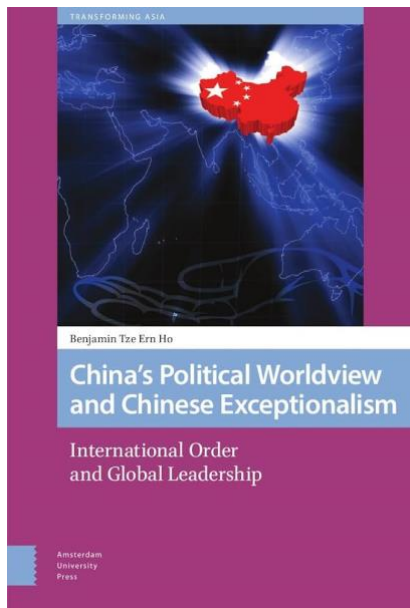


## China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism: A Book Review

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| Title     | : China's Political Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism |
| Author    | : Benjamin Tze Ern Ho                                    |
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This fascinating book is a product of Benjamin Ho's PhD dissertation, examining an interpretative concept of exceptionalism distinct from the Western idea. It presents a systematic and well-constructed analysis of how the rise of China as an emerging global power and its international political perspective is being comprehensively interpreted through Chinese exceptionalism discourse. The comparison of four Chinese IR thoughts and mainstream IR theories derived from realism, liberalism, and constructivism presents multiple views to understand the study of China's international relations. Through his study, Ho unravels China's exceptionalism in perceiving itself as different and unique in conducting international relations, particularly after President Xi Jinping took office in 2012. Ho further identifies how it influences the dynamics of China's political actions in the existing international order and the possibility of China's attempts to establish its preferred world order vis-à-vis the Western-led. A well-combined elaboration of historical, domestic political, cultural value, and sociological factors provides more inclusive outlooks determining the motivation and the way Chinese leaders and policymakers think about and propose expansive strategies to promote Beijing's norms and objectives to the international realm.

The book primarily focuses on articulating the notion of Chinese exceptionalism in deeply perceiving China's political worldview concerning the world order and international relations that intertwine with the global community. The main objective is to provide a holistic explanation of Chinese exceptionalism in conceiving its global ambitions, which are closely influenced by the interaction between domestic and international politics. Ho conducts his research using qualitative methodology derived from primary and secondary sources, including in-depth interview methods and discourse analysis, involving academics, policymakers, intellectuals, and scholars from China, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore. He examines perspectives from Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore as case studies.

The book's central argument is that Chinese exceptionalism fundamentally affects how China sees the outside world and its viewpoints toward international relations. The sense of exceptionalism portrays Chinese nationalistic pride as tremendous and different in its global vision since thousands of years ago. Ho points out that the concept of exceptionalism frames Chinese leaders' mindsets and behaviors to prominently stress its claim about China's self-identity as being better and different from the Rest. What makes his exceptionalism framework different is that it comprehends a critical overview of China's role as an emerging global power that presents relevance to the outside world and significant influence to other countries that Beijing engages with, albeit posing potential challenges to the Western domination in the global system. However, Ho emphasizes from the beginning that the notion of Chinese exceptionalism is not the only factor in analyzing China's interaction with the international community because other key factors should be considered.

Ho properly utilizes Chinese and mainstream IR theoretical resources to see how these different ideas are compared and incorporated to explain China's manners and thinking about the global order and international relations. From his point of view, the so-called Chinese indigenous paradigms emphasize the Sino-centric approach shaped by Chinese historical experiences, political system, and cultural values – distinguished from the Western-centric – which tend to be politicized by the interests and policies of Chinese domestic politics and the communist party.

