

# How China Constructs Cultural Self-confidence

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## Abstract

Cultural self-confidence and its implications for China's domestic and foreign affairs have become a focus of attention in Chinese IR discourse and cultural studies since 2010. As analysts consider that China's international relations policy-makers draw from ideas and understandings about cultural self-confidence from domestic debates and discussions on the concept. This paper investigates how cultural self-confidence is understood by Chinese scholars and why they recognise it as now imperative at this point for China's development. In so doing, it aims to provide insights into some of the concepts that may influence China's 'self-confidence' narrative in its foreign policy messaging. The focus of discussion on scholarly writings is limited to journal articles that have been associated with studies funded by the Chinese government since their views are expected to align to some degree or another, with the broad direction of China's internal 'discourse-power building. Indeed, the discussion of the concept of cultural self-confidence is aligned with China's objective of enhancing its discourse power through promoting soft power and public diplomacy, and finally leading to the realisation of the China Dream. The influence of domestic scholarly discussions on cultural self-confidence on China's foreign policy is potentially significant. It not only reflects how China's emerging discourse power views its global position, but also indicates how China expects others to view it.

**Keywords:** Cultural self-confidence; China; scholars; soft power; discourse power; international relations

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## Introduction

The concept of Cultural Self-confidence has gained extensive attention in China since 2010, after publication of three articles by Yun Shan<sup>1)</sup> in the Chinese official journal *Red Flag Manuscript (Hongqi Wengao)*. These articles defined cultural self-confidence as “a nation’s full affirmation of the value of its culture” (Yun, 2010, p.4). More recently, political authorities appear to have reframed China’s pursuit of soft power as an exercise in building cultural self-confidence. As a strategy to counter the growing influence of Western culture and to project Chinese culture, the concept is increasingly aligned to China’s soft power and public diplomacy strategies. For example, Li (2008), an international relations (IR) scholar at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, pointed out that China’s soft power discourse revealed “a lack of confidence and forcefulness” (“China Debates Soft Power” p. 307).

Studying China’s domestic discussion amongst IR and other scholars is crucial in understanding foreign policy strategies. Recent scholarship from International Relation (IR) experts argues that the field of IR scholarship in China is not a monolith and that scholars are active in expressing diverse opinions on many policy issues to “best serve China’s national interests” (Feng & He, 2019, p. 109). Given the increasing role that IR scholars play in providing advice and suggestions to policy makers in China, studying Chinese scholarly research can contribute to better understanding “what Chinese policy makers might think and what they might do in world politics in the future” (Feng et al., 2019, p. 193). Thus, this paper is intended to take a similar lens and investigate how state-funded scholarly articles rationalise cultural self-confidence in order to help contribute to the development of this concept. Overall, scholarly opinions on cultural self-confidence are consistent with the policy positions of the Chinese government. Scholarly discussion agrees with the application of cultural self-confidence in China’s domestic and foreign policies, and in this way government policy is reinforced by the contribution of Chinese scholarship, which provides more insights into culture, definitions of cultural self-confidence, and why and how to enhance cultural self-confidence.

Most writings by Chinese scholars and analysts within the international relations (IR) field are in Chinese language, so little appears in English-language journals. The principal aim of this study is therefore to present and appraise empirical evidence of their views and to enrich understanding of the conceptual construction of cultural self-confidence as a vital component of an emerging diplomatic strategy for China. In addition, exploring Chinese scholars’ discussion and debates about cultural self-confidence is valuable for three reasons in particular. First, these debates provide a new perspective on a Chinese foreign policy strategy as well as on the role of Chinese IR scholars in Chinese foreign policymaking. Second, this project seeks to bridge the perception gap between the Chinese scholarly (particularly IR) community and the outside world. Third, this project has strong policy relevance for both

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1) The name “Yun Shan” used in the paper is a pseudonym for Liu Yunshan, the former leader of the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China, as confirmed by Shanxi Daily in 2010.

China and the international community.

This paper includes five sections. The first provides context by briefly considering uses of cultural self-confidence as a political concept in a number of important official. The second explores how cultural self-confidence is understood in China, while the third section examines why cultural self-confidence is seen to be highly significant at this point in China's development. The fourth section discusses the mechanisms that underpin the scholars' influence on China's foreign policy. The fifth analyses the implications of cultural self-confidence for China's management of international relations.

### **Context of developing cultural self-confidence within China**

Growing political and academic interest in the concept of *cultural self-confidence* in China now sees this term appearing frequently in government documents, scholarly articles and books, and media reports. This frequency indicates that cultural self-confidence is being rhetorically developed as an increasingly indispensable component of how China seeks to engage with the world, and particularly here, how Chinese citizens need to carry out their international engagement to most effectively contribute. As an approach to foreign policy carried out at popular as well as official levels, and one that is vital for telling the world China's story on Chinese terms, cultural self-confidence is seen to have the potential to make a valuable contribution to China's public diplomacy strategies for developing discourse power as a form of soft power for China.

