



HPG Working Paper

# Responsibility, legitimacy, morality

## Chinese humanitarianism in historical perspective

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September 2014

**HPG**

Humanitarian  
Policy Group



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## Acknowledgements

The author has benefited immensely from the work and knowledge of Dr. Caroline Reeves from the Fairbank Center at Harvard University. The author would also like to thank Eleanor Davey for her guidance and patience throughout all stages of the paper, Matthew Foley for his comments and editorial assistance, and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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ISBN: 978 1 909464 85 8

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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	1
	1.1 A note on translation and sources	1
<b>2</b>	<b>Harmony and order: humanitarianism in Imperial China</b>	3
	2.1 Benevolence, morality and responsibility in Chinese philosophy	3
	2.2 Imperial responsibility and the ‘Mandate of Heaven’	4
	2.3 Civil charities	4
<b>3</b>	<b>Humanitarian thought and action in the Republic of China</b>	7
	3.1 Conceptual change at the turn of the century	7
<b>4</b>	<b>Change and continuity under Mao</b>	11
	4.1 Marxist humanitarianism	11
<b>5</b>	<b>Liberalisation and the post-Cold War era</b>	15
	5.1 New concepts and debates	15
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	19
	<b>References</b>	21



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# 1 Introduction

As China's economic and political power has grown in the past two decades, so too has its role in the international humanitarian sphere. The country's increasing integration into mechanisms of multilateral humanitarian coordination has dovetailed with growing contributions to responses to major recent international emergencies, including the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, the Kashmir earthquake in 2005 and Cyclone Nargis in 2008. At the same time, however, there is a widely-held view that China does not always behave as a responsible global power should, and scholarship on its humanitarian activities is often critical of a perceived failure to adhere to established norms and practices. The existing literature tends to stress *how* China's behaviour differs from that of Western countries in the humanitarian landscape, while comparatively little study has been dedicated to *why* China behaves 'differently'.

Analysing this question requires moving away from a Western-centric model of humanitarian assistance. What is needed is an exploration of how the dynamic process of history has shaped China's own ideas about caring for others. In line with the objective of the Humanitarian Policy Group's 'Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action' project, this paper seeks to provide a better appreciation of China's past to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of its unique humanitarian identity outside of the popular narrative, or as a supplement to today's Western-dominated discourses.

In an attempt to shed light on how the concepts which underlie 'humanitarianism' – such as compassion and the desire to alleviate suffering – has been understood during the course of China's history, the paper examines its ancient roots by uncovering some of the origins of Chinese humanitarian thought. The chief focus of the paper, however, concerns the transformation of this concept over the twentieth century, and especially after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Without claiming to offer a fully representative account of humanitarian practice and thought in China, it provides an introduction to understandings of 'humanitarianism' and related concepts. In doing

so, it seeks to explain the changes and continuities in the country's approach to humanitarian action, while also investigating the different terminologies used to describe it, the sentiments driving it and how it has been delivered throughout the last century. The paper argues that China's humanitarian thought and action have consistently, but to varying degrees, been shaped by the ancient conceptual paradigm of responsibility and legitimacy. These two concepts have shaped China's political culture for millennia, and Chinese humanitarianism cannot be understood apart from them.

## 1.1 A note on translation and sources

One major challenge in the scholarship of China's humanitarian sector lies in the ambiguity of the term 'humanitarianism' in the Chinese language. Although its literal translation, *rendao zhuyi* (人道主義), is used today in much the same way as the word 'humanitarian' in the English language, the notion is often conflated with *renwen zhuyi* (humanism) or even *renben zhuyi* (humanistic psychology) in philosophical contexts. Although prior to the twentieth century use of the word *rendao* was limited, the idea it represents has been deeply rooted in Chinese culture for millennia. Therefore, the paper explores the various corresponding terms used at various times which constitute or relate to the equivalent of the English understanding of humanitarianism.

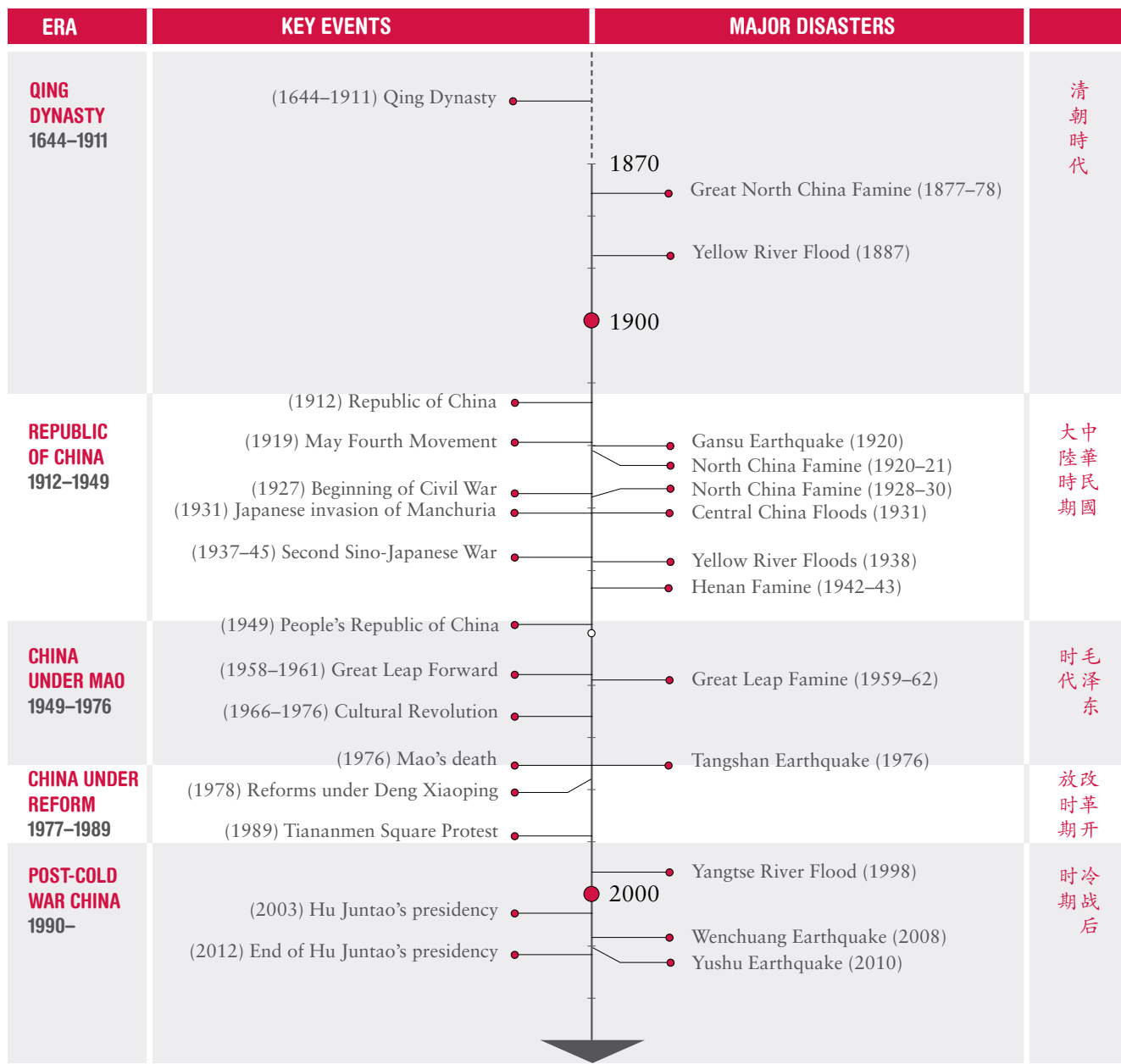
Source materials for this paper include contemporary English-language accounts, Chinese and English newspapers and journals, analyses by Chinese and Western scholars, and United Nations documents. The work builds on a multidisciplinary literature on scholarship accompanying China's evolving humanitarian thought and action, encompassing philosophy, religion, mythology, economics, the environment, politics and international law. The paper uses the system of transliteration from Chinese known as *hanyu pinyin*. Unless otherwise



stated the translations are the author’s own, with the exception of ancient Chinese texts, where those by James Legge are used. It should be noted that, in English texts, the Chinese term *rendao zhuyi* is interchangeably translated as humanism and

humanitarianism; throughout this paper, *rendao zhuyi* will be referred to as ‘humanitarianism’ for the sake of consistency. The paper uses traditional Chinese characters until 1949, and simplified characters after the establishment of the PRC.

