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Macron's 'Strategic Autonomy': An Interpretation Drawn from Chinese International Theory

<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/04/18/macrons-strategy-autonomy-an-interpretation-drawn-from-chinese-international-theory/>

CHIA-YU LIANG, APR 18 2023

French President Emmanuel Macron engendered a controversy regarding his comments on Europe's relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States (US) during his visit to China in April 2023. He advocated for European sovereignty, which would require European states to reduce their dependency on the US and not be involved in the Sino-Taiwan conflict, as it is not of Europe's doing, but an issue of 'the US agenda and a Chinese overreaction' (Anderlini and Caulcutt 2023). The idea of European sovereignty is so crucial to Macron's vision for Europe that he reiterated it in a speech in the Netherlands (Macron 2023) where he characterised his vision for Europe as a dream by invoking George Steiner's imagery of cafés. This vision, or dream, is for Europe to be a third superpower. This dream deserves further examination because on the one hand, it clearly breaks away from the prospect of a bipolar world order that is often characterised in the language of a 'new Cold War'. On the other hand, the fact that a former colonial empire is championing the establishment of a new superpower provides invaluable insight for reviewing the formulation of the post-World War II international order.

However potentially rich the controversy the philosopher president's vision provoked may be, the dispute has neglected one indispensable perspective: the Chinese perspective. The debate effectively centres on whether France – and Europe – should be 'America's follower' without 'strategic autonomy' and framed the issue as the relations between two agents: Europe and the US. Nevertheless, Macron expressed his view during his visit to the PRC, which is exactly the other superpower next to the US. For him to advocate for Europe as a third superpower, the neglect of the second superpower seems curious. Furthermore, the PRC's potential invasion of Taiwan is exactly what the US as the first superpower sought to deter, and what Macron sought to dissuade European states from engaging with. Finally, it is actually possible to examine China's view on Macron's vision, since Chinese academics have produced abundant scholarship on Chinese International Relations Theory (IRT) that is based on sources of Chinese Intellectual History and Chinese Philosophy, forming a large scope of Chinese perspectives on international politics. Without taking the Chinese perspective into consideration, the debate over Macron's vision cannot reach a comprehensive assessment of his idea.

This article provides one possible Chinese perspective for assessing Macron's vision. The perspective is provided by the interpretation of a Chinese classical text, 'On Six States' by Su Xun (1009–1066). Before engaging with Su's article, I must first explain why the interpretation of this classical text could constitute a Chinese perspective.

Chinese International Relations Theory: Themes and Method

To call a perspective 'Chinese' does not mean that there is one unified and coherent Chinese viewpoint, but rather a set of formulated perspectives that distinguish themselves from the hegemonic western ones, whereby such a formulation is based on the intellectual tradition that is called Chinese. Similarly, other traditions could form their perspectives based on the resource of their respective intellectual traditions. The recognition of the need for these non-Western traditions' contribution in the renovation of IRT was the drive behind the discussion of non-Western IRT (see Acharya and Buzan 2007). In this development, Chinese scholars put forth several versions of Chinese IRT, which are diversified in their themes, but unified in their method of theory-building. Categorised thematically, there are at least Yan Xuetong's moral realism, which integrates the concept of morality into realist IRT (Trigkas 2020), Qin

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Yaqing's relational theory, which underscores relationality in Confucian thought as the ontological foundation of IRT, Zhao Tingyang's theory of the *tianxia* system, which advocates for the supremacy of the traditional Chinese worldview of *tianxia* (All-under-Heaven) to tackle problems in a globalised world, and Ren Xiao's symbiosis theory, which reinterprets traditional China's diplomatic practice and political thought as constituting an alternative to the western-dominated international order (see Grydehøj and Su 2022). These theories differ in their epistemological assumptions and thematic foci, and their thematic propositions have proved to be useful in explaining the PRC's rhetoric in her foreign policy.

However, on the methodological front, these theories all apply the same approach of rediscovering ancient Chinese political thoughts and reinterpreting them for the identification of keywords to be the cornerstone of their theory-building. Moral realism underscores the teaching of the Confucian thinker Xunzi; relational theory expanded to Confucius and other Confucian thinkers; *tianxia* theory effectively invoked most influential schools of thought of pre-imperial China, including Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism; and symbiosis theory even more freely incorporated concepts such as yin-yang and 'the symbiosis/unity of Heaven and Man'.

The similar approach resulted in, first, the common embracement of a series of concepts, including non-exteriority, all-inclusive, co-existence, characterised as core values of Chinese tradition; second, the general justification of officially proclaimed foreign policy objectives, such as Hu Jintao's harmonious world and Xi Jinping's Community of common destiny (*Ibid.*, 38); and thirdly, certain shared methodological weaknesses that other IR scholars indicated in their criticism of Chinese IRT. For example, William Callahan acutely challenged Zhao's interpretation of *tianxia* as based on a decontextualised misinterpretation of Chinese classics such as *Dao De Jing* (Callahan 2008).