The cultural self-confidence concept has attracted significant attention from top Chinese leaders. In 2011, then Chinese President Hu Jintao clearly proposed the concept of cultural self-confidence for the first time, in his speech at the 90th Anniversary Gathering of the Communist Party of China. He claimed:

As culture has increasingly become an important factor in competition for overall national strength, we must have a keen sense of our own cultural identity, have confidence in our culture, focus on raising the quality of our nation and shaping a noble character, redouble efforts to promote cultural reform and development, carry out cultural innovation in the great practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and enable the people to share in cultural achievements (Hu, 2011, para. 52).

In 2011, Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China Concerning Deepening Cultural Structural Reform in the Sixth Plenary Session of the 17th Congress of CPC proposed "training [people in] high-level cultural consciousness and cultural self-confidence" to build a "strong socialist-culture country" ("Central Committee of", 2011, para. 8). The reference here is an important indicator that cultural self-confidence had been endowed with significance as a political term for the first time in China's history. From there, its popularity and use have increased in both scholarly and political arenas.

President Xi Jinping has attached ever greater importance to cultural traditions since he came to power in late 2012, as reflected in his public speeches on various occasions. For example, on 1 July 2016, at a celebration of the 95th anniversary of the founding of the CPC, Xi Jinping delivered a speech in which he added cultural self-confidence to the three self-confidences initially proposed by Hu Jintao at the 18th National Congress. The three self-confidences refer to the chosen path, the guiding theory, and the political system. Xi's speech is considered to indicate the formation of "Xi Jinping Thought" on cultural self-confidence. Xi stressed the importance of cultural self-confidence, among other things, by stating that it is a "more fundamental, broader, and deeper form of self-confidence" (Xi, 2017, para. 36). This statement emerges from the belief that culture is embedded within the frameworks of both economy and politics and has a continuing impact on people's thinking, thereby affecting not only people's current thought and behaviour, but also their potential thought and behaviour (H. Liu & Wang, 2018).

The report of the 19th National Congress in 2017 further strengthened the importance of this concept by including it in the basic national strategy for developing socialism with Chinese characteristics. In the report, Xi stated that "cultural confidence represents a fundamental and profound force that sustains the development of a country and a nation" (p. 19), and "without full confidence in our culture, without a rich and prosperous culture, the Chinese nation will not be able to rejuvenate itself" (p. 36).

Then, in November 2021, the Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century noted that "since the 18th National Congress, we have seen a sweeping and fundamental shift in the ideological domain, a notable boost in confidence in our culture among all Party members and all Chinese people, and a major increase in cohesiveness throughout society" (p. 38). This statement indicates official acknowledgement of the continuing importance attached to the concept of cultural self-confidence nationwide.

Discussion in the two sections below concerns two key questions about the messages these journal articles convey: (1) *what* is cultural self-confidence and (2) *why* does China need to promote cultural self-confidence? This discussion – looking "inward" to examine debates about cultural self-confidence in general – sheds light on how scholarly discussion helps to bolster the understanding and promotion of cultural self-confidence as a key "external" stance for China. The dominant messages of these articles constitute a key posturing that has come to define how the CPC wants to situate China's influence in the world.

### **What is cultural self-confidence?**

Scholarly literature reveals the absence of consensus on what "cultural self-confidence" means. Nevertheless, four key perspectives dominate. One, reflected in the work of Liu and Liu (2019), conveys the overriding importance of culture for understanding this concept. In this sense, cultural self-confidence is defined as "confidence and trust in the role of culture, its

vitality, creativity and influence” (H. Liu & Wang, 2018, p. 116). Just as *culture* includes material, social, and spiritual culture, cultural self-confidence involves faith in a wide range of entities such as family, food, housing, country, society, history, religion, and philosophy (H. Liu & Wang, 2018). Here the weight attached to cultural self-confidence is determined by the importance of the myriad aspects of culture (Qin & Wang, 2017).

The second view, introduced by Qin and Wang (2017), focuses on the holders of cultural self-confidence, recognising two levels: (i) country/nation/party; and (ii) people. For cultural self-confidence at the first level, the country, nation, or political party “correctly views its own culture, clearly understands both the rich connotations of this culture and the value of the times and has full confidence in the vitality and development prospects of this culture” (p. 61). Cultural self-confidence at the second level requires that all citizens of China acknowledge the identity and values of Chinese national culture and have positive attitudes towards it (Qin & Wang, 2017).

The third perspective understands cultural self-confidence from its sources. The majority of Chinese scholars abide by President Xi Jinping’s views of the source of China’s cultural self-confidence:

China’s fine traditional culture, which was born out of more than 5,000 years of civilization, and its revolutionary and advanced socialist culture, which was born out of the great struggles of the CPC and the people, house the deepest aspirations of the Chinese people, representing a unique symbol of our nation (Xi, 2016, para. 35).

