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Reconciling China's maritime discourses of nationalism and international engagement with left Confucian logic

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China's discursive combination of nationalism and international engagement with its maritime neighbours seems self-defeating. To explain why this narrative strategy has been deemed apt, previous studies have predominantly followed a realist approach and contended that China's international engagement is pure statecraft to help its national rejuvenation efforts. As the merits of Confucianism increasingly affect contemporary Chinese socialism, this paper interprets the internarrativity of left Confucian ethics, Chinese nationalism and international engagement in East China Sea geopolitics. It argues that China tends to identify itself as a contributor to common material interest in the international community. With the notion of graded love, the contribution to the people of the world does not undermine the self-interests. China's national defence is often allegedly conducted alongside the defence of the existing order enabling its contribution. China does not aim to challenge the order per se, but it challenges the US and its allies' collective interpretations of it. This situation leads to antagonistic peace when the US-led alliance is unstable. However, if the US's geopolitical alliance is strong enough to withstand the solipsistic interpretation of the order, the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation can be better realized.

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Introduction

In the meeting to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War, President Xi Jinping explicitly stated that the great victory of the war destroyed the Japanese militaristic scheme of colonizing China. The victory not only safeguarded China's sovereignty and territorial integrity but also completely cleansed China of the national humiliation of its repeated defeat by foreign aggressors in modern times. It symbolized the victory of the Chinese national spirit centring on patriotism. Given the bitter historical memory, President Xi Jinping also stated that Japan was China's neighbour. A favourable Sino-Japanese relationship was beneficial to the peace and stability of Asia and the world. China should facilitate cooperation between and win-win relationship between the two countries based upon mutual respect and coexistence (Xi, 2020a).

This statement is one of many examples in which China has shown two faces to its maritime neighbours: its stern determination in its national defence and its aspiration to engage in the international community as a cooperative and peaceful agent. As the relevant literature is dominated by the realist approach prioritizing material needs, the country's overwhelming national emotion is believed to solipsistically distance China from the international community, centred around Western countries, and increase the risk of violent confrontations (Wirth, 2019). Therefore, China's discursive combination of nationalism and international engagement seems paradoxical.

Nonetheless, many studies have argued that Confucian ethics were a meaningful part of China's foreign policy-making (Cao, 2007). Confucian ethics have never faded from Chinese politicians' mentalities and were even revived in 21st-century China (The People's Daily, 2020). Confucianism is essentially a civilized and noble mentality that provides codes of conduct for traditional Chinese society. The core values of Confucianism are *ren* (benevolence) and *yi* (righteousness). Benevolence is overarching. The social responsibilities resting upon these values can be extended to the state and interstate levels. At these levels, Confucian ethics can be reconciled with Chinese nationalism to provide a vision of a cosmopolitan order from a specific cultural perspective (Bell, 2014). Besides, the merits of Confucianism have been incorporated into the socialist political ideology and have become left in China (Bell, 2010a; Xi, 2023). The discursive process through which different narratives refer to, invoke and empower each other, i.e., the internarrativity (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2019) of left Confucian ethics, nationalism and international engagement, may explain why China deems apt this seemingly self-defeating discursive strategy. Thus, the question to be answered in this paper is as follows: From the ethical perspective of left Confucianism, why has China embraced the discursive combination of nationalism and international engagement in the geopolitics of the neighbouring seas? The paper adds a nuanced understanding of China's pursuit of national rejuvenation in the regional order.

To this end, the remainder of this paper is divided into six parts. The section "China's discursive combination of nationalism and international engagement: a self-defeating paradox?" is a literature review, discussing more extensively the recent studies on China's maritime discourses of nationalism and international engagement. The section "Conceptual framework: left Confucianism and its manifestation in Chinese state media outlets" introduces the conceptual framework employed. The section "Research design" is about the case selection and interpretation method. The section "China's narratives and the internarrativity of benevolence, nation-defending and international engagement in ECS geopolitics" illustrates the internarrativity of Confucian ethics, Chinese nationalism and international engagement

aspiration by interpreting China state media outlet's framings of East China Sea (ECS) geopolitics. The section "China's national rejuvenation in the current order: is a stronger US good?" discusses the implications of internarrativity for China's role in the existing US-led order. The final section is the "Conclusion".

China's discursive combination of nationalism and international engagement: a self-defeating paradox?

China's geopolitical discourse as projected to its peripheral seas contains both international engagement initiatives and nationalist sentiment urging better defence (Narins and Agnew, 2020). Through the engagement narrative, China has identified itself as the guardian of the rule-based international order. It sought to foster better cooperation and peace with its partners (Xinhua News Agency, 2018). Simultaneously, China's discourse of national rejuvenation reproduces traumatic memories regarding Japan and the US as imperialists (Xi, 2020b). China has defined the US hegemony as the source of the malfunction in the existing international order. The US was reported to be cooperating with separatists in Taiwan, sending ships to the ECS and containing China through regional economic initiatives with its allies. Meanwhile, Japan lifted the ban on external military actions and reminded its ECS neighbours of its previous invasions. Encouraged by domestic nationalism, the Chinese government protested the Japanese Prime Minister's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine.

Generally, national rejuvenation does not have to contradict international cooperation. When China's rise was still not significant, some scholars argued that China's booming economy could provide cooperation opportunities for other countries and thus stabilize the region (Kang, 2005; Zheng, 2005). Nonetheless, China's further economic rise relies on a higher position in the global value chain. This will inevitably intensify tension with industrial countries such as the US (Yue, 2008). The US and its allies' recent containment of the Chinese semicolon industry has confirmed this. When the Chinese economy rose up more significantly in recent years, the scholarly arguments that China's expanding economic influence could stabilize the region almost disappeared.

More importantly, recent studies tended to understand the consequences of Chinese nationalism with a realist approach prioritizing material needs. They argued that Chinese nationalist sentiment undermined regional cooperation as Chinese maritime nationalism encouraged the pursuit of greater naval battle capability and the expansion of geopolitical power. They contended that China's national humiliation was understood as the consequence of its lack of control of the peripheral seas (Zhang, 2005). The US military's exercises near China's territorial seas evoked Chinese people's memory of a traumatic history (Holmes and Yoshihara, 2005). Thus, naval achievement became an increasingly important part of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) domestic prestige. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has become the most powerful player in China's maritime strategy decision-making (Chan, 2022). The Chinese outlets gave extensive coverage to the development of PLAN (Ross, 2009). They especially applauded the pursuit of aircraft carriers and more advanced weaponry to protect China's overseas citizens (Ross, 2009), because of the fear of being "bullied" militarily (Zhang, 2009; Martinson, 2018). The acquisition of advanced weaponry was understood as overcoming geographical constraints and pursuing greater maritime power (Erickson and Wuthnow, 2016). Chinese maritime nationalism prioritized the recovery of the lost territories. It also hoped to break out of the island chain encircling China (Ross, 2009). There were even calls

for a blue-water navy to counter the threat from the far seas and resentment of the soft stance on maritime issues (Chan, 2022).