Figure 1: Timeline of political events and major disasters



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# 2 Harmony and order: humanitarianism in Imperial China

## 2.1 Benevolence, morality and responsibility in Chinese philosophy

The word ‘humanitarian’, *rendao* (人道), makes its first explicit appearance in the Chinese classics of Confucius written more than two millennia ago. Translated as ‘the way of men’, ‘human duty’ or ‘humanity’, it is often used in conjunction with the Confucian virtue of filial duty or ancestral worship. While explicit mention of this term in ancient texts is limited, the fundamental values underpinning the idea – concern for others or kindness – are reflected in a plethora of literature bequeathed by China’s rich Confucian heritage. The *Book of Rites (Li Ji)*, an integral part of the *Five Classics* of the traditional Confucian canon, written before 300 BC, records: ‘Benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮), and knowledge (*zhi* 智) – these make up the characteristic attributes of humanity (*rendao*)’.<sup>1</sup> Of these four fundamental attributes, the most central to Confucian ethics is the concept of *ren* (仁 not to be confused with the homophonous *ren* 人 from *rendao*). *Ren* lies at the core of Confucian thought and appears more than any other word in the *Analects of Confucius* (Hua, 1995: 115). It can be translated as benevolence, humaneness, kindness, philanthropy and mutual love between two humans; indeed, its essence is evidenced in the character itself, which fuses the characters ‘human’ (人) and ‘two’ (二).

Another integral component of the Confucian concept of ‘humanity’ (*rendao*) was a sense of morality, which is deeply connected with the notion of benevolence (*ren*). Confucian philosophy seeks a stable, well-ordered state guaranteeing a harmonious society. This ideal unity among people was built on the ultimate goodness and moral conduct of all individuals,

and predicated on a clearly defined social order where people had specific duties and obligations towards their social superiors. The ‘Five Bonds of Confucianism’ defined the principal relationships within China’s dynastic society, between ruler and ruled, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife and friend and friend. In this highly hierarchical order, the wellbeing of the entire society depended on the dutiful fulfilment of each individual’s responsibility, and this sense of responsibility constituted the code of conduct and formed the cornerstone of interpersonal relationships in the lives of most Chinese.

Confucianism became the official ideology during the reign of Han Wu, emperor of the Western Han dynasty (156–87 BC). This fusion with the state was a much more intimate combination than the alliance between state and church in Europe, for unlike the church Confucianism did not have its own institution and instead became directly attached to the state (Lei and Tong, 2014: 30–31). However, while the influence of Confucianism in China cannot be understated, it did not enjoy a philosophical monopoly. Although Confucian teachings long predate the advent of Buddhism from India, Buddhist sentiments played a considerable role in Chinese philanthropic thought, and Confucian and Buddhist terms were used almost interchangeably. Examples are the strongly Confucian notion of *yi* (義) and the essentially Buddhist formulation of *shan* (善 charity, benevolence) (Will, 1990: 138), or ‘acts of benevolence’ (*yixing* 義行) and ‘good deeds’ (*shanju* 善舉) (Smith, 1998: 150). There were also characteristically Buddhist expressions of philanthropy such as the ‘hidden acts of charity’ (*yinde* 陰德) which constitute acts of anonymous giving with the prospect of no immediate social recognition but a deferred ‘repayment’ (*bao* 報), which might even be saved for a later life or for one’s descendants (Will, 1990: 138). This concept of ‘repayment’ predated the advent of Buddhism (Smith, 1998: 150), but the

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1 ‘Four Principles Underlying the Dress of Mourning’: 3 (*Sang Fu Si Zhi*), *Book of Rites (Li Jing)*.

Buddhist karmic laws of cause and effect (*yinguo* 因果) and influence and response (*ganying* 感應) reinforced this ancient belief.

Two other notable philosophies, Legalism and Daoism, influenced the notion of morality in ancient China. Legalism rejects the idea of moral education and argues for strict punishment for criminal behaviour, while Daoism is characterised by passivity and a proclivity for withdrawal. Neither posed a challenge to the Confucian order, however; rather, after Confucianism became the official ideology, there followed ‘a process of Confucianization of the legal system’, while Daoism complemented rather than questioned the prevalent Confucian order (Lei and Tong, 2014: 30).

## 2.2 Imperial responsibility and the ‘Mandate of Heaven’

The sense of responsibility founded upon benevolence and morality embedded in ancient Chinese society not only governed familial and interpersonal relations, but also formed the foundation of the imperial government by laying the basis for state responsibility and legitimacy. Just as the individual’s obligation towards the socially superior was to be obedient and submissive, so it was the responsibility of those of higher social standing to reciprocate by protecting their subordinates. The expansion of responsibility as social status increased meant that the emperor, at the top of the social order, was the ultimate benefactor responsible for safeguarding the wellbeing of his citizens by benevolent governance. This was especially the case in times of misfortune; known as *huangzheng* (荒政 famine + politics), early literature on the policies, practices and institutions of disaster and famine relief can be dated back to as early as the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) (Chen, 2012: 131).

This concept of imperial responsibility was reinforced by the ancient Chinese idea of a cosmic link between natural disasters and human conduct which long predated Confucianism. Historical records show that, for millennia, China has been struck by natural and meteorological disasters: earthquakes and landslides, droughts and floods and periodic famines. The Chinese term for natural disasters, *tianzai* (天災), literally means ‘heavenly disaster’, and conveys the traditional interpretation of natural calamities as a form of divine retribution: Heaven’s response to

human conduct, where ‘[r]ainfall and sunshine were thought to be seasonal or unseasonal, appropriate or excessive, according to whether human behavior was moral or immoral’ (Elvin, 1998: 213). The behaviour of different individuals carried different weights. While the behaviour of common people ranked last, the actions of bureaucrats had a greater effect, and the emperor’s conduct was of preeminent importance (Elvin, 1998: 213). As such, ‘the true ruler must model himself on Heaven or the cosmic Way’ (Lewis, 1990: 138).

This ancient belief in astral retribution became entangled with the Buddhist idea of karma. These influences combined to form the popular expectation that the emperor would prevent misfortunes through moral conduct; if misfortunes did occur, he would take swift and appropriate measures to restore normality. The emperor’s ability to do this effectively and through benevolent governance was commensurate with the legitimacy of his rule, understood as the ‘Mandate of Heaven’ (*tianming* 天命). Illustrative of the link between an emperor’s disaster management capabilities and his political legitimacy is the story of China’s legendary first ruler, Yu the Great (c. 2200–2100 BC), who became emperor by successfully regulating flooding through sophisticated hydraulic systems for flood control (Hirono, 2013: S207). Yu also introduced water conservation projects and maintained granaries (Shapiro, 2001: 7). Conversely, a ruler’s failure to honour the Heaven-sanctioned responsibility to protect his subjects in times of disaster could end in the loss of this legitimacy. The concept of the ‘Mandate of Heaven’ was employed to justify not only the right to rule, but also the ‘right to rebel’ (Lei and Tong, 2014: 29). Throughout Chinese history, peasant rebellions have brought down dynasties when the emperor was perceived to be immoral or incapable of protecting his people.