The last view looks at the relationship between cultural self-confidence and the other three self-confidences. Xi Jinping has singled out cultural self-confidence as most important among the four confidences, urging that “we must strengthen our confidence in the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, in theory and in systems. In the final analysis, we must strengthen our confidence in culture” (Xi, 2016, para. 30). Qin & Wang (2017) have observed that adding cultural self-confidence to the three confidences identified earlier enables the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics to become “more persuasive and attractive” (p.66). This link indicates the fundamental role of cultural self-confidence in enabling the conditions necessary for socialism with Chinese characteristics, such as ideological support for the other confidences, and the newly proposed concepts for China’s development, such as the China dream. Among the four definitions, the prevailing definition is that cultural self-confidence is confidence in China’s fine traditional, revolutionary, and advanced socialist culture (Zhu, 2019). Domestic scholars study cultural self-confidence in the context of China, and not at a global level, positioning them to identify cultural self-confidence as the confidence of the Communist Party of China, the Chinese nation, and the Chinese people in the Chinese nation’s socialist system (Gao, 2018).

Scholars express differing opinions about the interpretations of the priorities in conceptualising cultural self-confidence. Some stress the importance of integrating socialist ideology into the

cultural self-confidence debate. In terms of theory, they promote the sinicisation of Marxism as a concept that can be situated within the broad gamut of promoting cultural self-confidence. Ma and Ma (2018) have considered that subsuming sinicised Marxism as intrinsic to contemporary Chinese cultural ideas gives major ideological guidance for China to rebuild its cultural self-confidence. For example, some traditional ideas consistent with this theory, such as “harmony is most precious (*yiheweigui*)” and the need for “harmony without uniformity (*he'erbutong*)” have been developed into the modern idea of “a community of [a] shared future for humankind”, which Xi Jinping has championed. This concept has been implanted with new meanings, especially in dealing with international affairs, to convey that promoting the diversity of civilisations is better than advocating for a one-size-fits-all political system (Xin, 2017). “A community of shared future for humankind” implies that countries should respect and learn from and with each other rather than exclude each other (Xin, 2017).

Other scholars debate the relative importance of Western culture as a key influence on the degree to which the Chinese nation can claim sufficient cultural self-confidence. While acknowledging the values of Western culture, there are different interpretations of the attitudes China should take. Some scholars claim that development of cultural self-confidence in China does not necessitate total abrogation of Western influence, and they argue that cultural self-confidence requires learning from the positive and useful aspects of the culture of foreign countries. This statement originates from the advocacy of the reform and opening-up policy, which highlighted the need to learn from the advanced aspects of the West, while remaining loyal to national independence, self-determination, and self-reliance (Han, 1996). Therefore, the correct way for China to engage with the West is to “neither advocate wholesale Westernization nor negate it in wholesale fashion” (Han, 1996, p. 90). In this case, various elements including advanced technology; positive aspects of literature, the arts, ethics, and philosophy; and even the rational and scientific elements in economic theories, policies, and legislation from the West are all considered beneficial in the construction of a globally beneficial productive force (Han, 1996). Other scholars, while supporting learning from other cultures, emphasise the significance of increasing cultural compatibility with peoples and cultures outside China to help cultivate mutual tolerance. They point to the importance of learning and absorbing foreign cultures because cultural self-confidence is, after all, built on qualities such as tolerance, adaptability, inclusiveness, and self-reflection (Xu et al., 2018). They see that a country with open-minded cultural self-confidence is willing to accept elements of other cultures without worry about assimilation, and that country can objectively judge and make clear responses to “bad” culture, rather than being wary of foreign cultures (Meng, 2017).

Others are more cautious about how to deal with the Western culture. Liu (2018) raised concerns about the difficulty in integrating the Western culture. They claimed that how to handle the relationship between security and insecurity in cultural integration between China and foreign countries is a major challenge for cultural development in the new era. Taking a more balanced approach, Peng and Zhang (2019) claimed that insisting on a rational and inclusive cultural disposition does not mean worshipping Western culture blindly and without

scrutiny, otherwise it would be easy to swing to the other extreme (Peng & Zhang, 2019). In the same vein, Meng (2017) noted that China must not only study critically excellent elements of Western culture, but also be vigilant in guarding against cultural invasion and penetration in order to prevent cultural aggression and cultural hegemony in the benign name of cultural exchange. Zhang (2018) has approached this issue more pragmatically. They offered two suggestions about how Chinese people can learn from foreign culture to better serve China. One suggestion is to make consistent the foreign culture from which Chinese people may learn with the ideology embraced by China's socialist system. The other suggestion is to integrate the cultural achievements of foreign countries with conditions in China, such as Chinese customs and values. However, these evaluation criteria are still not clear enough for classifying "welcome" and "unwelcome" foreign cultures, so they will result in confusion between cultural tolerance and cultural repulsion in the understandings and behaviours of the Chinese public.