These aspirations inevitably provoked regional tension and military competition and damaged US-China cooperation in particular (Ross, 2009; Jin, 2012). Chinese leaders have to choose either conducting aggressive diplomacy to appease the domestic nationalist sentiment or using a peaceful strategy to maintain China's international engagement (Ross, 2011). The consequences of China's nationalism have been similar to those of the Western great powers (Ross, 2018). In this sense, China's narrative of national rejuvenation is largely paradoxical to its self-identification as a cooperative and peaceful power (Tok, 2005; Wirth, 2019). As the expanding irredentist sentiment leads to a more assertive and excessive defence undermining the current international, rule-based order, this discursive combination results in China's further ideational isolation from the international community (Wirth, 2019).

To explain why China deems this discursive combination apt, some scholars have suggested that its international engagement discourse was the means to the end of a greater national defence (Blanchard, 2017). Narins and Agnew (2020) argued that China expanded its national defence of sovereignty and its territorial integrity in the maritime sphere through vaguely bounded economic cooperation initiatives. Wirth (2019) argued that China's partnership initiatives solipsistically placed China over other participating countries. The cooperation narrative therefore manifested an overwhelmingly strong national sense in disguise. The national memory of humiliation stimulated the desire to be powerful through assertiveness. Some scholars have further contended that China's maritime discourse was part of its 'hybrid' or 'grey zone' strategy, increasing the risk of war and intensifying strategic competition (Liff, 2019; Patalano, 2018). One frequently quoted consequence was its announcement of the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) (Cronin et al., 2014). The discourse challenged the international rule-based order and manifests power politics (Summers, 2021). China's expression of international engagement therefore appeared to be a pragmatic claim to downplay unfavourable contestations (Summers, 2021). It was regarded as a tool for rebuilding a powerful China. The ethics behind it seemed fully realistic.

Nonetheless, the utilization of a realist approach prioritizing material needs has limited effectiveness in understanding the implications of China's nationalism. Some scholars have argued that this approach narrowly overexaggerates China's position as an external threat to the US (Glosny et al., 2010). Jonathan Kirshner (2012), as a classical realist avoiding the sheer materialist explanation, contended that the two nations were not hyper-rational automatons driven by geographical conditions and material needs. They, including China, could learn from the lessons of the past, which have shown that the pursuit of hegemony was dangerous (Kirshner, 2012). Therefore, China is not destined to follow the fate of the Western great powers. The Chinese government clearly claimed that its path of peaceful development was a strategic choice incorporating the essence of Chinese traditional culture (The State Council Information Office, 2011). The most influential part of Chinese traditional culture, especially among the elite, is Confucianism. The current literature does not deny Confucian ethics' meaningful involvement in China's strategic discourses. Tong (2011) argued that benevolence was indispensable to the Chinese government's construction of legitimacy. Cao Qing (2007) contended that Confucian ethics had significant implications for the construction of China's foreign policy. In addition, the state-run People's Press published a series of books interpreting President Xi Jinping's quotations of the Chinese traditional classics, which primarily originated from Confucianism. The books value Confucian

wisdom in modern governance (The People's Daily, 2020). These publications indicate the significant implications of Confucian ethics for China's maritime geopolitical discourse.

Furthermore, some critics have argued that Confucian ethics were limited to personal duties, especially to those of family, and were incompatible with nationalism (Crane, 2007). This paper argues that Confucian ethics are compatible with Chinese nationalism and contribute meaningfully to the understanding of China's engagement in the international community. In the Chinese language, the nation-state is translated as *Minzu Guojia*, but this term is imprecise, and no scholarly endeavour has sought to correct it. *Minzu* means nation, but the concept of *Guojia* is broader than the state, as it also connotes family and homeland. These linguistics suggest that the modern Chinese have never delineated impermeable boundaries between the family, the nation and the state. This mentality enables Confucian ethics to extend from kinship to interstate affairs. As argued by Mencius, care for elderly and young people should be extended to the elderly and young people of others (*lao wu lao, yi ji ren zhi lao, you wu you, yi ji ren zhi you*) (Meng, 2013). Confucius argued that exemplar persons' self-cultivation can bring peace to the common people (*xiu ji yi an baixing*) (The Analects, 2016). The ruler who practices benevolence is invincible (*ren zhe wu di*) (Meng, 2013). Based on these concepts, Daniel Bell (2014) argued that Confucian ethics clearly promote social responsibilities beyond the family and have their own vision of a cosmopolitan order that does not necessarily clash with nationalism.

With regard to the implications of the Confucian mindset for Chinese foreign policy, many scholars believed that it was a geopolitical tool. Yan (2021) suggested that Confucian moral and ethical inspiration can also be the source of national power. A great power that abides by international norms, rewards norm-abiding countries and punishes countries that violate norms can be regarded as a humane (benevolent) authority (*Wangdao*). Zhao (2018) contended that Confucianism was utilized to enhance nationalist sentiment and to embellish the assertive foreign policy. Similarly, Andrew Nathan and Boshu Zhang (2021) argued that Confucian values are hierarchical. They placed China at the top and served China's strategic self-interests. Therefore, China failed to persuade others via Confucian values. (Nathan and Zhang, 2021). A frequently mentioned example of Confucianism being utilized as a means to achieve China's diplomatic goals is the Confucius Institutes, which have been suspected to be the Trojan horses in recent years (see, Lahtinen, 2015). Thus, China's nationalist sentiment and international engagement still seem incompatible.

Nonetheless, I argue that Confucian ethics can be part of the means and ends of China's foreign policy. They have governed Chinese social behaviours for thousands of years. These ethics can reconcile Chinese maritime nationalism and its aspiration for international engagement. For instance, in Mencius's sense, a benevolent ruler naturally receives external recognition and support (Meng, 2013). Ethics emphasize the liaison between an agent's self-cultivation and external engagement. They define China's interests by influencing its value judgement and are not merely the statecraft to be manipulated for value-free interests. As argued by Zhang Feng (2015), the conventional means-end distinction is not rooted in the Confucian perspective. Confucianism could moderate the excessive instrumental self-interest maximization of geopolitical nationalism by encouraging inclusive humanism, thus broadening the outlook of China's foreign policy (Zhang, 2015). Therefore, this paper argues that the associations of Confucian ethics with Chinese nationalism and its international engagement can produce new internarrative meanings regarding China's subjectivity in maritime geopolitics and regional order deserving of further scholarly efforts.

In this context, this paper deconstructs the dominant meanings of China's maritime geopolitical discourse through a categorical lens that allows the further interpretation of various narratives and their internarrativity. This paper probes the extent to which Confucian ethics are meaningfully associated with China's international engagement and nationalist discourses of maritime geopolitics. Furthermore, this paper elaborates on why this so-called discursive paradox is apt. This paper aims to add a nuanced understanding of China's intentions and feelings about maritime geopolitics. Thus, it seeks to produce a new perspective for understanding Chinese national rejuvenation in the existing order. To this end, the following part introduces the conceptual framework for the interpretation.

Conceptual framework: left Confucianism and its manifestation in Chinese state media outlets

This paper employs left Confucianism as the concept for interpretation. Confucianism has been developed and re-developed for thousands of years. After the May Fourth Movement in China, Confucianism was criticized. It was even deconstructed during the Cultural Revolution. Since the Reform and Opening Up policy, the rise of capitalist values has further squeezed Confucianism. Nonetheless, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has begun to emphasize the importance of Chinese traditional culture to reshape the Chineseness of the country when it opened up (Guo, 2004), especially during the Xi administration. Confucian norms have also been revived and incorporated into socialism with Chinese characteristics. The CPC has provided further impetus to this embrace at the 100-year anniversary of the CPC establishment in 2021 when President Xi Jinping proposed “two convergences” (*liang ge jie he*). In addition to the former doctrine claiming that Marxism should be converged with China's reality, Xi Jinping stated that Marxism in China should converge with the excellent Chinese traditional culture. This was another ideological emancipation (Xi, 2023), allowing Chinese socialism to more substantially absorb the merits of Confucianism. This statement consolidated the scholarly observation that the new Confucians could formulate an alliance with the left in China (Guo, 2004). The Confucianism in 21st-century Chinese political ideology was embedded in Marxism (Wu, 2014). In this light, this paper employed left Confucianism as the conceptual framework.