## 2.3 Civil charities

Ancient Chinese texts meticulously record the state’s responsibility as the preeminent humanitarian benefactor. In so doing, however, they tend to represent the practice of aid-giving as originating solely with the emperor, reducing ‘the people’ to mere beneficiaries of imperial charity (Tsu, 1912: 23). In reality, charitable philanthropy seems to have been so widespread that it outstripped imperial initiatives (Tsu, 1912: 23, 28–30). While the public expected the state to act as the principal responder in disasters,



the limits of state action were generally recognised, as was the importance of mobilising local elites outside of the government in disaster prevention and response (Antony and Leonard, 2002: 1).

Charitable activities were largely exercised as a privilege of China's Confucian-trained elite. Claiming philanthropy as an expression of elite culture, scholars, officials and merchants aspiring to social status used involvement in charitable enterprises and societies to garner social capital and acquire merit, both religious – according to Buddhist tenets – and official – in line with Confucian strictures (Brokaw, 1991). Thus, while China had boasted mutual aid societies from the Han Dynasty onwards (206 BC–220), performing charitable activities such as the burial of the dead, the care of widows and orphans, the provision of medical care for the poor, refugee care and spreading the teaching of Confucius, Buddha and the emperor (Reeves, 2014: 214), by the period of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) Chinese elites had appropriated these long-standing voluntary associations and placed them in an elite milieu (Smith, 2009: 50). Faith structures such as Confucian ancestral halls and Buddhist monasteries also played a key role in non-state philanthropic action. Often called 'lovers

of charity' (*leshan* 樂善), Buddhist philanthropists drew upon their religious belief to mobilise donors to organise relief programmes.

Elite charity was privately run, as were faith organisations, trade associations and the native place societies formed by immigrants for fellow-provincials in urban areas, notably Shanghai. The state, aware of its financial and operational limits, encouraged and reinforced these associations. Indeed, in exercising what Max Weber called informal 'liturgical governance', whereby 'local elites were called upon to perform important public services on the state's behalf, at their own expense' (Mann, 1987: 12–13), these associations acted as a quasi-extension of the state, often maintaining close contact with the government through sub-county officials who were the 'catalysts for state-society interaction and cooperation' in crisis management (Antony, 2002: 27–28, 52). As such, China's culture of philanthropy reflects a fundamental difference in Chinese and Western concepts of the division between government and civil society. Whereas in the West, the state creates distinct boundaries between the public and private spheres, in China this boundary was vague and relative.



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# 3 Humanitarian thought and action in the Republic of China

## 3.1 Conceptual change at the turn of the century

The ubiquitous presence of Confucian doctrine in China's political and social culture came to be challenged by new reformist ideas towards the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Imperial China had suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of the British in the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century, resulting in unequal treaties and territorial concessions to foreign powers, and against Japan, in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895. Weakened by maladministration and external threats, the imperial government had also proved unable to respond adequately to a devastating famine in the north of the country in 1877–78 which left 13 million people dead (Yeophantong, 2014: 8). There was a growing belief that Western technology and modernisation were the answer to China's perceived weaknesses. Whereas the previous era had been characterised by efforts to protect the Confucian heritage, the new intellectual tide advocated the wholesale adoption of Western practices at the expense of China's traditional values (Sheridan, 1977), and the position of Confucianism as a central philosophical system with the answers to all of China's problems began to be called into question (Spence, 1990: 275).

These ideas found their fullest expression following the founding of the Republic of China in 1912. This marked the beginning of a period of extensive intellectual self-scrutiny and exploration commonly known as the May Fourth Era. Starting as a student movement against the new government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles, which ceded Shandong province to the Japanese, and the perceived continued foreign humiliation of China, the May Fourth Movement gave rise to a new, iconoclastic Chinese intelligentsia. For these intellectuals, 'traditional' Chinese culture, lacking the attributes of its modern European counterpart, was doomed to backwardness and weakness. As one wrote, it was only with the help of 'Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science [that we can]

rescue China from the obscurity that casts upon the country's politics, morality, scholarship, and thought' (Chen, 1919: 10–11).

These intellectual currents also influenced the way humanitarianism was conceptualised. The word *rendao* – humanism or humanitarian – began to be used outside of the Confucian context, and with the suffix *zhuyi* (主義), roughly meaning 'ideology' or 'idea'. With the use of the term *rendao zhuyi* (人道主義), it ceased to be a mere moral concept ('humane', 'humanitarian'), and came to be regarded as an ideology ('humanitarianism'). In public debates, this new term appeared alongside other 'Western' '-isms', such as Marxist-Leninism and Bolshevism. In this school of thought, the term 'humanitarianism' was categorised as advanced and Western, and often associated with the idea of democracy. The author Tan Mingqian, for example, viewed humanitarianism, alongside freedom, fraternity and equality, as the fundamental elements of a 'spiritual democracy' (Gu, 2001: 605, 609). According to Li Dazhao, one of a group of intellectuals clustered around the periodical *New Youth*, the Allied defeat of Germany had been won, not by military strength, but by 'the victory of humanitarianism ... the victory of freedom, the victory of democracy' (Li, 1918: 443).

For the May Fourth intellectuals, humanitarianism was regarded both as the most significant attribute of modern European culture, and as a 'universal ideal of mankind' (Wang, 1995: 11). However, while this intellectual current was arguably the most vocal, other voices spoke in support of traditional Chinese values. One Buddhist-inspired philosophical trend saw the West as a dehumanised civilization, the antithesis of the 'warm humanity of the Chinese way', and argued for the import of Western ideas only where they did not compromise 'humane' Chinese values (Sheridan, 1977: 128–29). There was also a significant left-wing trend which considered socialist Russia as the true humanitarian. Li Dazhao, with Chen Duxiu the co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party, praised the victory of humanitarianism and democracy, but

equally applauded ‘the victory of socialism, the victory of Bolshevism, the victory of the proletariat’ (Li, 1918: 443). Indeed, after the October Revolution, and especially after the Soviet government had declared the abolition of all unequal Sino-Russian treaties, the Soviet Union came to be regarded as the ‘embodiment of humanitarianism’, attracting significant attention from radical scholars (Sheridan, 1977: 111; Gu, 2001: 615).

Important though they were in the late imperial and Republican period, Western influences on Chinese humanitarianism in fact predated the May Fourth Movement. Western missionaries had a long-established presence: missionary schools had been offering free food, housing and medical care since the late sixteenth century, and by the mid-1800s both missionary and unaffiliated doctors were building hospitals with money given by Western philanthropists or raised by subscription from local Chinese (Spence, 1990: 204–207). The most prominent Christian organisation, the YMCA, appeared in the 1870s (Garrett, 1970). These interactions led to the establishment of relief organisations modelled along Western lines. As such, the period between the last decades of the Qing empire and China’s war against Japan (1937–1945) was characterised by the transfer of more and more responsibility for relief to private auspices, both Chinese and, increasingly, Western.