The final factor that affects the interpretation of cultural self-confidence involves emphasis on helping Chinese people live a prosperous and satisfying life. In this context, there is a general consensus among scholars calling for cultural satisfaction among Chinese people. Wu and Ma (2018) argued that an important measure of cultural self-confidence is whether it can meet people's cultural needs and spiritual pursuits, including work and faith (Wu & Ma, 2018). Similarly, Luo (2018) opined that the construction of cultural self-confidence must adhere to the principle of "people's culture" and to the people-centred cultural work orientation. This, in turn, will enhance cultural identity in the process of identifying cultural needs (Ye & Mao, 2019). This statement stems from the notion that realising cultural self-confidence relies on acknowledging China's cultural values, and the prerequisite for a positive assessment of cultural values is based on fulfilling people's cultural needs (Ye & Mao, 2019).

## **Why China needs to promote cultural self-confidence**

Why has China so enthusiastically promoted the concept of cultural self-confidence and what is the significance of this? Chinese scholars have approached these questions from two angles: internally, where cultural self-confidence has been regarded as meeting the essential conditions from historical, practical and political perspectives, and it is also closely related to political and ideological security, and externally, where it can promote soft power in ways that are intended to enhance discourse power and offer Chinese wisdom to the world.

### ***Internal factors***

Internally, the dominant view among Chinese scholars is that the situation in China today meets all the requirements for reconstructing national cultural self-confidence. Specifically, the official proposal to reconstruct cultural self-confidence has three bases: historical, practical, and political. Cultural self-confidence stems first from a historical basis (Wang & Zhong, 2017). The concept of cultural self-confidence stems from a crisis of "lack of cultural

confidence” in modern China (Zhao, 2018). The dominant narrative on the importance of cultural self-confidence is closely related to the “century of humiliation” during the 19th and 20th centuries. Until 1840, Chinese people had faith in their culture, which was seen as advanced by comparison with other nations’ cultures. However, China’s national power declined through a series of military defeats, from the first Opium War (1839-1842) to the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the consequential unequal treaties China was forced to accept, as well as through the political unravelling of the Qing Dynasty. The successive downturns convinced prominent scholars at the time that Chinese culture was backward and should be seen as responsible for China’s failures. These developments resulted in the collapse of China’s cultural self-confidence, which impacted Chinese people’s views of all aspects of their culture (Wu, 2018). Consequently, the peoples’ relative lack of cultural self-confidence has seriously affected China’s cultural power and ideological security, as both scholars and central political authorities appraise. One further reason for the cultural self-confidence drive has been increasing recognition within China of the qualities of China’s heritage and history. Chinese scholars have claimed that China’s long and splendid cultural traditions, and heritage and vast resources, can provide a solid foundation for China to re-establish cultural self-confidence (Zhu, 2019). For example, Wang Yuxin (2017) argued that the uninterrupted 5000 years of Chinese civilisation, together with socialist thought with a history of 500 years in the world, and China’s 100 years of leadership under the CPC, are precious resources for the development of cultural self-confidence in 21<sup>st</sup> century China.

Secondly, cultural self-confidence has its practical basis. More recently, an additional source of national pride is the era of economic and social modernisation since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Scholars such as Lei (2016) and Jing (2018) note that China’s recent cultural self-confidence results from significant national achievements, through the great success of contemporary China’s development—from economic development to the increasing life satisfaction of Chinese people. China has developed into a global power, with its economy, measured in nominal exchange rate terms, the world’s second largest below only the United States since 2010. It is also the major trading partner of over 140 countries worldwide. Consequently, the Chinese government and its national development model have gained more trust from the Chinese people. Given the important role of economic development in realising cultural self-confidence, China’s rapid economic rise will continue to enhance the confidence of Chinese people in their nation’s culture. The value of a culture in most senses depends not on the culture itself, but on the social conditions to which the culture is attached (H, Wang, 2017). The same culture may appear to be excellent or weak differently, depending upon its social development background (H, Wang, 2017). It is widely believed that if a nation loses strength in these areas of development, its culture will also weaken (C. Liu & Wang, 2018). Chinese leaders have a clear vision of the important position that economic and political power can play in promoting culture in the international community.

Thirdly, the source of cultural self-confidence has a political basis. While it is evident that the Chinese government strongly promotes cultural self-confidence in its policies, it could be argued that this is largely to counteract negative perceptions of culture within its borders.