The left Confucianism, a term coined by Daniel Bell (2010a), is a Confucianism that embraces and enriches socialism in China. The notable figures of left Confucianism include Gan Yang, Chen Lai, Jiang Qing and Yu Dan. Some left Confucians obtained official or semi-official positions in the Chinese government. They include the former director of the Policy Research Office of the CPC Central Committee, Teng Wensheng, who subsequently became the president of the International Confucian Association. Fang Keli, the academician of the Chinese Academy of Social Science (the highest position in the think-tank officially affiliated with the Chinese State Council) is also among them.

Generally, left Confucianism has inherited core values such as benevolence (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*). It proposes the self-establishment that is also conducive to the establishment of others and encompasses a wide range of altruistic mentalities such as rightness, principles, integrity and justice (Chen, 2020). On the other hand, left Confucians argue that Confucianism should continue adapting to and evolving with changes in social context. They regard Confucianism as open, inclusive and critical (Bell, 2010a; Teng, 2016; Gan, 2018), even of Western values such as democracy, rule of law and human rights (Bell, 2010a). Only by participation in Chinese national rejuvenation can Confucianism continue to thrive (Chen, 2020). Left Confucians believe that

contemporary China has three converged traditions: the Confucian culture from the ancient period, socialism from the Mao-era and the market liberalism proposed by Deng Xiaoping (Gan, 2018). From the individual perspective, left Confucianism contends that inter-personal benevolent ethics can be extended to the larger community, and ultimately to the community of the state. Every individual should be responsible to his or her community, rather than recklessly prioritizing his or her self-interest (Chen, 2020). From the perspective of the state, left Confucianism cares about the normal people, especially the disadvantaged. It emphasizes the importance of basic material well-being (i.e., safety and economic income) (Bell, 2010a). From the perspective of world affairs, as solidarity is one of the core values of socialism, left Confucianism calls for solidarity with strangers and justice for the world's people (Teng, 2016). China should not neglect the interests of the foreigners. However, ties, from those of the families to those with the foreigners, are extended with diminishing intensity (i.e., graded love) (Bell, 2010a). Additionally, they have their preferences for foreigners. The left Confucians tend to uphold the solidarity of non-Western countries which are in disadvantaged positions in the global distribution of resources (Gan, 2018). Nonetheless, such solidarity should be peaceful and cooperative with external others (Chen, 2020). China's graded love for others is different from the practices of other democratic states that practice the one-person, one-vote electoral system. The leaders of the latter tend to care for only their own citizens (Bell, 2010a).

Furthermore, this paper argues that left Confucianism as a converged form of thinking can be manifested in the maritime news of the state media. Confucianism has been explicitly promoted by Chinese paramount leaders since the beginning of the 21st century (Wu, 2014). In the Xi era, the association of Confucianism and Chinese socialism was reinforced. As contemporary Chinese people are no longer attracted to orthodox Marxism and socialism (Guo, 2019, p. 360), the CPC may rely more on belligerent foreign policy to earn nationalist support (Goldstein, 2005, pp. 95–96). The discursive embrace of peaceful Confucian culture can downplay antagonism with other countries without losing support from nationalists with regard to external affairs. Domestically, it can also provide a spiritual anchorage for the unity, identity and autonomy of the entire nation (Guo, 2019, pp. 360–361). These are good reasons for President Xi Jinping's incorporation of left Confucianism into his policy discourses. A typical example is China's initiative of “community with a shared future for mankind”. The Xi administration stated that the Chinese nation embraced the notion of “all under heaven as one family” (*tianxia yijia*). It pursued harmony among all states (*xiehe wanbang*). The strong states should not bully the weak states, nor should the rich states insult the poor states. China cherished the Confucian advocacy for self-establishment, which also led to the establishment of others (Information Office of the State Council, 2023). The party-led media in China disseminated and elaborated on the Confucian discourses articulated by the government. For example, following government propaganda, the Xinhua News Agency stated that the initiative for a “community with a shared future for mankind” inherited the mentalities of benevolence (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*). This demonstrated the CPC's adherence to the notion of *tianxia*. China believed that its well-being was inextricably linked to global well-being and vice versa. China sought to bridge the gap in development between the Global North and Global South (Xie, 2023).

Research design

Case selection. To achieve the research objective, this paper selects Chinese state media's geopolitical discourse

surrounding the ECS for interpretation. China has strategic interests in many maritime regions and conducts different strategies for them. However, this paper argues that the East China Sea remains the most important maritime region for the examination of liaisons between Chinese nationalism and international engagement. In this region, China directly faces its main counterparts, the US and Japan. They are the main targets of Chinese nationalism and the countries that have led the international and regional order. Geographically, China's coastline is the longest in this maritime region. Geopolitically, the main part of the first island chain lies in this region. Diaoyu (Senkaku) Island, which is allegedly an inalienable part of Chinese territory, is still administered by Japan. Historically, the East China Sea is the maritime channel that has witnessed the most invasions. Many national heroes have been commemorated for their resistance to the invasions from the East China Sea, including Qi Jiguang, who was a military general widely known for his defence of foreign pirates in the coastal areas of the East China Sea in the 16th century. In the late Qing Dynasty, when the Fujian fleet lost the battle against the French fleet, historical trauma was established. Economically, this region houses China's closest trading partners, the US, South Korea and Japan. Metropolises such as Shanghai, Nanjing, Hangzhou, and Xiamen, which are the major powerhouses of the Chinese economy, are located by the East China Sea's coast. No other sea can be simultaneously as geographically, geopolitically, historically and economically important for China as the East China Sea. This paper argues that China's maritime discourse about the East China Sea is the best case for the examination. Sufficient discursive items of nationalism and international engagement can be expected and collected in this context.

Methodology. To examine the construction of internarrativity, this paper collected discourses from Chinese state media outlets. This choice was also made because news coverage can present information with greater flexibility and manifest emotion more clearly than those released by government authorities. Furthermore, this paper argues that narrative meanings can be interpreted not only through the text but also by the textual structure. Thereby, a media-framing package was employed to categorize the relevant information and its structure. Generally, a frame refers to the media's mode or textual structure in presenting the core idea of an issue or phenomenon (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). The media-framing package approach divides a frame into framing and reasoning devices. Framing devices include exemplars, catchphrases, and depictions, while reasoning devices consist of roots (causal analysis), consequences (effect), and appeals to principle (ethical claims) (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). This division indicates how the narratives are dominantly framed. It allows an examination of their internarrativity. The framing devices can illustrate the selected and highlighted aspects of reality. They can provide information about the extent to which the discourses of left Confucian ethics are saliently presented together with those of national interests and international engagement. This reasoning demonstrates the logic behind storytelling and shows how the different discourses of left Confucian ethics, nationalism and international engagement are arranged in the causality of an event. Their mutual empowerment can therefore be examined.