The late imperial government, too poor and too fragmented to provide relief, relied on foreign as well as private philanthropic engagement, notably during the Great North China Famine of 1877–78. Missionaries provided aid to famine victims; Western committees in Shanghai and Tianjin also distributed assistance (Nathan, 1965: 3), and a China Famine Relief Fund was established in the UK. The Fund published a booklet of illustrations of famine conditions, greatly contributing to awareness of China’s plight abroad (Li, 2007: 276). Non-governmental famine relief efforts during this period were unprecedented in scope and form. The gentry and merchants established relief offices in Shanghai and other cities (Edgerton-Tarpley, 2008: 132) independently of official relief institutions. Although as in previous periods they cooperated with the government, charitable and philanthropic activities were no longer exercised as a privilege of the intellectual elite, but extended now to China’s lower classes.

The North China famine relief effort also marked the beginning of the internationalisation of China’s

charitable institutions. One significant step in this direction was the foundation of the International Red Cross of Shanghai in 1904 (Reeves, 2014: 216). The precursor of the Chinese National Red Cross Society, it was established by a group of Chinese business and political leaders to provide assistance to Chinese civilians in Manchuria caught up in fighting during the Russo-Japanese war. Officially recognised by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1912, the Chinese Red Cross contributed to relief activities abroad by donating significant funds to international Red Cross disaster relief, including in response to the earthquakes in San Francisco in 1906, Kagoshima in 1914 and Tokyo and Yokohama in 1923. By the mid-1930s the Society had almost 120,000 members and 500 chapters (Reeves, 2014: 219).

When another devastating famine struck Northern China in 1920–21, the Chinese International Famine Relief Commission (CIFRC), jointly run by Chinese and Westerners, played an active role in coordinating and managing funds from within China and overseas.<sup>2</sup> The famine prompted an outpouring of generosity in the United States following appeals by the CIFRC; the American Red Cross also raised significant funds, and there was a ‘contagion of philanthropy’ in Beijing and Tianjing, among Chinese and Western communities alike (Li, 2007: 297). Aid efforts by international committees dominate the relief narrative of this period, and the Republican government’s response during the famine is generally presented as inadequate (Spence, 1990: 309) and negligent (Nathan, 1976: 68), with disorder and corruption frequently obstructing foreign relief efforts (Sheridan, 1966: 23–24). However, while the success of international institutions should not be underestimated, Fuller (2013) shows that communal and government relief efforts were more effective and attentive to people’s welfare needs than has been previously recognised in the scholarship (Fuller, 2013). Three segments of Chinese society – Buddhist and other Chinese charitable societies, the Republic’s military establishment and officials and residents of affected communities – came together to provide relief, saving lives before the international effort was fully mobilised (Fuller, 2013: 3–5).

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2 Institutions were interlocked to a remarkable extent: the CIFRC’s founders and directors, for instance, were missionaries, churchmen and foreign and Chinese YMCA officials (Thomson, 1969: 46).

The Republican government also undertook efforts to modernise its disaster relief capabilities, beginning the first systematic monitoring of the Yellow River's flow in 1922 and developing plans to tackle flooding along China's major rivers (Chen, 2012: 133). However, the civil war with the communists, which began in 1927, and, later, the conflict with Japan seriously hampered this work, and the war effort took priority over relief. In one instance, the government's war priorities actually created a humanitarian disaster when a dyke on the Yellow River was opened in an effort to halt the Japanese advance, causing a disastrous flood in 1938. Dubbed the 'largest act of environmental warfare in history' (Dutch, 2009), the destruction of the dyke diverted the course of the river southwards, claiming at least half a million lives in central China (Chen, 2012: 133).

As the conflict with Japan developed into a fully-fledged war in the summer of 1937, newspapers collected donations to support the war effort and for relief work, and civilian cooperative humanitarian efforts, in particular women's associations, increased (Stranahan, 1998: 220–21). Displaced people fleeing to cities such as Shanghai, Beijing and Tianjin were sheltered in temples, schools and native place associations, and fundraising events were held to collect money for food and medicine (Stranahan, 2000: 166). As the war progressed, however, Western charities began to dominate, and missionaries contributed heavily towards local relief. During the mass atrocities against civilians known as the Nanking Massacre in 1937, several missionaries reported Chinese suffering at the hands of the Japanese and took the lead in establishing a safety zone to protect civilians (Varg, 1977: 252–53, 258). A charitable organisation known as the Nanking International Relief Committee sponsored surveys to provide information on the violence. Its chairman, John Rabe, a German businessman, provided shelter for hundreds of refugees, and on his return to Germany Rabe sought to publicise the situation in China through public lectures (Yoshida, 2006: 30–32). Indigenous organisations such as the Daoist-Buddhist Red Swastika Society (*hongwanzihui* 紅卍字會) were also active (Dubois, 2008; 2011).

Despite Chinese–Western philanthropic cooperation during the war against Japan, mutual distrust was ever-present. This was nowhere more evident than in the relationship between the Chinese government and the United Nations Relief and

Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). UNRRA was established in 1943 with the objective of providing aid, rehabilitation and resettlement assistance. Of its 24 country offices, the one in China was the largest, providing over \$500m-worth of supplies and employing a staff of 1,300 (Greene, 1951). Uniquely, UNRRA technical staff were also seconded to line ministries such as health, agriculture and communications, helping to expedite UNRRA programmes and providing technical and administrative support. UNRRA was also involved in the massive operation to restore the dyke on the Yellow River destroyed by the Chinese in 1938 (the river finally returned to its pre-1938 course in 1947).

Although operations within the country were formally the responsibility of the Chinese government, relations were poor and China was frequently criticised for appropriating UNRRA goods and funds: 'Not much aid – as aid – went beyond the warehouses at Shanghai' (Kerr, 1966: 159), and 'the ineptitude, paralysis, and outright corruption of the [Chinese] officialdom remained the dominant themes' in foreign press coverage (Isaacs, 1962: 188). There was general scepticism about China's capacity to respond to humanitarian issues; as one US official noted, 'if peace comes suddenly, it is reasonable to expect widespread confusion and disorder [since] [t]he Chinese have no plans for rehabilitation, prevention of epidemics, restoration of utilities, establishment of balanced economy and re-disposition of millions of refugees' (cited in Spence, 1990: 484). Another reported that 'governmental organization and responsibility for the handling of relief in the best of times were not to be compared to those of Europe' (Greene, 1951). These problems were compounded by severe logistical difficulties and insecurity. China's main ports were so congested that at one stage UNRRA shipments stopped, and inland transport was extremely poor (*ibid.*). Several UNRRA officials were killed in ambushes in communist areas, and the government refused to deliver goods to areas under communist control (Mitter, 2013: 66–67). There was also criticism of UNRRA's competence and effectiveness – even its own staff admitted that its contribution was tiny compared to the scale of need – and its operating costs were high, amounting to up to 40% of the value of commodities delivered (Greene, 1951; Neils, 1990: 172).

The period from the turn of the century until the end of the Japanese war saw increased Western humanitarian involvement in China, heavy constraints



on government relief due to economic and political problems and the continuation of local charitable action as a supplement to governmental relief. Despite the arrival of many new Western ideas, the Confucian idea of a well-ordered state still held currency, although the conflict curtailed the government's efforts to act as principal benefactor in times of disaster. Drought, military procurements and a famine in Henan province in 1943–44 combined

to leave between two and three million people dead and another three million displaced, fuelling popular discontent with the government (Westad, 2012: 270), even to the extent of starving peasants assisting the Japanese against government forces (Sheridan, 1977: 262). While many foreign relief efforts were welcomed by the Chinese, collaboration was frequently impeded, and cooperation with UNRRA was obstructed by the intensifying conflict with the CCP.