Chen (2018) suggests the promotion of cultural self-confidence is a strategic move tailored to oppose Western-oriented culture theory and eliminate national and cultural inferiority. Cultural self-confidence plays a significant role in political discourse, with Wang & Deng (2017) linking it to the success and failure of the establishment of socialism with Chinese characteristics. C. Liu and Wang (2018) go further, proposing that cultural self-confidence offers strategic support for China's independence and rise, especially since culture could be a catalyst for strong national cohesion and influence domestically, and a tool to project soft power internationally. The pursuit of cultural self-confidence could, however, be perceived as a lack of awareness within China of the uniqueness and importance of Chinese values. Some scholars argue that many social problems in China stem from this deficit, that is, insufficient appreciation of Chinese culture (Li & Ru, 2017). Fei Xiaotong, a notable Chinese anthropologist, was first to put forward the concept of cultural self-awareness (*wenhua zijue*) in the public arena in 1997. In his opinion, those living within a specific culture must first “know themselves, know where they came from, how their culture developed, its distinguishing features, and how it is evolving” (2015, p.43). A prominent held viewpoint is that contemporary Chinese society exhibits a tangible disconnect from its rich cultural heritage, especially traditional culture, thus leading to the partial failure of cultural inheritance (Hu, 2012). Critics like Hu (2012) suggest that the culture of Chinese language, arts, and ways of thinking has been passed down through generations, but in the contemporary period Chinese people have largely abandoned these long-standing cultural values and philosophy such as that of Confucius and Buddhism, as well as the social and scientific knowledge in ancient works. This purported cultural distance, some argue, has rendered the Chinese populace unsure about the place of traditional culture in contemporary society. Wang and Pan (2017) without presenting any empirical evidence, argue that some challenges have prevented Chinese traditional culture from being effectively integrated into self-confidence. For example, the sentiments of cultural superiority, inferiority, and confusion have led to an uncertain situation of how to reconstruct traditional culture, what role traditional culture plays in a national cultural system, and what is its relationship to all of the world's outstanding cultural achievements.

In analysing the role of cultural self-confidence in China's ideological stance, it emerges as a potential shield against Western influence. Significantly here, in the context of globalisation and the rapid advancements in internet technology, the concern that people being exposed to and gradually influenced by different cultures, as noted by Zhao (2020), will lead to a genuine ideological shift. While C. Liu and Wang (2018) discuss concerns of a possible ideological infiltration from Western nations, it is worth considering the broader implications of this. Huang (2019) delves into the strategic nuances of cultural diplomacy, suggesting that the West has employed culture as a tool for “peaceful evolution” within China. They suggest that Western nations have leveraged their perceived cultural superiority, including establishing dominant international cultural standards. They imply that these efforts have dictated global narratives that are unfavourable to China, positioning China with a discourse system of binary opposition between civilization and barbarism, democracy and autocracy, and advanced and backward. These dichotomies draw lines of contrast in realms of civilization. Because of the strength of Western influence, a number of Chinese people

believe that the Western civilization is superior to Chinese and so argue that China should abandon its traditions and become completely Westernised (C. Liu & Wang, 2018). Scholars such as Shao and Bai (2019) have expressed concerns about the security of China's socialist ideology and have offered a proposal for bolstering China's core socialist values and national spirit to counteract the perceived negative impacts of Western ideas. Others have argued that core socialist values and national spirit can be realised only after Chinese people become more confident in their culture (Liu & Liu, 2019).

### *External factors*

Projecting cultural self-confidence 'outward' to the world, involves promoting China to the world and contributing Chinese wisdom to global governance. As China's prominence in global politics and economics rises, there's a discernible emphasis on soft power tactics, aimed not just at increasing cultural export but also at carving a distinct space for Chinese narratives in international dialogues. Over the past decade, China is reported to have invested US\$10 billion annually in amplifying its soft power. Such investments primarily manifest in activities such as aid, cultural and educational exchanges, and global media outreach.

More recently, Chinese self-confidence appears to be increasingly aligned with China's soft power and public diplomacy activities. Culture is the core concept that connects cultural self-confidence, soft power and public diplomacy. Cultural self-confidence emphasises having faith in Chinese culture and values. Accordingly, soft power and public diplomacy embrace culture as the most important source of their promotion; therefore, they are primarily interpreted by Chinese scholars and officials through a cultural lens. When advocating cultural self-confidence and promoting soft power on different occasions, Chinese President Xi Jinping used the same words to show the important role of culture by claiming that "Culture is a country and nation's soul. Our country will thrive only if our culture thrives, and our nation will be strong only if our culture is strong" (Xi, 2017, p.36). Due to the rise in its economy and politics, China's public diplomacy has developed to a new direction, with focus shifted from "listening to the world" to "telling China's story" (Zhao, 2019). This change requires that China's public diplomacy place more weight on the projection of cultural self-confidence to show the real China to the world, promote a Chinese discourse power, and improve China's communication capacity in the international community (Zhao, 2019). While cultural self-confidence offers an important underpinning to China's soft power narrative and public diplomacy projections, the cultivation of soft power, in return, serves as a source for cultural self-confidence. This alignment stems from the fact that all competitions ultimately converge into a competition of cultural soft power (Sun, 2019).