Based on this approach, this study collected news items from the People's Daily, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Daily, China Youth Daily, the Guangzhou Daily, the Economic Daily, the Guangming Daily, the China Daily, the Beijing Daily, and the Changjiang River Daily,¹ to ensure the selected outlets' strict links to Chinese foreign policy and influential dissemination in the digital age. These mass media platforms were selected not only for

their role as mouthpieces of the CPC but also for their effective utilization of Chinese social media in information dissemination. Therefore, the perception of the facts cited by these media can be tracked more widely than other media platforms. According to the National Party News Outlets Convergence Communication Index Report in 2019, these CPC media are listed among the top 20 most influential outlets on WeChat and Weibo (the most influential Chinese social media platforms) (People.cn, 2019). The researchers collected all coverage about China in ECS geopolitics from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure database, the Duxiu database, and the official digital portals of the selected media and their WeChat and Weibo accounts. With this approach, this study collected 637 news items reported from 2001 to 2020. Subsequently, an induction-based qualitative content analysis was employed. This is a method for arranging and structuring relevant discourses. It can illustrate the dominant frames from numerous disorderly discursive contents. The interpretation proceeded through four coding phases as follows.

First, the researcher identified the three most frequently reported issues in the collection. Those items with similar coverage from different media sources were retained to preserve the salience of certain issues. Subsequently, the researcher selected the issues to examine for their media-framing strategies. After identifying and sorting the issues, the researchers selected the China–Japan ECS resource exploitation dispute (163 items), China's establishment of the ECS ADIZ (96 items) and China's high-level strategic negotiations with regional stakeholders (84 items) as the cases to examine.

In the second phase, under each selected issue, six codes were established as the indices: exemplars, depictions, catchphrases, roots, consequences, and principles. The first three constituted the framing devices, and the last three were the reasoning devices used to persuade audiences.

In the third phase, the author coded the relevant news content following a two-step strategy modified from grounded theory. In the first step, the author adopted an open-coding scheme, coding all the news content relevant to the indices and arranging the codes under their corresponding indices. In the second step, the author conducted axial coding. Using constant and iterative comparison, the author incorporated similar codes under each index and clustered them as a category defined by a more abstract and broader meaning encompassing the codes.

The fourth phase was a code-testing process. The collected news items were distributed to the other three research partners, who identified the relevant information for each issue by answering questionnaires. Each questionnaire contained the full text of each news item and questions asking for the information identified in the indices. Answers that were correctly given by at least two partners were selected for coding. After coding, the intercoder reliability was calculated between the author and the research partners (calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient).² The reliability was 0.86 after three rounds of discussion and major revisions. The results are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Then, the author interpreted how the narratives and internarrativity of Confucian ethics, nationalism and international engagement were framed in the examined cases.

China's narratives and the internarrativity of benevolence, nation-defending and international engagement in ECS geopolitics

Benevolent China. Although left Confucianism has not been explicitly adopted by the Chinese government as a policy doctrine, its spirits and propositions have been articulated in the official discourse. In China's foreign policy for its peripheral area, being benevolent to the neighbouring countries (*qin ren shan lin*)

and promoting reciprocity were explicitly articulated as the guiding principle. China allegedly was, is and will be the good neighbour, good friend, and good partner of the regional stakeholders. China will always be a pillar of peace, stability, development and prosperity (Xinhua News Agency, 2023). China demonstrated its graded love extending from its own citizens to the world's people. For example, in the report of 20th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping articulated the world vision of left Confucianism as follows.

“We must maintain a global vision. The Communist Party of China is dedicated to pursuing happiness for the Chinese

people and rejuvenation for the Chinese nation. It is also dedicated to human progress and world harmony. We should expand our global vision and develop keen insight into the trends of human development and progress, respond to general concerns of people of all countries, and play our part in resolving the common issues facing humankind.” (Xi, 2022).

In this statement, happiness is dedicated to the Chinese people, while the response to general concerns is for the people of the world. The former is obviously more beneficial, although there is care for the interests of both. Here, the “Chinese people” and “the people of all countries” are the subjects, rather than China and all countries. The emphasis on the people’s well-being illustrates the left inclination. Thus, the realization of benevolence is oriented more towards the basic material benefits. Also stated in the report of the 20th CPC National Congress, is that China will contribute to the well-being of the people of the world by providing new development opportunities and promoting an inclusive world economy. Preference is given to the Global South, with China firmly supporting the development of developing countries (Xi, 2022). Such left Confucian thought was implicitly manifested in the collected discourses.

In the framing devices, the flagship media outlets, as the tongues of the CPC, highlight this benevolent world vision. China was depicted as principled, restrained, magnanimous and constructive in ECS geopolitics, promoting common basic

Table 1 Identified issues.

Issue	No. of items
ECS resource dispute	163
ADIZ establishment	97
Strategic negotiations	84
PLA military drills in the ECS	59
Criticizing Western interventions	58
Addressing the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Island dispute	52
Others	124

All collected news items are in the separate dataset file shared by the author.
Source: The author.

Table 2 Media-framing packages for the selected issues.

	ADIZ establishment	Strategic negotiations	ECS resource dispute
<i>Framing device</i>			
Exemplars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counteractions against outer hostilities (39) • Effective ADIZ management (19) • Justifying the ADIZ (19) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicitly and thoroughly stating China’s attitudes towards ECS issues (36) • Facilitating negotiations (25) • Reaching a consensus with Japan (18) • Exchanging opinions (13) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiations with Japan (52) • China’s resource exploitation (34) • Re-emphasis of China’s propositions (38) • Reaching an agreement and a consensus with Japan (15)
Depictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrity and legitimacy of the ADIZ (76) • Safety function of the ADIZ (69) • Outer threats (23) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECS negotiation progress (55) • China’s determination to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity (22) • Outer hostility (7) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiation and cooperation progress (61) • China’s self-defence efforts against Japan’s provocations (36) • Legal foundation of China’s ECS exploitation (32)
Catchphrases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criticizing Japan’s irresponsible condemnation (37) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calling for and appreciating a better relationship with Japan (33) • Criticizing and warning Japan (12) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criticizing Japan’s irresponsible words and actions (21) • Expecting favourable Sino-Japanese relations (19)
<i>Reasoning device</i>			
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being good to find the solution (51) • Safety (44) • Abiding by international law and common practice (27) • Being good for aviation (23) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being cooperative and friendly (230) • Safeguarding core national interests (65) • Being responsible (64) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being good to find the solution (226) • Being defensive (59)
Roots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National defence (68) • Peace (54) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining Sino-Japanese relations (61) • Maintaining Sino-American relations (6) • The importance of peace (4) • Complexity of the geopolitical situation (4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan covets ECS resources (34) • Sovereignty and maritime demarcation disputes (32)
Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreign accusations and concerns (40) • Better national security (23) • Foreign hostile military actions (16) • International recognition (13) • More favourable conditions for aviation (8) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better partnerships with neighbouring countries (82) • International support of China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity (7) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sino-Japanese cooperation progress (83) • Facilitation of peace and stability (14) • China criticizes Japan (9)

Numbers in parentheses refer to the number of references in the collected items. The coding details are in the codebooks shared by the author in separate files.
Source: The author.