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# 4 Change and continuity under Mao

## 4.1 Marxist humanitarianism

The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 saw many ideas redefined to suit the ideological stance of the new communist regime, including the idea of 'humanitarianism'. Mao's interpretation of Marxist humanitarianism as the antithesis of 'capitalist humanitarianism' is still visible today: the entry for 'humanitarianism' in the widely used Chinese dictionary the *Hanyu Da Cidian* states that the concept has 'always been a system of thought belonging to the capitalist class'. It then describes 'Marxist humanitarianism' (*Makesi rendao zhuyi* (马克思主义人道主义)) as a form of humanitarianism based on the Marxist doctrine of class struggle aimed at 'safeguarding the dignity and rights of the working class'. As such, Marxist humanitarianism was 'essentially different from bourgeois humanitarianism'.<sup>3</sup>

This conceptual difference featured heavily in the *Literary Gazette* (*Wenyi bao* 文艺报), a magazine known for publishing radical articles. One article from 1960 states that 'humanitarianism has more and more become a tool used by the bourgeoisie to cover up capitalism's merciless exploitation and oppression, to cover up class contradictions, and to deceive the proletariat ... [u]nder the name of the abstract humanitarianism, [the revisionists] vend the opium of bourgeois humanitarianism' (*Wenyibao*, 1960: 101). The *Gazette's* analogy between bourgeois humanitarianism and opium, still fresh in the country's memory as a powerful symbol of the toxic Western influence that paralysed Chinese society in the nineteenth century, is a striking example of the antipathy the term evoked. (It also, of course, echoes Marx's famous dictum about religion as the opium of the people.)

The word 'humanitarianism' was now almost exclusively used in anti-Western polemics. This is not

to say, however, that notions of 'humanitarianism' in the Mao era were founded upon objections to liberal democratic concepts alone; China also developed its own, new understanding of assistance. This idea manifested itself in the 'Three World' theory, credited to Mao and first explicitly presented by Deng Xiaoping in a speech at the UN in 1974, which categorised the world into three camps: the First World, comprising the United States and the Soviet Union; the Third World, comprising developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America (including China); and the Second World, made up of the developed countries in between. The 'Three Worlds theory' aspired to unite 'progressive' Third World states, win over the 'middle' Second World and isolate the two 'reactionary' superpowers (Yee, 1983: 241). Promoting development assistance to the Third World and the provision of assistance to revolutionary movements abroad, this became the cornerstone of China's aid-giving in the late 1960s and 1970s. Development assistance was *not* regarded as 'humanitarian assistance' (*rendao zhuyi yuanzhu*), which was rejected as an 'imperialist plot' devised by the bourgeoisie, but as a 'Chinese' alternative to it, in line with principles agreed at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955.<sup>4</sup>

While new orthodoxies were being formulated, traditional concepts underwent dramatic change. One was the concept of natural disasters as a signal of heavenly displeasure with man's behaviour. Under communism, this age-old cosmic link was snapped: in the pursuit of rapid industrialisation and collectivisation by means of a mass mobilisation campaign known as the Great Leap Forward, Mao regarded nature as 'an enemy to be overcome, an adversary to be brought to heel', and proceeded under the slogan *Ren Ding Sheng Tian* (人定胜天), 'Man Must Conquer Nature' (Dikötter, 2010: 174). Polarising and adversarial language – nature was to be 'conquered', 'victories' to be won against flood

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3 In the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, Karl Marx described philanthropists and humanitarians, among others, 'as incurable agents of the exploiting classes' (Roberts, 2004: 5) 'desirous of redressing social grievances in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society' (Marx, 2011: 97).

4 These principles included mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and cooperation.

Figure 2: 'Earthquakes cannot frighten us, the people will certainly conquer nature'



Propaganda poster referring to the Tangshan Earthquake, 1976. © Collection International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam).

and drought – filled official discourse (Shapiro, 2001: 3). Convinced that the passion for revolution could transform nature to fit human needs, natural disasters – hitherto feared as divine punishment for human misconduct – were no longer considered a serious threat. This conviction found institutional expression with the abolition of the Central Committee on Disaster Relief in 1958, which had been established eight years earlier to coordinate the government’s disaster management work (Chen, 2012: 134). Ancient Confucian values were also purged (Leng, 1977: 365, 369–70). Whereas imperial China had propagated a world order of hierarchies among unequals integrated into a system of reciprocal relations, the ideological imperative now was the creation of an egalitarian community. This was also shaped by the Marxist idea that ‘social harmony is obtained not through legislative reforms ... but by destroying those antagonisms that originate in the division of labour’; once these antagonisms had been destroyed, ‘solidarity, and not legal and constraining regulation of institutions, [would allow] one to assure the harmony of human relationships’ (Coicaud, 2002: 28). In contrast to the Confucian ideal of stability and harmony, Maoism sought explicitly to overthrow the status quo (Chan, 1999: 203) and create a ‘Chinese world order that saw virtue in contention and upheaval, not in order and stability’ (Foot, 2013: 25).

Despite this urge to overthrow Confucian values as feudal and reactionary, those elements of Marxism that gained real traction within China did so precisely because they resonated with their Confucian predecessors, and there were strong echoes of Confucian ideas in much of the Maoist practice of governance, such as ‘self-criticism’ or the belief that rulers should be morally upright (Bell, 2008: 10). Certain structures of thought also persisted: Billiourd (2007: 56) notes the extent to which Chinese communism was infused with the Confucian tradition of self-cultivation (*xiuyang* 修养) and ‘inner sainthood’ (*neisheng* 内圣). The Confucian principle of *minben* (民本) – people as the start and end points of governance – did not change, and political deliberations under Mao were based on much of what had made Confucianism popular, where the old concepts of legitimacy and responsibility remained crucial components. Mao was supremely concerned with the question of legitimacy. Since ‘having the commanding height on moral issues legitimizes the state power’, criticism of the government was

tantamount to charging it with immorality (Tong, 2011: 152–53). This serves to explain communist China’s sensitivity towards criticism and the persecution of real and perceived dissidents under the Maoist regime.

Domestic purges and the removal of foreign elements from China in an effort to ‘cleanse’ it of ‘capitalist’ influences had far-reaching consequences in times of crisis. Religious institutions such as temples, shrines and monasteries were closed (Becker, 1996: 51), missionaries expelled or incarcerated and their medical and educational institutions taken over by the state (Westad, 2012: 326; Varg, 1977: 305–6). Meanwhile, peasants were organised into ‘mutual aid teams’ (*buzhuzu* 互助组), before being collectivised into agricultural cooperatives during the Great Leap Forward. All of these moves meant that, when the Great Leap Forward produced a widespread famine between 1958 and 1961, traditional coping mechanisms, such as private charity, state assistance and mutual help, failed. The Chinese Red Cross Society was branded feudal, revisionist and capitalist, and, although internationally it entered one of its most active periods, it all but shut down domestically (Reeves, 2014: 226). Coupled with this ban on non-state relief, the government refused foreign assistance, even from the socialist bloc; aid from East Germany, for example, was rejected, and Chinese embassies were instructed not to accept donations.<sup>5</sup> During the devastating Tangshan earthquake in July 1976, the government rejected international assistance altogether, including from bodies such as the UN and the ICRC, and prevented foreign journalists from entering the disaster area, instead recommending that the victims lead thrifty lives and resume production as soon as possible (Chen, 2012: 134–35). Medical teams and People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops were sent to the disaster area as part of a national relief campaign (Spence, 1990: 649), but inadequate training impeded government efforts to such a degree that some 80% of survivors were thought to have been rescued by local people (Suttmeier, 2012: 126 n8).

