lack of comprehensive institutional and regulatory frameworks, the People’s Republic seems to exhibit stronger compliance with prevailing norms and expectations of responsibility in a global context, as opposed to those in a regional setting, where external scrutiny and public pressure are generally less conspicuous. This is, moreover, supplemented by the fact that unlike the problem of hydropower development on the Lancang-Mekong which touches on Chinese energy-security concerns or the climate change negotiations that impinge on the country’s purported right to development, disaster governance is perceived to be a matter of ‘clear-cut’ humanitarianism, as it provides less ambiguity vis-à-vis questions of sovereignty and non-interference.

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812 For excellent analyses on China’s interactions with international institutions, see Marc Lanteigne, China and International Institutions: Alternate Paths to Global Power (London: Routledge, 2005); Johnston, Social States; and Kent, Beyond Compliance.

813 But of course, as elucidated in Chapter 5, while disaster governance appears to be detached from politics, the reality is that even disaster relief activities are frequently laden with politicised motives.
Needless to say, underlying tensions are likely to persist between Chinese conceptualisations of international responsibility and those obligations which have been externally imposed unto it. As is evident from ongoing policy and scholarly debates over the duties the PRC ought to shoulder as a ‘big developing power’, Chinese approaches to global governance will not always conform to (Western-derived) notions of ‘responsible’ governance prevalent today. For while the People’s Republic has managed, more or less, to acclimatise itself to established notions of responsibility from its past and present engagement with global governance structures, it still retains its own set of indigenous understandings as to what its political obligations are to its people and to other members of this evolving world society.

Second, China is both a rule-taker and a rule-maker. Aside from having expressed a commitment to becoming a responsible country in line with the expectations of the international community, the People’s Republic has also been active in proffering its own interpretations of what being a responsible power signifies. Epitomised by such concepts as ‘harmonious society’ or ‘scientific development’, the Chinese leadership has habitually drawn on the country’s rich culture and history to reinvent pre-existing ideas within the international sphere, affording them with distinctive ‘Chinese’ characteristics. Although some critics have voiced concern over this practice, seeing it as indicative of revisionist intent, it is undeniable that enduring lessons can be distilled from the Chinese experience and that, at times, striking similarities can be drawn between so-called ‘Chinese’ and ‘Western’ ideas.

Questions of practicality aside, attempts by scholars to graft Confucian principles of benign government onto modern notions of ‘good governance’, for instance, are not entirely without reason given the perceptible overlap in the normative content of these ideas. Socialisation, as I have stated before, is an interactive process. It is oftentimes the case that a socializer can concomitantly become a socializee, and vice versa. This consequently requires both sides to be open to mutual learning and dialogue. Particularly when it comes to governing nature, there

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814 While appearing as a somewhat idealistic remark, the overarching rationale for such attempts can, in part, be seen reflected in the following statement by Paul S. Reinsch, former U.S. Minister to China (1913-1919): ‘If the just and peaceable traditions of Chinese civilization can be preserved in Asia, world peace will rest on a more secure foundation than the ingenuity of statesmen could contrive’. Reinsch, ‘The Far East as a Factor in International Developments’, in Edmund A. Walsh (ed.), The History and Nature of International Relations (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969 [1922]), p. 223.
is value to learning from Chinese traditions of environmental statecraft, both responsible and irresponsible. Classical perspectives on the harmonisation of the human-nature relationship clearly complement contemporary ecological thinking on environmental protection and sustainability, whilst others still (e.g. the Maoist fixation with conquering nature) may serve as cautionary reminders of the irrevocable damages caused by unmitigated environmental abuse and rampant neglect.

Third, especially with regard to the realm of ecological governance, each of the cases examined in this study clearly attest to the importance of establishing inclusive, multi-stakeholder arrangements based on a multilevel approach to governance. China’s litmus test vis-à-vis environmental management, in this respect, lies not only with its conduct at the global and regional levels, but equally with its performance domestically. The interconnectedness of these three spheres has made it such that to demonstrate the force of its environmental commitments the PRC will have to meet expectations at all three levels. Both cases of water and disaster governance undoubtedly attest to this. Seeing how the transnational problems posed by natural disasters and transboundary water-sharing can only be addressed effectively through a combination of local institutional fixes and global policy responses, they underscore the necessity of forging cross-cutting partnerships that transcend local, regional, and global divides. In other words, what is required here is the integration of a responsibility-sharing dynamic into extant governing arrangements so as to bring about a more ‘responsive’ system of governance – one better attuned to the multifaceted nature of the non-traditional security threats facing states today.

‘Be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them’. While taken (somewhat out of context) from William Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, these words resonate deeply with the Chinese experience. In contrast to skewed realist depictions of China’s rise that tend to portray its foreign policy as being geared solely towards interest maximisation and the maintenance of relative power, China’s international engagement has proven to be far more complex than what conventional neorealist explanations would allow. Not only has the PRC shown itself to be exceptionally skilled at navigating international hierarchies and dense institutional networks, but it has also paid considerable

815 These words were originally articulated as part of a ruse to trick the steward Malvolio into behaving absurdly in front of Twelfth Night’s main female protagonist Olivia. Taken literally, however, they retain their relevance here.
attention to ideational concerns – or more specifically, to issues of reputation and status. As argued throughout this thesis, the current climate of ideas is such that states can no longer afford to overlook questions of identity and legitimacy which can – and often do – affect their positions within the international system. This is even more so the case for a country like China, which is still in the midst of re-establishing itself on the world stage.

Having had the mantle of greatness and responsibility thrust upon it, the People’s Republic will continue to encounter challenges and tasks unique to its current stage of social and political development, as well as to its position as a major developing power. It is, therefore, important that we do not underestimate the influence that notions of responsibility can exert on the course of China’s international engagement. Even though the normative content of this idea might not always be readily ascertainable, this should not deter scholars from pursuing this line of inquiry further as it promises to yield alternative insights into a relatively understudied dimension of Chinese foreign policy. Because this thesis has focused mainly on China’s involvement in ecological governance, admittedly, there are limits to the generalisability of the conclusions made here. Applying the politics of responsibility to other aspects of Chinese engagement with the existing architecture of global governance would thus promise to open pathways for future research.

As we move beyond minimalist interpretations of international order – defined simply in terms of ‘peaceful coexistence’ – to an understanding of world order based on ‘a system of global governance that institutionalizes cooperation and sufficiently contains conflict such that all nations and their peoples may achieve greater peace and prosperity, improve their stewardship of the earth, and reach minimal standards of human dignity’, the idea of the responsibility of power becomes all the more significant. Without sentiments of duty, there would be no purpose to action. And without a sense of obligation or an imperative to act on the part of states, global governance would not be possible. International relations, in this sense, is not just about power politics, but is a realm deeply saturated with the politics of responsibility.

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