material interests with regional stakeholders. In the Chinese ADIZ establishment, China had called for kindness, integrity, friendship, and restraint encompassed by the concept of benevolence. It managed the ADIZ in a principled fashion and responsibly for the regional stakeholders. The safety function of the ADIZ was saliently depicted. Chinese ECS ADIZ was presented as a zone of safety and cooperation, rather than a zone of risk and conflict. China's national defence and foreign countries' aviation freedom could be created simultaneously (The Beijing Daily, 2013). In reporting strategic negotiations with Japan, a country identified by its traumatic imprint on Chinese national history, the media outlets portrayed China as a friendly and benign actor embracing cooperation. China hoped the mutual relationship could look to the future and use history as a guide. Additionally, economic cooperation was frequently illustrated as a means to achieve this. On June 28, 2019, the Economic Daily reported Chinese President Xi Jinping's meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. The largest parts of the negotiation consensus were those illustrating bilateral business cooperation between the people of the two countries and development partnership for the people of the world in multi-lateral dimensions (The Economic Daily, 2019). Likewise, in framing the ECS resource dispute, the outlets emphasized that China sought a solution with the country that left trauma in its wake without the intent of retribution. The progress of negotiation or cooperation on material needs was hailed as more detailed coverage was provided. On 19 June 2008, Guangming Daily explicitly stated that the people of the two countries were the beneficiaries of China-Japan joint development of energy in the ECS (The Guangming Daily, 2008). This manifested left Confucianism's principle of non-offensive solidarity with foreigners and emphasis on people's basic material interests.

Left Confucian ethics also function implicitly in reasoning devices, that arrange the logic of story-telling. Setting aside disputes in favour of being friendly, equal, constructive, circumspect, reciprocal, and open in joint development was a benevolent principle attributed to China in regard to these issues. With their guidance, events that reportedly originated from selfish reasons could result in constructive consequences for relevant stakeholders. Even for highly conflictual events, the establishment of the Chinese ADIZ allegedly received international recognition and created favourable conditions for aviation. For instance, as reported by the Beijing Daily, Hong Lei, the spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry claimed that China was abiding by international laws and common practices. He stated that the safety function of the Chinese ECS ADIZ consequently received recognition from many countries. 55 airlines from 19 countries submitted flight plans to the Chinese authorities. The exceptions were the US and Japan, two regional ruling military and economic powers. The national security of China and international aviation safety were therefore better guaranteed (The Beijing Daily, 2013). In this report, the establishment of the ADIZ as an action driven by self-interest ultimately complied with the material interests of all. However, the alleged win-win safety situation was asymmetric. The stronger national defence and airspace authority of China are clearly more fundamentally important and favourable than better aviation safety for foreign airlines. The situation is least favourable to the US, as its military planes would be intercepted. This narrative logic was guided by the principles of graded love. It served self-interests most, with other countries receiving less, and the regional hegemony receiving the least.

Nation-defending China. Self-victimization and the sense of humiliation have stimulated China's need for national defence

(Wirth, 2019). The sense of external threat is strongly felt in the discourse of Chinese foreign policy. According to Xi Jinping's "Thought on Diplomacy", global peace and development are under the threat of unilateralism, protectionism, and hegemony. The creation of cliques against others (*xiaoquan*), boycotts, coercion, decoupling, cutting off supplies, sanctions and isolation split the world and created confrontation (Publicity Department of the CPC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2021). Although the threats did not explicitly refer to any countries, they *ipso facto* pointed to the actions of the US and its closest allies.

In the framing devices, to construct the nation-defending narrative in ECS geopolitics, state media outlets have highlighted lingering hostility from Japan and the US, which encroach on China's national interests. China is merely acting in self-defence. In the establishment of the Chinese ADIZ, the catchphrases included *Zei Han Zhuo Zei* (A thief crying, "Stop, thief!") and *E Ren Xian Gao Zhuang* (He who first offends first complains.). These catchphrases were employed to demonstrate the hypocrisy behind the hostility against China. Adhering to this pattern, foreign threats and hostility, in the form of either military action or verbal provocation, received much attention in Chinese news outlets. In reporting on strategic negotiations with Japan, the Chinese government's solemn position on historical and sovereign issues was extensively depicted. In the ECS resource dispute, the framing arrangement retained sovereign concerns salient to China's diplomatic discourse. Catchphrases such as *Chun Chun Yu Dong* (flexing muscle) and *Zui Weng Zhi Yi Bu Zai Jiu* (The designs of the drunkard lie not on the wine but on other purposes.) were chosen to illustrate the implicit and hypocritical hostility of Japan, whose provocations were highlighted. These provocations included the Japanese government's granting of exploration rights to private enterprises and the severe criticism of China in the Japanese media.

In the reasoning devices, defences against external hostility were more or less set as the origins of the events. The ADIZ issue reportedly came from Japan's hostility to ownership disputes regarding the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands. In strategic negotiations with Japan, the sovereignty problem was also regarded as a driver of talks. In the ECS resource dispute, the driving force was understood as Japan's greediness for more resources. As for the consequences, China allegedly constructed better national security in all examined issues. The situation was more peaceful and cooperative, although foreign accusations and military hostility still lingered in the ADIZ event.

International China. The Xi administration identifies China as a player that embraces international engagement and has stated that China has firmly safeguarded the international order based on international law with the United Nations at the core. China pursued reciprocity and openness with other countries. It realized its further development by engaging with the world and making its development conducive to the world (Publicity Department of the CPC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2021). China's embrace of international engagement is illustrated in the discourses of Chinese state media outlets. The outlets constructed two frames to demonstrate China's inclination towards international engagement.

The first shaped China as a sincere follower of international laws and globally accepted common practices. It aimed to illustrate that its counterpart, not China, was challenging the existing order. This frame was not only demonstrated by the exemplars and depictions in the framing devices but also upheld as the principles in the reasoning devices to guide the development of events. Specifically, the outlets highlighted the Chinese ADIZ's legitimacy deriving from the United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and international common practices. For example, the PLA Daily on 26 November 2013 reported that the ADIZ was literally invented by the US to provide a better early warning system for containing foreign air threats. Such practices have been followed by more than 20 countries or regions, including Canada, Australia and South Korea (Lu and Luo, 2013). In reporting Xi Jinping's strategic negotiation with Leon Panetta, the then-US Secretary of Defence, the China Youth Daily on September 19th highlighted Xi Jinping's condemnation of Japan's encroachment on the international order after WWII, as it doubted the effectiveness of the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation (Qian, 2012). In the ECS resource dispute, international norms and rules were upheld. Compliance with them was considered good to find a solution. China asserted that the relevant stakeholders should act based on international laws and agreements, which were the foundation of the ethical judgements of geopolitical behaviours.

The second frame emphasized China's efforts in international cooperation and negotiation. This frame was manifested by the major principles in the reasoning devices. China reportedly tended to negotiate with regional stakeholders regarding the concerns provoked by its ADIZ. China upheld the principle of innocuousness. During the strategic negotiations, China's actions were described as being guided by cooperative, friendly and responsible principles. China was enthusiastic in its friendly engagement with Japan, the former bully in its history. For instance, on 29 December 2007, the Guangzhou Daily vividly depicted China's ebullient welcome of Yasuo Fukuda. Peking University was reported to be crowded before the Japanese Prime Minister arrived. Even though Mr. Yasuo Fukuda was 30 min late, the audience still felt very excited when he delivered his speech about Sino-Japanese cooperation (Qian, 2007). Similarly, regarding the ECS resource dispute, the story was that China sought to solve the problem through dialogue and communication, to set the dispute aside and to conduct joint development projects with Japan.