On the one hand, Ho explores how the issue of identity and its contradiction influences China's claim of exceptionalism and its internal and external affairs. The problem is that China still faces certain domestic social and political challenges between the state and its citizens, which will affect the political narrative of Chinese exceptionalism. On the other hand, Ho also considers the importance of China's positive national image in promoting its self-recognition as being exceptional and better than the Rest as so to be universally and morally acceptable. Nevertheless, to conceive the broader framework of China's exceptionalism and its worldview, it is necessary to infer not only Chinese-based thoughts from the aspect of morality, relationality, and

emotional affectivity, but also the Western-based paradigms about power politics and statehood.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's response to the changes in domestic and international situations. In chapter five, Ho reveals that the BRI represents Beijing's soft power in terms of political economy to promote China's integration and more significant role in the regional and global realm. However, according to what he mentioned, BRI poses some challenges embedded in its objective ambiguity and its legitimacy by other countries. Meanwhile, many scholars are skeptical about the emergence of China's global initiatives. However, the relationship between China and the existing initiatives cannot be inferred only from a single approach and its implications to global governance as an 'exit option' to replace the ruling ones. Thus, Chinese-led initiatives are partially challenging and complementing the existing Western initiatives they conform to while presenting a challenge to global governance.

In chapters six and seven, Ho examines the perception of Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Singaporean scholars and policymakers in understanding China's exceptionalism, regional influence, and foreign relations in Southeast Asia. Most respondents express pessimism over China's exceptionalism and regional influence. In Vietnam, the rise of China's influence and its impacts on Sino-Vietnam relations is not perceived positively. Instead, most of them express contradictory perceptions of China as exceptional, particularly regarding the issue of territorial disputes. In case of Indonesia, although both sides currently synergize each other into a strategic and comprehensive bilateral relationship under the scheme of BRI, the ups and downs of their diplomatic history leave suspicion and mistrust towards China's long-term objectives in Southeast Asia, which is likely to counterbalance the US influence in the region. On the other hand, Singapore, which embraces the West, has a complex relationship with China and meets with a skeptical view towards Beijing's political worldview.

Generally speaking, Ho's motivation for conducting research on Chinese exceptionalism is well-illustrated in the book's first chapter, discussing the introduction of Chinese exceptionalism discourse and the research design. In this book, he also successfully identifies the research problem comprehensively. His arguments and presentation of the research findings are consistent with the research's objective, methodology, and limitations. His empirical and theoretical approaches expand his ideas about China's international relations and the sense of its exceptionalism, which is specifically seen from the Chinese paradigm. However, it would be much better if he presented a brief evaluation of previous research as a comparison that might cover related research problems. Although he uses a qualitative approach that tends to be descriptive and explanative, he elaborates on the types of research, sources and data collection, and analysis methods in a detailed and well-structured manner. The proposed research questions are not complicated or obvious and represent an actual

scientific contribution relevant to the current global political constellation. Throughout this book, the reader discovers a good framework for understanding China's political worldview with a qualitative approach.

In addition, Ho's standpoints accentuate a comprehensive understanding to the reader in perceiving China's international relations from Beijing's perspective, a slightly different outlook from what we have seen through the lens of the West. Since much literature on exceptionalism tends to represent America's perspective, his presentation of Chinese exceptionalism describes different features contrary to Western thought. In chapter two, Ho not only compares the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western IR theories but also combines some of their features to show how they can be correlated. Although he does not provide a more in-depth examination, his comparative theoretical analysis has sufficiently shown how he develops the existing scientific ideas to legitimate his arguments. However, the most challenging part is to deeply understand the issue of identity, discontentment, and complexity in the state and individual relationships regarding their outlook toward China's rise and its global vision.

Despite Ho's book offering reasonable interpretations and explanations of Chinese exceptionalism discourse, some possible aspects need to be considered. First, using three case studies of Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore is insufficient to understand China's political worldview and exceptionalism dynamics in depth. It neglects the importance of other states beyond the Southeast Asian region, such as the Middle East and Latin America, that may have positive perceptions and support toward China and become its key regions in the future. For instance, China's regional security architecture in the Middle Eastern region has changed in recent years, showing China's well-accommodating diplomacy upon reconciliation efforts towards conflicting factions in Palestine, including mediating Saudi Arabia and Iran. It can also be analyzed how this issue is connected with Chinese exceptionalism discourse. Second, Ho shall consider the general public's views towards China's political worldview and Chinese exceptionalism to avoid elite-centric perspectives by conducting public surveys in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore. It can also present a thorough lens if he can reach less influential groups and their understandings of China. Third, it becomes more interesting if the book presents Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore's strategies to navigate Chinese exceptionalism.