Over time, scholarly discussion about cultural self-confidence discourse has gradually expanded to incorporate broader discussions about how China can best project itself to the world. Chinese scholars agree that cultural self-confidence and international discourse power are mutually reinforcing. They believe that international discourse power plays an important role in China's soft power and public diplomacy initiatives. Increasing China's discourse

power to the world has become one of the central tasks of China's public diplomacy. Chinese authorities nowadays attach more importance to discourse power on the assumption that a country's discourse power is closely related to the rights of setting an agenda, making rules, and expanding influence in international affairs (Zuo & Zhao, 2019). This growing attention paid to discourse power is also related to the unfriendly international environment. The prevailing China threat theory in most Western countries has generated negative public views that cast China in a certain adversarial light, deemed by many Chinese scholars as biased and exaggerated. They often regard it as a term created by the West in order to contain China's growth. Another reason for the negative perception is the misunderstanding from the West due to its lack of knowledge of Chinese history and culture. To address both issues, China needs to be heard and understood by foreign publics.

Therefore, Chinese leaders and intellectuals began to suggest creating a discourse system with Chinese characteristics—a system with features using its own words to explain its success, problems and future in a way that can be understood by ordinary people and foreign people. The concepts that have been proposed with Chinese features include the China Dream, Harmonious Society and Harmonious World, and A Community of Shared Future for All Mankind. Although China has made progress in enhancing its international discourse power over the past decades, it is considerably weak compared to its political and economic development. Some of the new discourses have not gained the expected traction, especially in the international arena (Boer, 2021). One possible reason for this is the coexistence and collision of various ideological ideas such as historical nihilism, wholesale westernization and neoliberalism which severely impact how Chinese discourse functions (Long & Lin, 2018). Chinese scholars mostly attribute the weakness in promoting a Chinese discursive system internationally to Western long-established cultural hegemony and China's hesitancy and passiveness in its culture promotion (Zhao, 2018). One Chinese scholar further pointed out that China's lack of competence in agenda-setting and establishing efficient communication methods also contribute to the weakness in discursive power (Hu & Liu, 2020). Some of the challenges that hinder China's ability to engage in discourse power can be, to a certain extent, attributed to the lack of cultural self-confidence.

### **Scholarly discussion: information model**

To understand China's foreign policymaking, an important aspect involves an analysis of the domestic discussion within China by Chinese IR scholars and other academic scholars. Feng and He have emphasised the "unique value" of Chinese scholars in helping understand China's foreign policy by pointing out that China's domestic scholarly debates are "more dynamic than widely perceived" in the West (Feng & He, 2019, p. 4). These IR scholars, they argue, keep China's state security and development in mind while attempting to aid the government with policy promotion or advocate policy change. Through investigating IR scholarly views, people can "better assess how Chinese policymakers may think, behave, and react on major issues in IR" (Feng & He, 2019, p. 4). Although scholars agree it is indeed

difficult to calculate the precise extent to which scholars impact foreign policy, they nevertheless believe that their importance cannot be ignored (Zheng, 2016). To better understand this impact, several analytical models have been proposed to examine the mechanisms of such influence. For example, Feng and He (2019) proposed four models: the epistemic community model, the free market model, the signalling model, and the mirroring policy model. The four models are not designed to be mutually exclusive (Pu, 2017), and they all have their merits. Pu and Wang (2018) suggested the information model, based on the last two of these models, featuring a mutually influential dynamic between academic discussion and policymakers. Therefore, this information model is considered more appropriate to analyse the state-funded articles because IR scholars, on the one hand, “reflect the orientation of Chinese policy-makers” because the Chinese government can “use funding opportunities to shape the research agenda of scholars” (Pu & Wang, 2018, p. 1022). While, on the other hand, they can also provide feedback for policymakers through various events such as interviews and conferences (Pu & Wang, 2018).

Three features have been identified to elucidate the operational framework of the information model, showcasing how Chinese scholarly discussions contribute to the development of cultural self-confidence concept while also providing feedback and suggestions to policymakers. First, scholarly discussion here has been large-scale and rapid, as data from CNKI, the most popular Chinese language scholarly database indicates. As discussion below of scholarly publications on this topic reveals, in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the concept of “cultural self-confidence” attracted considerable interest in China’s academic arena.

Second, scholarly discussion of a concept can equip the public with better understanding of its implications. When a concept is proposed or even politically emphasised, it might appear only briefly in the speeches of leaders or official documents, making it difficult for the public to clearly comprehend. Ordinary people then need to rely on academic experts who can provide deep insight into its meaning. This is particularly true for the cultural self-confidence concept, because carriers of Chinese culture, who are now required to have cultural self-confidence, are not only the authorities or elites in China, but are also citizens across the entire country.

To realise the national goal of constructing and projecting cultural self-confidence, the public needs to have an elementary understanding of cultural self-confidence, why it needs to be promoted, and how it can be enhanced. Chinese scholars can play a role in helping the public address these issues. “Ordinary” people do not generally read scholarly articles, but media serve well to carry scholars’ ideas to the public, including various media channels that present interviews where scholars can express their opinions. Prominent IR scholars such as Zhang Weiwei and Yan Xuetong, use online platforms through which they express opinions on China’s domestic and foreign policies, and cultural self-confidence has been often discussed. For example, in the well-known TV show [*Zhe Jiu shi Zhongguo*] (*China Now*), key speaker Zhang Weiwei who, often actively involved with activities in support of Chinese government’s discourse, devoted one episode (episode 39) to Chinese culture in promoting cultural self-confidence. The new media ecology such as social media and digital media can

also provide a platform for the public to express their opinions on this topic.