Internarrativity. These three narratives are not mutually independent. They empower each other. Left Confucian ethics drive China's international community engagement. They also provide guidance for national defence and attach legitimacy to it. In addition, the graded love of left Confucian ethics moderates the connection between the mindsets of national rejuvenation and international engagement. On the other hand, such a connection makes China's ethical pursuit realistic and pragmatic.

First, regarding the mutuality between the left Confucian ethics and China's international engagement, the pursuit of benevolence reinforces China's constructive role in the current order and vice versa. Driven by the ethical imperative of left Confucianism, China is eager to provide basic public material goods for regional stakeholders, although the strongest ones receive less. As demonstrated by the reasoning devices, the events were guided by constructive, cooperative and responsible principles. They complied with the left Confucianism's insistence on the core ethical tenets and demonstrated care for the interests of foreigners, especially in a material sense. The Chinese ECS ADIZ was reportedly good for international aviation and received international recognition. The strategic negotiations resulted in better partnerships, and the ECS resource dispute finally ended with further cooperation between China and Japan. Left Confucian ethics made China realize that its rise depended on the contribution to the interests of others. It deeply understood the regional anxiety and even the hostility caused by any potential challenge. Simultaneously, it cares for basic material interests, i.e., the safety and economic income of the people, although the

stories are reportedly less favourable to foreign regional hegemony. Thus, China sought to maintain regional peace and stability and mutual economic benefit expansion. They were enabled and regulated by the UNCLOS, the UN charter, and the various bilateral agreements and common practices. The expression of constructing peace by abiding by the existing order demonstrated China's sincerity about being a contributor. Therefore, China's discourse, as manifested by the media-framing packages, chose to fully respect the existing rules, norms and common practices. Especially in military-related issues, the existing order was identified as its public justification. Abiding by international law was the stated principle. By self-identifying as a follower of and contributor to the status quo, China sought to construct its outward benevolence as widely accepted.

Second, regarding the internarrativity of left Confucian ethics and Chinese nationalism, this paper argues that being benevolent can legitimize national defence from a Confucian perspective. A certain consideration comes into play. Although a harmonious approach is more effective than a conflictual one (Chen, 2020), the left Confucians insist on the fundamental value of just war (Bell, 2010b) and regard war as the last resort to safeguard national interests (Gan, 2018). In this sense, the nation being legitimately defended, and not the counterpart, is benevolent. A state without benevolence should not be considered powerful, even though it has strong economic and military capabilities, because people do not adhere sincerely to a ruler who lacks benevolence, and they will not sacrifice themselves for his or her reign. Therefore, his or her retaliations for past humiliations are also not righteous (Meng, 2013). A truly powerful ruler should be an ethical leader, apart from the state's economic and military capabilities.

In the context of ECS geopolitics, the benevolent Self and the ethically inferior Other are clearly delineated in media-framing packages, especially regarding conflict-provoking issues. In the framing devices, the state media outlets highlighted China's justification of the ADIZ primarily based upon its principled management. Simultaneously highlighted were the repulsive counteractions from the US and Japan, who reportedly pioneered the establishment of such ADIZs while hypocritically not allowing China to do so. To organize the causes and effects in the story, the maintenance of regional aviation order and national safety was presented as the intention and consequence of the Chinese ADIZ, showing China's obliging consideration. However, the US and Japan responded with verbal accusations and hostile military actions. When the goodwill was denounced with hostility, a further differentiation was produced between a righteous China and the hypocritical US and Japan. In this sense, the extension of defence, i.e., the intensive management and patrol in the ADIZ afterwards, was frequently reported on. This action was depicted as non-offensively complying with the common safety interests. Meanwhile, in the framings of strategic negotiations and the ECS resource disputes, as China's constructive efforts reportedly did not result in hostility from its counterparts, the negotiations were depicted as successful.

Third, the graded love of left Confucian ethics moderates the connection between national interests and willingness to engage with international communities. In the reasoning devices, national interests are saliently presented as the roots of the disputed events. Moderated by ethics, selfish beginnings were connected to constructive ends. This connection was enabled by the vision of a Confucian-style interstate order, rather than a Westphalian one. In the former, a state's legitimate interests are essentially pursued on the basis of ethical superiority rather than merely as rule-abiding actions (Chen, 2020). Such ethical superiority is necessarily conducive to the international

community, on the one hand. On the other hand, an international contribution reinforces the national strength in the Confucian sense. Nonetheless, altruistic pursuits in the international community cannot reach the extent to which national self-interests are derogated. Through Confucianism's concept of graded love, the defence of benevolent national interests can be conducted in parallel with the defence of the shared interests of the international community. For instance, as manifested in the consequences of ECS ADIZ, the national security and airspace authority is for Chinese people and aviation order and safety are for foreigners (The Beijing Daily, 2013). The prerequisite of the graded love liaisons is the state's ethical superiority, without which international engagement cannot be justified as benevolent and thus descends to pure statecraft. As manifested in the media-framing packages, the outlets emphasized China's alleged inspiration of goodwill, which differed from the approach of the former potential hegemon in Westphalian power politics. For example, as reported by the People's Daily on 4 June 2010, during a state visit to Japan, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao claimed that China had never pursued hegemony and posed no threat to any country. The harmonious world was China's foreign policy vision. China's development was very important to regional and world peace and stability. It would facilitate the just and reasonable reform of international economic governance. To construct a better relationship with Japan, Premier Wen took time from his busy schedule dominated by economic affairs to communicate with the Japanese people. He treasured the traditional culture that was bridging the Chinese and Japanese nations' feelings and hearts. Premier Wen expressed his friendly emotion and aspiration through reciting poetry. The Japanese people were reportedly deeply moved (The People's Daily, 2010). In this report, the end of Chinese national development was conducive to world development. This illustration was followed by the story of the political leader's ethical manifestation as the implicit justification. Premier Wen Jiabao was reportedly willing to magnanimously shelve historical trauma and warmly embrace friendliness toward people from the former invader country. Such a discursive strategy was enabled by the left Confucian mindset regarding ethical superiority as the source of legitimacy in the order.

On the other hand, left Confucian ethics cannot be realistic and pragmatic without the mindsets of nationalism and engagement in the status quo. Benevolent leadership in the traditional Chinese sense presumes very differently from the construction of hegemony in the existing order. Left Confucianism agrees with Mencius's argument that the hegemon, which must have a powerful state, use forces in disguise of benevolence, while the king (in the Confucian sense), who may not have a powerful state, conducts benevolence with virtuousness (*yi li jia ren zhe ba, ba bi you da guo, yi de xing ren zhe wang, wang budai da*). The hegemon receives ingenuine compliance because the other states comply with the hegemon due to their lack of power. The virtuous one receives genuine compliance, like what Confucius received from his students (*yi li fu ren zhe, fei xin fu ye, li bu shan ye, yi de fu ren zhe, zhong xin yue er cheng fu ye, ru qi shi zi zhi fu kong zi ye*) (Bell, 2010b; Meng, 2013). Yan (2015) further defined the leadership built upon *ren* and *yi* as the humane authority (*wangdao*). He suggested that China could seek leadership of this kind.