5 The lack of relief efforts by the government stemmed not so much from an inability to provide them as from the fact that the famine was not *allowed* to be defined as a crisis. The Great Leap Famine has never been officially described as a famine or disaster within China, and the common term for it today is the rather euphemistic ‘Three Difficult Years’ (*sannian kunnan shiqi* 三年困难时期). While widely studied in the West, Chinese-language sources on the event remain scarce, and it is still a politically sensitive topic in China.

The government's reaction to the Great Leap Forward famine and the Tangshan earthquake illustrates how the source of state legitimacy had changed. Just as it did for imperial dynasties, so for the communists legitimacy was a key and overriding concern. Radical rhetorical departures from China's cultural traditions notwithstanding, Mao was never able to extricate himself from the ultimate goal the ancient emperors had sought for centuries, namely securing state legitimacy by winning the approval of the Chinese people. Now, however, that legitimacy was seen to flow, not so much from the state's traditional function of protecting its people during disasters, but rather from improved social welfare and the establishment of China as the leader of the Third World and the vanguard of 'true' Marxism, in opposition to the Soviet model. Mao's domestic legitimacy was largely founded on his 'humanitarian' responsibility, but this did not mean the state's capacity to save lives following disasters; instead, it consisted of the creation of an egalitarian society. This was to be achieved by increasing life expectancy and bettering the lives of Chinese peasants through government welfare and by means of mass campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (as well as creating a cult of personality around Mao himself). International legitimacy derived from China's support 'to help the proletariat of the world revolt and overthrow the decadent, imperialist regimes and the "old world order"' (Chan, 2013: 61).

According to the 'Three World theory', China was to become both the guardian of the Third World, founded on its support for national liberation movements, and the true leader of the Communist bloc, based on its revolutionary zeal. Economic aid to developing countries was regarded as a political demonstration of China's power as leader of the Third World (Bartke, 1989: 7), and China's ambition to be such a power dictated a focus on economic and financial assistance rather than humanitarian aid. In its early days, the PRC provided military and food aid assistance to North Korea during the Korean War (Cathcart and Kraus, 2011: 37, 44–5) and to

Vietnam in the Indochinese War, and offered loans to Cambodia and Nepal (Bartke, 1989: 10). The sudden recall of Soviet workers from China in 1960, amid rapidly deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations, brought in its wake a rapid turn towards non-communist Asia, the Middle East and especially Africa (Cooper, 1976: 117), and Chinese economic assistance became 'increasingly tied to requirements of anti-Soviet behavior on the part of recipients' (Hamlin, 1986: 42). In 1963 Algeria became the first recipient of Chinese medical aid during its independence war with the French (Li, 2012: 126); by 1970 ten countries were receiving Chinese medical aid, and by 1980 that number had risen to 32 (Bartke, 1989: 20). Infrastructure aid to Africa also increased, including the construction of a 1,900km rail line between Tanzania and Zambia, though economic aid declined in the 1970s under Premier Zhou Enlai (Bartke, 1989: 10, 13). The Chinese Red Cross Society saw its most active phase internationally during this period, sponsoring efforts to repatriate Japanese citizens stranded in China in the early 1950s and offering disaster relief support to some 140 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, totalling over 1 billion Renminbi (Reeves, 2014: 226).

Throughout the Mao years from 1949 to 1976, the political culture of the People's Republic built upon many of the values inherited from imperial China, while also modifying ancient concepts to fit its ideological agenda. '[T]he Communist system, like the traditional Chinese political system, sought legitimacy in an official ideology, in this case Marxism-Leninism', which claimed to offer guidelines for China's economic and social development as well as a set of moral standards for the conduct of officials and ordinary citizens (Harding, 1987: 25–26). While in official discourse the term 'humanitarianism' was redefined to suit Marxist doctrine, the CCP leadership formulated its own concepts of responsibility related to 'humanitarianism' both in a domestic and international sense, which in turn translated into state legitimacy. While the source of state responsibility changed, the traditional idea of responsibility as legitimising the power of the ruler persisted.



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# 5 Liberalisation and the post-Cold War era

## 5.1 New concepts and debates

Humanitarianism (*rendao zhuyi*) re-emerged in intellectual discourse in the early 1980s after leading Party members such as Wang Ruoshui and Zhou Yang encouraged the Party leadership to redefine Marxism-Leninism in a kinder and gentler form (Davies, 2007: 120–21). According to Wang, the ‘starting point of Marxism is man’ (Wang, 1986: 202–3); humanitarianism did not exclusively belong to the bourgeoisie, as Marx was also a great humanist (Hua, 1995: 99). Wang argued for ‘a socialist humanitarianism ... [which means] upholding the principle that all men are equal before the truth and the law and that a citizen’s personal freedom and dignity are inviolable’ (cited in Goldman, 1994: 117). Socialist humanitarianism was also supported by the controversial writer Dai Houying, whose hero in her 1980 novel *People, ah, People!* (*Ren, a, ren!*) presented a very un-Marxist idea by arguing that social problems should be solved, not by class struggle but by humanitarianism, which he set in opposition to politics (Yang, 1985: 513–14).

Wang’s colleague Ru Xin also argued that Marxism included humanitarianism, and as such should not be set in fundamental opposition to humanitarianism because, although the latter had originated from an ‘ideological and cultural movement launched by the rising bourgeoisie during the European Renaissance’, it also referred to ‘attaching importance to the value of man ... Man himself is the highest aim of mankind and man’s value is in himself’ (cited in Goldman, 1994: 74). Conservatives such as Hu Qiaomu, on the other hand, rejected Wang’s and other scholars’ claim that ‘man is the starting point of Marxism’, arguing that Marx had not used concepts as abstract as ‘man’ and ‘human nature’. The scholar Li Zehou also disagreed with Wang, in that he believed that Chinese and Western humanitarianism were not the same, as the former could be traced back to Confucius and Mencius, ‘stressing amicable cooperation and mutual aid’, whereas the latter had originated from

‘the individual; the wish during the Renaissance to be liberated from the yokes of the church in the Middle Ages’ (Li, 1986: 208).

This re-evaluation of humanitarianism was part of a wider questioning of Marxism-Leninism in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. A ten-year social experiment conducted by Mao between 1966 and 1976, the Cultural Revolution had caused massive civil unrest; tens of thousands of people were killed and millions of ‘intellectuals’ and ‘bourgeois’ were forced into manual labour. The upheaval destroyed a large amount of the political credibility the Party had accumulated, and plunged it into a legitimacy crisis (Harding, 1987). Many scholars, drawing on their own disillusionment during the Cultural Revolution, came to challenge what they saw as an ossified interpretation of Marxism in the atmosphere of gradual liberalisation that took hold during the 1980s. In parallel, in a ‘renaissance of Confucianism’ (Holbig and Gilley, 2010: 21), influential scholars reassessed traditional Confucian values (Goldman, 1994: 77). Regarded as a repressive ideology throughout the Mao period, many discourses now stressed the ancient Confucian emphasis on harmony and responsibility. Some referred to the values Confucianism shared with Western humanitarianism; one news article emphasised that, although European humanitarianism originated during the Renaissance, ‘the same world view was already expressed in the humanitarian doctrines of Confucius almost 2000 years before the Renaissance, and it became later the fine tradition of Confucianism’ (Goldman, 1994: 77). With these new interpretations, the Chinese understanding of humanitarianism was finally beginning to lose some of the historical burden of its Western capitalist connotations (Hirono, 2013: S208).