Third, scholarly discussion, to a large extent, represents and reflects the requirements of China's policies. In China, the government often sets the focus and provides guidance for research topics and, in turn, the results are expected to facilitate further policymaking. Detailed meanings attributed to political terminology are often fleshed out by scholars in think tanks and universities. Scholars evidently follow the political trend in their research area and intuitively take responsibility for elaborating and explaining policy and political concepts. However, helping interpret policy does not mean scholars accept everything that officials propose. In fact, scholars' opinions often differ from or even conflict with government policy and concepts. Feng and He (2019) have argued that "many scholars have seriously and diligently used their knowledge to challenge official policies as well as offer valuable recommendations to the Chinese government" (p. 200). On cultural self-confidence, scholars have reached general agreement about the importance of promoting this concept among Chinese people, yet differences remain among scholars in their understandings of what the concept means and the priority for various approaches and challenges to enhancing cultural self-confidence.

While I have not argued that there is direct causal effect between scholarly writing on cultural self-confidence and policymaking, an examination of thinking and debates within the field of scholars whose research is state-funded indicates what the "perceptual parameter" (Feng & He, 2019, p. 4) of opinions and thoughts exist that policymakers are able to be drawn on to develop rationales for cultural self-confidence in domestic and IR policy. The "perceptual parameter" means the broad gamut of published opinions and ideas that can be used as a resource for articulating arguments about a certain issue or subject. Arguments for or against a certain issue found within a perceptual parameter not only enables an outsider to understand what actions or constraints Chinese leaders might face in policy-making, but also can potentially assist in predicting their future behaviour (Feng & He, 2019, p. 7).

### **Implications of cultural self-confidence for China's international relations**

Understanding the reasoning of scholars in relation to the "what" and "why" of cultural self-confidence, as discussed above, gives context to the debates about how this discourse is being put to use to promote China's image internationally. The main implication is that the internal discussions about the worthiness of cultural self-confidence largely align with IR scholars' arguments about the importance for China of exhibiting cultural self-confidence in *international affairs*. *This is not to suggest any alignment of understanding among all who are involved, or that this proves a direct causal link between developments of the content of "internal" discussions about what cultural self-confidence is and why it is important, and the content of "external" IR debates in Chinese academic and diplomatic circles about China's place in the world.*

One of the most significant implications of the development of the cultural self-confidence

narrative in Chinese academia and policy is that cultural self-confidence has now become an indispensable component of China's grand strategy in relation to the way it presents itself to the world. Chinese diplomats and foreign policy experts, like the majority of Chinese scholars who study this topic, argue that China needs to promote its confidence to ensure cultural security internationally by lessening the complex, inappropriate sentiments on the domestic front. Consequently, the concept of cultural self-confidence will become clear in the process of struggling against cultural inferiority and superiority (Xiao & Zhang, 2018). Fulfilling the China Dream of National Rejuvenation requires that China develop its confidence in soft power and public diplomacy strategies to enhance its international discourse power and play a more important role in the global community.

The second major observation that can be made in light of the discussion above is that the concept of cultural self-confidence is consistent with China's proposal to establish a discursive system with Chinese characteristics. According to Hu et al. (2021), simply counteracting the Western narrative is not enough for China to achieve discourse power with Chinese characteristics. They claim China's strategy "should be based on broader common values and act as a bridge between China and the West" (para. 27). In this vein, China would extricate itself from the sphere of influence of Western narratives and explain its success and problems in its own way.

The discussions in this study align with a sound body of evidence that China's diplomacy has departed from its practice of "keeping a low profile", in pursuit of the national goal of realising the China Dream (Hu, 2019; Yan, 2014). These Chinese scholarly debates seek to challenge Western interpretations that the shift in China's foreign policy sees China becoming more assertive and aggressive, with the intention of seeking hegemony and changing the current international order by replacing dominant Western values with dominant Chinese values. In understanding this alternative view of China's national rejuvenation discourse, three specific implications for debates about the rise of Chinese self-confidence become evident.

First, to better understand China's intentions, it is necessary to consider China's stated motivation for putting forward this concept of cultural self-confidence. Both Chinese political leaders and scholars state that promotion of this concept is in accordance with the goal of rejuvenating the Chinese nation on the basis that cultural self-confidence is closely related to national prosperity, cultural security, national spiritual independence, and social cohesion. Increasing cultural confidence is not merely a cultural issue but is also related to China's changing identity and vision, as articulated by the current leadership. It is also a strategy that can be used to strengthen the people's confidence in political ideology and core socialist values. Wang Yonggui (2017) has argued that cultural self-confidence in China is also ideological confidence, because ideology is considered the final goal of cultural self-confidence. In the same vein, Dong (2017) has argued that the foundation of cultural self-confidence represents and reflects socialist values, which is a manifestation of "the ideals, beliefs, orientations and attitudes of all members of the Chinese nation" (p.134).