However, this paper argues that the establishment of humane authority in the current international order is utopian. Mencius's suggestion of establishing benevolent authority was not given to a nation-state in an international system embracing the equality of sovereignty. The house of *Zhou* remained the highest authority, at least in a nominal sense. The state system in the Spring and

Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, when Confucius and Mencius lived, was hierarchical. Although the hierarchy was damaged in those periods, it had not been overthrown when the idea of benevolent authority was proposed (in fact, Confucius and Mencius hoped to repair that hierarchy). The hierarchical state system was underpinned by a patriarchal clan system based on blood ties. The ideal of benevolent politics actually derived from the ethics governing family affairs. Because of the clanship system, a state's gain was conducive to others as the rulers were family, at least nominally. The king of *Zhou* did not feel a great existential threat from the other states before the hierarchy collapsed, nor did it urgently develop its own capabilities for self-defence or countering others. This is why Confucius's and Mencius's policy suggestions were completely different from Machiavelli's suggestions. They called for greater ethical inspiration, not only for the growth of a state but also for the maintenance of the clanship system that underpinned the interstate order.

Nonetheless, the equality of sovereignty, not hierarchical clanship, is in the presumption of the current international order. In this sense, the establishment of humane authority in the anarchical international system originating in 17th-century Europe is impossible. Given the lack of higher authority and the non-existence of clanship among the states, certain ECS geopolitical games are naturally zero-sum. These games include the demarcation of the Exclusive Economic Zone; the acquisition of undersea resources; and, most importantly, the sovereignty of disputed islands. The existing order—which consists of a series of international laws, institutions, norms and common practices—is incapable of fostering benevolent solutions in the region, and a state cannot be such a coordinator. States tend to coordinate interstate relations by guaranteeing and safeguarding their innocuous self-interests.

By embracing nationalism and the existing order, China has abandoned the clanship presumption of Confucian ethics. China does not act like a humane authority calling for a peaceful and hierarchical order. China must not be the state of *Zhou*, which was small in capability and strong in morality. Its nationalist sentiment has created a great sense of threat from the East China Sea. Chinese state media outlets cheer for the development of greater maritime defence. Nevertheless, China will not deteriorate into a Machiavellian state that requires benevolence to conceal its slyness. Confucian ethics are not hyperaltruistic to the exclusion of the pursuit of self-interest. Being perceived as benevolent is also conducive to self-interest. China can be a nation-state with a benevolent impulse to provide public goods and pursue ethical superiority, despite the impossibility of humane authority. Its construction of benevolence contributes to its own soft power (Bell, 2010b). This is a competitive business. As manifested in the media-framing packages, the discursive combination of national defence and left Confucian ethics has resulted in the production of inferior roles for China's counterparts. Thousands of years ago, the *Zhou* royal house did not do so deliberately in its maintenance of the hierarchical inter-state order. However, these roles, albeit hostile and hypocritical (e.g., condemning irresponsibility, coveting resources, and disputing maritime sovereignty), did not impose a direct, existential threat to the state. The benevolent game competition does not provoke war either. In this sense, China simultaneously avoids the utopian pursuit of humane authority and a game of the Hobbesian state of nature, which are both *ipso facto* dangerous. China tries to win within the existing order with ethical inspiration in a system. The discursive combination of nationalism and international engagement makes left-Confucian ethics realistic and pragmatic. This narrative entanglement endows China's role in the existing order with special connotations.

China's national rejuvenation in the current order: is a stronger US good?

With this examination of the mainframes of internarrativity, this paper argues that the implications of China's aspiration in the current order are complex. Left Confucian ethics reconcile the discourses of national defence and international engagement by the graded love notion. They create the perception that national interests are best defended by the asymmetrical contribution of basic well-being to the international community. China's national rejuvenation needs greater material capabilities that coalesce with its ethical inspiration. Thus, Chinese state media outlets emphasized China's establishment of the East China Sea ADIZ's safety consequences for regional stakeholders, although the benefits are more for China and least for the US and Japan, the two greatest powers in the region. They also concretely presented China's constructive attitudes towards and propositions for the maritime disputes. China reportedly warmly embraced economic cooperation with the country that had left trauma in its historical memory and hailed for its benefits to the people. These actions complied with the requirements of left Confucian ethics, demonstrating the graded humaneness extended to the world and cares for the disadvantaged.

However, China's ethical efforts have been met with few desirable outcomes as its expectations transcend mere material benefits. Its closest trading partners are geopolitical allies of the US and have relatively advanced economies. China's capacity to promote its benevolence to these countries is limited. They are not foreign aid recipients, even aside from China's ethically inspiring promotions. They have a lower proportion of people living in poverty. In contrast, the US has its own widely accepted and well-received benevolence to its allies. The success of its long-term economic and military assistance as well as its ideological model for regional actors also conforms to China's conception of moral leadership, not to mention the establishment of the international order supporting the basic material needs of regional peace and development. Thus, although on certain issues, the US's national defence efforts are extended to an unscrupulous containment of China, it is unwise for China to extend such defensive efforts to overthrow this order. From China's perspective, its counterpart's overall strength in China's peripheral seas is much stronger than China's combination of economic and military capabilities. Despite China having the world's second-largest economy and military budget, the regional order cannot be shifted to China's preference, and China cannot change it. Zhang Yunling, a senior analyst from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), a state-affiliated think-tank, argued that China has the largest economy in Asia but is not the strongest country; although its comprehensive capabilities have increased dramatically, US (regional) hegemony has not changed fundamentally. China's economic capability is not overwhelming, nor can it provide security to neighbouring countries (Zhang, 2015). Yang (2015), also an analyst with CASS, argued that China remained far behind the US and other great Western powers in terms of developing external relations. The further progress of China's national strength and international support relies on its stronger abilities to provide public goods and its concessions of interest for the middle power and small countries. Realizing its incapacity, China believes it is wiser to thrive under the existing order. Therefore, Chinese state media frequently identify China as a guardian and contributor to the existing international order. This identification is not deceptive statecraft but a pragmatic and ethical attitude.

In an order constructed by the different Other, winning the hearts of others is an extremely complicated task. The construction of an ethical inspiration is much more difficult than the development of prevailing economic and military capabilities.

China well realized its limited strength. Thus, instead of boldly and recklessly expanding its defence, it chose prudence as an ethical, realistic and pragmatic choice on its way to national rejuvenation, notwithstanding the ineffective benevolent output. Its arduous efforts towards the national dream do not unconditionally increase the possibility of regional military conflict against the US. The conflict is more likely to be triggered by China if its counterpart is widely understood as destroying the existing order, the counterpart's benevolent capacities decrease dramatically or cease to exist or if the counterpart responds to China's kindness with hostility. In this context, the US's benevolence to its regional allies continues to be perceived by China. Thus far, the Biden administration has been actively aligning with its regional partners in security, technology and economy. It is expanding its provision of material public goods to the region (Blinken, 2022). In the foreseeable future, China will not wage a war proactively against the US in its peripheral seas.