This return to the previously suppressed Confucian orthodoxy had initially emanated from society rather than the government; by the mid-1980s, however, the Party was also turning towards these old teachings in a bid to reinforce the legitimacy of its rule. The violent crackdown on protesters in Tiananmen Square

in 1989 added special urgency to the restoration of state legitimacy, and the complexity and flexibility of Confucianism made it easy to incorporate into both Maoism and more liberal interpretations (Moody, in Deng and Guo, 2011). Those elements of Confucianism most suited to supporting the status quo – social order, stability, harmony, acceptance of hierarchy and the knowing of place – were translated into a ‘tailor-made socialist Confucianism’ (Holbig and Gilley, 2010: 22). References to Confucian-sounding ideas increased in official discourse, notably during the presidency of Hu Jintao between 2003 and 2013. When he took power, Hu introduced the concept of ‘Harmonious Society’ (*hexie shehui*) as a vision for the country’s future socioeconomic development. Hu’s belief that China should promote values such as honesty and unity, as well as forging a closer relationship between the people and the government, strongly echoed Confucian themes (Bell, 2008: 9). Society would be ‘harmonised’ by means of a second concept, ‘scientific development’ (*kexue fazhan*), which ‘takes a human-oriented approach [*yiren weiben*] ... and promotes comprehensive economic, social, and human development’ (quoted in Hirono, 2013: S208). The human-oriented approach was designed to help China ‘achieve comprehensive development and advance its notion of socialist humanitarianism’ by bringing development to the most impoverished regions in the country, with the ultimate aim of unifying the state and its people (Hirono, 2013: S208).

The ancient Confucian link between popular support and the state’s disaster management capabilities also regained its old centrality. The idea of responsibility based on the provision of popular welfare evident during the Mao era still featured prominently. In a remarkable effort, China lifted over half a billion people out of poverty between 1981 and 2004 (World Bank, 2009: 6). This may explain why the term ‘parental officials’ (*fu-mu guan* 父母官), an expression tracing back to the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), resurfaced following the end of Mao’s regime, reflecting the renewed validity of this ancient paternalistic state–society relationship in modern China (Tong, 2011: 151, n16).<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, the Chinese government recognised the necessity to ‘integrate disaster reduction into the comprehensive plan for national economy and social development’ (quoted in UNEP, 2002: 271). Reflecting

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6 During the Mao era the term was replaced by ‘people’s servants’ (Tong, 2011: 151).

this, the China National Commission for the International Decade on Natural Disaster Reduction (CNC-IDNDR) was established in 1989 and, following a series of devastating floods, most notably in Anhui and Jiangsu in 1991 and the Yangtse river basin flood in 1998, a national natural disaster reduction plan was promulgated to guide the Commission’s work. In 2004, the Commission was renamed the National Commission for Disaster Reduction (*Guojia jianzai weiyuanhui*), an inter-ministerial conference and coordination body within the Ministry of Civil Affairs (*minzhengbu*). Now comprising 30 ministries and departments, it is responsible for disaster research, policy and planning and the management of funds in major domestic disasters.

It was also during Hu’s presidency that China visibly departed from its isolationist stance and became increasingly involved on the international stage. As ideology-based legitimacy lost ground, so recognition abroad came to be seen as a measure of the government’s political success domestically. Thus, while China’s domestic politics and political culture decisively shape its international behaviour, domestic legitimacy is in turn nurtured and enhanced by the country’s image as a prestigious and responsible great power in the international sphere. This dual interplay between legitimacy and responsibility, domestic and international, laid the foundation for China’s engagement in foreign aid and disaster relief. It provided food aid during the famine in North Korea in the 1990s (Kim, 2010: 113), and offered significant funds following the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, the Kashmir earthquake in 2005 and Cyclone Nargis in 2008. China’s response during the tsunami was unprecedented both in size and in form, as for the first time the country channelled humanitarian donations through multilateral mechanisms, mainly UN agencies (Binder and Conrad, 2009: 9–10). Beijing also used its economic and diplomatic leverage over the Sudanese government to secure its consent to intervention in response to the conflict in Darfur in 2003. Where once the ICRC was dismissed as a lackey of Western imperialism, in 2013 China welcomed its president on a visit to Beijing.

Conversely, in contrast to its rejection of assistance under Mao, Beijing no longer regards foreign aid as a source of shame (Chan, 2013: 57). Japan launched its Overseas Development Assistance programme in China in 1980, the same year the country acceded to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund,

and during the 1980s China was one of the world's largest recipients of World Bank loans (Mitchell and McGiffert, 2007: 17). Long-standing suspicions of foreign aid agencies also eased, to the extent that, in the response to the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, the government granted both foreign and Chinese aid workers almost unlimited access to affected areas (Binder and Conrad, 2009: 9–10).

Convergence with international norms and practices has been less evident with regard to humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Chinese distrust of foreign intervention is rooted in the assaults on its sovereignty the country endured in the nineteenth century, and the concept of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states is woven into its political fabric. Resistance to democracy at home and its own human rights practices, China's multi-ethnic character and the existence within it of separatist movements all make the country particularly sensitive to questions of sovereignty. Thus, while China has endorsed the basic tenets of R2P and has largely supported UN Resolutions under Chapter VII authorising the use of force, for historical, cultural and political reasons the country is likely to remain cautious about humanitarian interventions and the use of force without the consent of the country concerned (Teitt, 2008).

Strong language tends to permeate Chinese discourses on humanitarian intervention, as was the case in 2001 when Chinese representatives stated that 'the conceptualization of humanitarian intervention is

a total fallacy' (ICISS, 2001). The Syrian conflict serves as an illustrative practical example of the difference between Western and Chinese attitudes towards humanitarian intervention. China has vetoed UN Security Council resolutions which would have condemned Syrian action and potentially resulted in sanctions, and in May 2014 it opposed the referral of the Syrian crisis to the International Criminal Court. In addition to its economic relations with the Syrian government, China's aid to 'rogue states' such as Sudan or Zimbabwe has been denounced in the West as sustaining autocratic regimes (Hirono and Suzuki, 2014: 447), and as driven by economic motives (Nakano and Prantl, 2011: 12). In particular, China has been criticised for its substantial involvement in Sudan's oil industry and for selling arms to the Sudanese government. Likewise, China earned international and domestic condemnation for its initially small contribution to the response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, which almost certainly reflected a recent deterioration in relations between the two countries over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Yet Western governments too have provided support for regimes with questionable human rights records, as evinced by British and American backing for the Mubarak regime in Egypt, and foreign policy calculations figure in aid calculations in Washington, London and Brussels just as much as they do in Beijing. Despite frequent claims that China is somehow 'different' to the West, when it comes to national self-interest its behaviour is perhaps not so different after all (Suzuki and Hirono, 2014: 445).



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# 6 Conclusion

The meaning behind being ‘humanitarian’, namely ‘concerned with or seeking to promote human welfare’,<sup>7</sup> is deeply entrenched in China’s rich philosophical heritage. To be sure, as would be expected in a country as large, diverse and complex as China, there has always been a kaleidoscope of divergent cultural influences which shaped discourses and politics at any given time. Thus, while resisting the temptation to regard China as a static and universal whole, it is clear that no other philosophy has influenced China’s state and people as consistently, sustainably and fundamentally as Confucianism. It would be tremendously difficult to gain an appreciation of China’s sense of humanitarianism outside of this Confucian prism.