Second, although it is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between the domestic debate and China's foreign policy, many external China observers have publicly claimed that China's recent assertiveness in foreign policy, for instance, on the South China Sea and Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, reflects growing self-confidence. Recently some Western media and politicians have labelled China's diplomatic style as "Wolf Warrior", which originated from two Chinese movies. Western media and scholars have mostly claimed the "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" features a shift in China's diplomacy from "conservative, passive, and low-key to assertive, proactive, and high-profile" (Zhu, 2020, para.1). In contrast, most Chinese scholars and politicians regard the shift in diplomacy as a way of defending China's national interests. Jin (2021) explained that China's new diplomatic style is a demand of the new development goal of "becoming strong" to solve the problem of "being scolded". Le Yucheng, the Deputy Minister of China's Foreign Ministry, said the notion of "Wolf Warrior" in Chinese diplomacy has become a new version of the "China threat theory" and its purpose is to "stop China from fighting back when criticised" (Zhou, 2020, para. 2).

Third, a misalignment appears in the understanding of China's new diplomacy. Chinese scholars and diplomats argue that to understand the difference between aggressiveness and self-confidence one needs to explore the culture and history of China. In China, the century of humiliation has had a long-lasting effect on Chinese authority and Chinese people. China's "keeping a low profile" policy proposed by Deng Xiaoping offered a partial reflection of the effect. Now it is evident that China's goal is not to permanently "keep a low profile". With its rising economy and comprehensive national strength, China wants to develop what leaders call a "normal" profile, which can be interpreted as being treated equally regardless of the differences in ideology, values, and culture. This is the key to understanding China's foreign policy stance in this regard because what other countries might view as aggressive, China argues, is merely a departure from being humiliated and "looked down upon." When most Western China viewers talk about China's assertive behaviour in Xi Jinping's era, they compare it with the policy formulated by his predecessors, especially Deng Xiaoping. That means they consider "keeping a low profile" as a standard, and call anything more proactive than that "assertiveness." In contrast, Chinese scholars and the public think China was "humble" and "obedient" in the past and should become more confident to "view the world with a mindset of equality" ("Xi Jinping", 2021, para. 1).

The debate over cultural self-confidence has been articulated through comparison and contrast between China and the rest of the world. The upsurging political popularity of cultural self-confidence in China appeared against a backdrop of the emergence of increasing flaws in Western democracy and culture, especially in the US. For example, domestically, the gap between rich and poor in the US has expanded, and its economy has increased more slowly with a potential of being overtaken by China. Chinese scholars argue that, internationally, the failure of many countries to transform into the model of Western democracy has plunged them into chaos, poverty, and instability (Yang, 2016). At the same time, populism caused by long-term problems with the liberal – democratic system of government has led to the splitting of societies in many countries (Yang, 2016). The incompetence of this system of

governance, the argument goes, will make other countries (such as China) stand out in a positive light. The perceived failure of the Western model and success of the Chinese economic development model have convinced many Chinese scholars that copying the Western model regardless of its national conditions “will not only lead China into an ideological deadlock, but also bring a historical tragedy to the nation and its people” (Dong, 2016, p.8); and therefore, China’s affairs should be dealt with according to China’s circumstances and by relying on the strength of the Chinese people.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past decade, cultural self-confidence and its implications for China’s domestic and foreign affairs have become a focus of attention in Chinese IR discourse and cultural studies. Since the early 2010s, much more attention has been given to this concept in China. However, few articles on this topic can be found in English language scholarship or publications. This study, the first in English to examine this aspect of policy and its implications for the IR field, moves some way towards enhancing the understanding outside China of cultural self-confidence and how a large section of the Chinese scholarly community view it.

This study suggests that discussion of cultural self-confidence in the scholarly realm of government funded research is playing an increasingly important role in foreign policy as China becomes a powerful and responsible state. The study has shown scholars’ agreement on the urgent need for China to build cultural self-confidence to establish discursive power with Chinese characteristics, as one of the leading tasks of China’s soft power and public diplomacy initiatives. Overall, this study strengthens the idea that IR scholars in China generally assert that cultural self-confidence is a vital component of Chinese policy – not only a result of China’s increasing comprehensive national strength, but also a requirement for China’s continuing rise in the future.

Over the past decade, moves have been made to shift Chinese discourse to address and recalibrate what Li Mingjiang suggests is the persistent lack of confidence evident in China’s soft power discourse (Li, 2008). Scholarly discussion in China about Chinese cultural self-confidence is still developing around the meaning and utility of this concept. Nevertheless, the interplay between scholarly and official discourse appears relevant to the dual and interrelated purposes of galvanising domestic opinion and support for political and party leadership on the one hand and countering the dominance of Western (especially US) negative perceptions, enhance its discourse power, and build a positive image on the other.

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