Nonetheless, peace is primarily antagonistic and has limited partnerships. Apart from the economy, military forces or ideology, regional competition includes a battle for favourable meaning in the existing order. Engaging with the international community under the guidance of the status quo order is necessary to meet ethical demands. However, many arrangements under international law, such as UNCLOS and the UN Chapter, and even some bilateral agreements remain vague. China's respect for and compliance with the status quo could be distinctive from its own style in other stakeholders' eyes, similar to others' interpretations of China's understandings, even regarding basic principles. This distinctiveness originates from China's triadic need to self-fulfil benevolence, defence and international engagement. The interpretation of the international order therefore seems selfishly benevolent and compliant. China promotes common material interests in a way that is more conducive to itself with a sincerely cooperative attitude. A typical example is the 'joint development' in the principled consensus reached by China and Japan. Several times, China and Japan accused each other of violating the joint development consensus. Japan argued that the *Chunxiao* (*Shirakaba*) oil and gas field should be included in the joint development (Manicom, 2008). China insisted that the field was not included in the joint development zone, but it welcomed cooperation with Japan in *Chunxiao* (*Shirakaba*). The cooperation should be based on China's full ownership of the field (The China Daily, 2008). Despite the disputed understanding, China continued to uphold the principle of "shelving the dispute and joint development" and treasuring the Sino-Japanese consensus. A similar divergent interpretation of the order widely exists regarding the demarcation of the Exclusive Economic Zone, undisturbed passage and trade rules. The interpretation results from the pragmatic use of the existing order and the desire to promote asymmetrical common interests without overturning the order per se.

These divergent interpretations produce different worlds for China and its counterparts in the same regional order, resulting in a *de facto* dual-core order in the region. The core here refers to a geopolitical sphere constructed from a series of collective understandings of the existing order and its consequences. The first core is embedded in the US and its allies' collective interpretations. The second derives from China and could be joined by potential dissidents (especially the Global South countries) in the US-led sphere or by new stakeholders in the region (e.g., North Korea and Russia). However, China and the US can still find some common ground in the existing order in their strategic competition. This ground is most likely to exist in issues allowing non-zero-sum improvement of basic material needs, for instance, in regional peace, as related interpretations are less disputed between the two nations. The cores are connected through such

common ground. Therefore, the implications of China's national rejuvenation for the status quo in the region are more complicated than merely challenging, amending or complying with it. Instead, such implications depend upon the US's geopolitical influence within its alliance.

Given that the US's benevolence towards its regional allies has oscillated (not vanished), China's pursuit of ethical inspiration provokes strong geopolitical anxiety in its counterparts. This situation further distances China from the US and its closest allies. In this scenario, China's path to national rejuvenation is thwarted, as its national strength lacks international support, and the expansion of benevolence will decline. Antagonistic emotions are strongly evidenced through communication, and cooperation is restricted. Nonetheless, even in this situation, room remains for peace as China and the US agree on the idea of regional peace (The White House, 2021). China could still maintain regional peace with the US and its allies. Various dialogues and engagements that can foster further common understandings continue to be quite meaningful for improving antagonistic peace. With communications, the US and China can assure each other that the current order remains the arena containing the competition, and regional peace continues to be the fundamental interest connecting the two states. Provided that the US-led regional alliance is internally solid enough to withstand China's solipsistic interpretation of the current order, as it was in the 1970s to the 1990s, engagement with China can foster better interests for others. This situation is also because China's self-evaluation of national strength depends on favourable liaisons with international partners. Various cooperative initiatives and interactions can better thrive in this situation. Less assertive moves should be conducted against their counterparts. National strength can be built more extensively upon benevolence. China's national rejuvenation can be guided in a way that is conducive to the US-led order. Thus, the effect of the US's China-engagement policy hinges upon the US's prestige among its allies. A stronger and more confident US, which has a greater capacity to provide a public good, can be favourable for Chinese national rejuvenation. In this scenario, China has a stronger capacity for benevolent output through international partnerships.

Conclusion

In discursive maritime geopolitics, China's nationalist sentiment has been widely perceived. Its outspoken inclination to expand its national defence has provoked serious concerns from its maritime neighbours. Simultaneously, it explicitly aspires to contribute to the international community. However, because of the dominance of realist thought prioritizing material needs in the domestic maritime policy discussion, China's nationalism is understood as paradoxical to its international engagement narrative. Recent studies have argued that this discursive combination distances China from the international community centred in the West. To explain why China upholds this seemingly self-defeating discursive strategy, the dominant propositions contend that the international engagement narrative is the means to the end of Chinese national rejuvenation. China's partnership initiatives are utilized as pure statecraft to challenge the existing regional order.

Many studies have identified Confucian ethics as playing a meaningful role in the development of Chinese foreign policy. Confucianism in contemporary China has become "left", as it is embracing, enriching socialism and even critically opening to Western values. However, such modified imperceptible functions of Confucian ethics are still missing from China's strategic discourse of maritime geopolitics. The ethics have abundant guiding principles for self-defence and managing social relations. Thus,

left Confucian ethics can be associated with Chinese nationalism and the aspiration for international engagement. Such an association can provide an insightful understanding of China's subjectivity in the regional order.

By collecting Chinese state media outlets' news items and interpreting their framing packages, this paper argues that China's perception of national rejuvenation hinges upon the establishment of a widely accepted ethical superiority of Confucianism. To be ethically inspiring, China must be able to satisfy the basic material needs of regional stakeholders and contribute public goods to the existing order. Constructively engaging with maritime neighbours contributes to the perception of better national strength. Through the moderation of left Confucian ethics, the contribution extends from itself to the foreign hegemon with diminishing intensity. And thus, it does not encroach on the importance of national interests. However, the ethical pursuit of benevolence does not guarantee refraining from the use of force. After the benevolent Self's kindness to the vicious Other receives a hostile response, military action counterparts could be understood as legitimate. Finally, nationalist sentiment and international engagement mindsets make Confucian ethics realistic and pragmatic in maritime geopolitics. Left Confucian ethics reconcile with nationalist sentiment by abandoning the ontological assumption of clanship in the understanding of interstate affairs. China becomes pragmatic by avoiding the pursuit of humane authority. The benevolent output turns to the soft power construction of the state in the existing order and makes the building of ethical superiority a competitive matter. Nonetheless, China's international engagement is not a deceptive statecraft but an ethical and pragmatic pursuit. Its evaluation of national strength depends upon sincerely favourable liaisons with relevant stakeholders.

The relationships among the discourses on left Confucian ethics, nationalist sentiment and international engagement generate new connotations for China's role in the existing order. China is neither a Machiavellian state seeking to overthrow the current order nor a Confucian altruist constructing an ethical order regardless of its own capabilities. It *ipso facto* challenges the US and its allies' collective interpretations of the existing order rather than the order per se, as China needs existing international law, norms and common practices to establish its global prestige through delivering basic material public goods for the people of the world. Therefore, in future East/South China Sea geopolitics, the regional order will produce two cognitive cores, centred on the US and China and interconnected by their limited consensus. When solidarity in the US-led alliance deteriorates, China's interpretive effort provokes stronger geopolitical anxiety, which thwarts its national rejuvenation by limiting its international support. Provided the US's geopolitical influence is strong enough to tolerate China's distinctive interpretation of the order, Chinese national rejuvenation can result, as benevolence is likely to receive greater international support.

Data availability

The datasets and codes generated during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Notes

1 To ensure analytical validity, the news items collected in this study illustrate issues involving other countries directly in the ECS region.

2 Cohen's kappa coefficient calculates the similarity of two or more coding results.

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Author contributions

This article is written by one author and thus his contribution is 100%.

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The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This study did not involve human participants performed by any of the authors. It utilized published discourses from the state media outlets.

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Additional information

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