For centuries Confucian notions such as *ren* (benevolence) permeated traditional Chinese philanthropy, which was exercised first as a privilege of the intellectual elite, and later by broader sections of society. More importantly, however, it is the Confucian notion of a harmonious world order guaranteed by the dual ideal of responsibility and legitimacy that has shaped Chinese humanitarian thought and action. On an individual level, every member of society had a clearly defined responsibility according to his or her status, while the emperor, understood as the ultimate moral benefactor, was responsible for protecting his people in times of crisis. The government’s capacity to alleviate suffering effectively translated into its legitimacy to rule. As popular dissent against a government could and often did result in the end of a dynasty, the emperor constantly sought the moral approval of his people by fulfilling his responsibilities to the best of his ability. Therefore, while the Western understanding of humanitarianism is based on the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, China’s notion of the same has always been shaped by the Confucian ideals of responsibility and legitimacy.

This concern with state responsibility and legitimacy has largely persisted. When the Republic of China was founded in 1912, many new, Western-inspired interpretations of humanitarianism emerged. However,

traditional Confucian ideals and an understanding of the state’s responsibility to protect its people still held currency. In the Maoist years, ‘humanitarianism’ was presented as a Western-introduced narcotic as harmful as opium, designed to debilitate Chinese society, and the concept of ‘Marxist humanitarianism’ based on the doctrine of class struggle was promoted in its stead. Even at the height of Maoist rule, however, when Chinese culture was supposedly being redefined, core Confucian ideals persisted in the concept of the moral leader and an emphasis on corruption in public life (Tong, 2011: 152). Mao himself was extremely concerned with state legitimacy and sought the moral approval of China’s people to secure the right to rule – the ancient ‘Mandate of Heaven’. The bolstering of Mao’s image via a cult of personality, and the much-publicised fulfilment of an adjusted version of responsibility, namely improvements in living standards in an egalitarian community at home and support for proletarian revolutions abroad, all served this end.

Scholarly interest in the rediscovery of Confucianism since the 1980s has translated into a revival of Confucian language in official documents over the past decade. After the Cultural Revolution and later the crackdown in Tiananmen Square in 1989, the government began to appropriate elements of Confucian thought to shore up its legitimacy (Billiourd, 2007: 51). The Confucian values of legitimacy and responsibility deeply influenced China’s actions in the humanitarian sphere as well, where the government’s disaster relief capacity once again became a central responsibility and source of legitimacy. However, it is also here where change becomes visible: whereas earlier state responsibility and, with it, legitimacy had rested on domestic disaster assistance (Hirono, 2012: 27), the rise of China as a global power has expanded this concept internationally, and international prestige has become an important new source of legitimacy. Although China’s growing international role has yet to be reflected in the volumes of its humanitarian assistance (Harmer and Martin, 2010: 19), the country’s foreign aid has grown steadily in line with its economic development, while China itself has begun to accept cash and material goods from other

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<sup>7</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for ‘humanitarian’.



countries in the event of domestic disasters. China has become increasingly integrated into the international community, has begun to channel humanitarian aid through multilateral mechanisms and has endorsed the basic tenets of the Responsibility to Protect. Aspiring to project the image of a responsible great power, China has gradually departed from ideology and adopted a more pragmatic, realist stance. With a more vocal, visible and active involvement in international humanitarian efforts, China's notion of humanitarianism is becoming global.

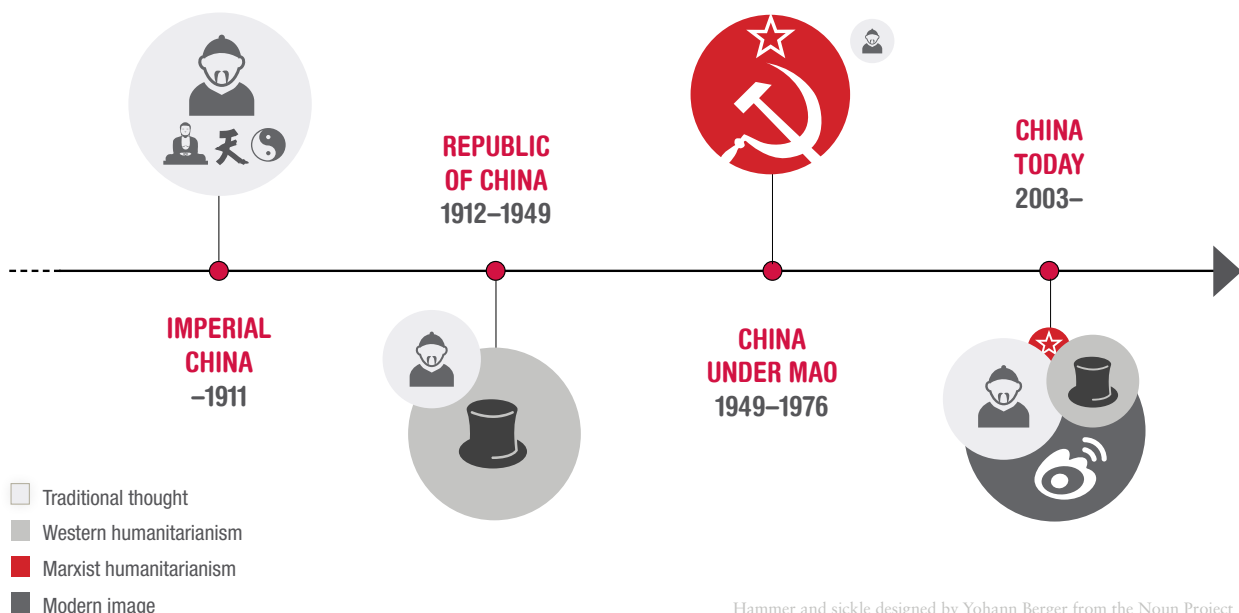
At the same time, this new source of legitimacy continues to be shaped by old values. China's domestic political culture is informed by traditional ideals, 'ethics rather than law, moral consensus rather than judicial procedure, and benevolent government rather than [...] checks and balances', and this heavily influences the country's behaviour within international organisations (Kent, 2013: 139–40). In particular, the idea of benevolent governance remains highly relevant, and forms part of the ancient notion of unity between the state and its people. Apart from its increasing references to Confucian harmony, the government has also adopted a new rhetoric of public accountability which uses 'the vocabulary of democracy in versatile ways aimed at enhancing the legitimacy of one-party rule', communicating the message of 'democratic centralism' or 'the people's democracy' to its citizens, while speaking of growing democracy within China (Davies, 2010: 81). Over time, therefore, the Confucian concepts of responsibility and legitimacy

have evolved to include contemporary elements in the changing political context.

This brief survey of China's past helps in understanding why the country is acting the way it is in its international humanitarian practice. In trying to understand Chinese thinking, it is important to appreciate its unique political culture, including the dual concept of responsibility and legitimacy which has for millennia shaped China's actions, humanitarian and otherwise. It is equally important to understand that these concepts may bear different understandings than in the West. Legitimacy in China is fundamentally different since it is not based on rational calculations and institutional logic, but rather on the normative order and moral responsibility of leaders: in China, legitimacy does not flow from how a leader obtains power, but rather how that power is exercised (Lei and Tong, 2014: 30), and social welfare has always been a key virtue in the execution of government power (Reeves, 2014: 215).

While within the international community there exists a view that China should adopt 'Western' values, such as democracy, solidarity, human rights and the rule of law, China believes that it is these values that must adapt to it, and seeks to 'Sinify' the prevailing international system with some of its own distinctive values. It is China's political identity that has painted the unique picture of the Chinese humanitarian landscape, and which will continue to exert a strong influence on the country's humanitarian action.

Figure 3: The evolution of humanitarianism in China



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Institute, 2014  
ISBN: 978 1 909464 85 8

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