Nevertheless, these theoretical constructs do form a perspective that is distinct from the major IRTs that have long relied on categories developed in the western tradition, such as state sovereignty, balance of power, and norm construction. It is therefore possible to argue that the Chinese perspective on international affairs could continue to be constructed if one follows the method of these Chinese IRT, that is, appropriating from the intellectual resource of pre-modern China, and extracting from the appropriated source crucial concepts and rationales that are distinct from those of the western traditions. The question then is: which materials in the abundant resource of traditional Chinese political thought should be appropriated so that Macron's vision can be re-examined, and the examination can be seen as from a Chinese perspective?

The Lesson from Chinese Classical Text: Sun Xun's 'On the Six States'

To address this question, I propose revisiting the Chinese classical text, 'On the Six States' authored by Su Xun, for three reasons. First, it is an exemplary text, by a representative author. Su Xun is enlisted in the Eight Masters of Tang and Song Empires, and recognised as a prominent figure in the long history of Chinese literati. The text 'On the Six States' is one of the two major classical texts that commented on the first unified Chinese empire, Qin Empire (221 – 207 BCE): Jia Yi (200 – 168 BCE) of Han Empire analysed the fall of Qin Empire in his 'On the Faults of Qin', while Su Xun's 'On the Six States' analysed the rise of Qin, by annihilating the other six major states. This then leads to the second reason, that is, the contextual correspondence between the context of Su and of Macron, as well as the thematic correspondence between Su's text and Macron's vision. Su analysed the rise of Qin in 221 BCE for the purpose of criticising Song Empire's policy towards neighbouring empires such as the Khitan Liao Empire and Tangut Xia Empire, which entailed paying an annual tribute of wealth and goods to appease the two non-Chinese empires. Macron's aspiration is situated in the Sino-US contestation, and has been criticised for breaking away from the western united front and for appeasing China. Finally, Su's method in this text, namely appropriating the past to analyse his present, is in accordance with the method of Chinese IRT, and the appropriation of Su's work to analyse our present could therefore be considered a possible argument of Chinese IRT.

In 'On the Six States' (see Cai 2022), Su argued that the founding of the first Chinese empire, Qin, as a result of Qin's annihilation of the other six states, was not permitted by the military weakness of the latter, but by the bribery the six states made to Qin. By bribery, Su meant the cession of territory. Su argued that, on the one hand, those states ceding lands to Qin in exchange for temporary peace weakened them, and by extension they also weakened other states that did not cede any territory to Qin. Su based his analysis on the judgment made by the 'Chinese

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Herodotus' Sima Qian (c. 145 – 86 BCE), who in his work that founded the Chinese historiographical tradition, *Records of the Grand Historian*, assessed that 'appeasing Qin by ceding lands is like putting out fire with timber – only the total consumption of the last timber could succeed'.

Based on this, Su further examined the three states that did not cede any land to Qin, namely the states of Qi, Yan, and Zhao. In Su's view, the three states not agreeing to the cession of territory was the reason why two of them, Qi and Yan, were the last to be conquered. Zhao fell earlier, but defeated Qin repeatedly before its doom. More importantly, in Su's view, the state of Qi, being the last to fall under the might of Qin, could have avoided this fate if Qi had assisted the other five states. Su, in conclusion, argued that the fate of the six fallen states could have been avoided, if they had given the land not to the aggressor Qin but to the talents of All-under-Heaven, if they had paid respect not to Qin but to the advisers on interstate affairs. With this conclusion, Su was effectively criticising the Song court's policy of tribute-paying to Khitan Liao and Tangut Xia.

What is the perspective that Su's text provides for the interpretation of the controversy engendered by Macron's comments? First, it provided an understanding of the strategic options for both the rising hegemon (Qin in Su's article) and the resisting powers (the six states in Su's article). The rising hegemon benefits from the concession and disunity of other states, while the other states' resistance can only be meaningfully achieved by their unity. By proposing the Europe as the third superpower, Macron could identify the Europe as the rising hegemon, which however is different from the US that sees the PRC as the rising hegemon. The avoidance of whether the PRC is the rising hegemon devalues Macron's proposal of 'stopping to follow the US', because it eschews the question of 'following the PRC'. In this sense, the western approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is more in accordance with the advocacy of Su's text. Furthermore, Macron's proposition could actually serve to benefit the PRC, especially as Macron included the avoidance of safeguarding Taiwan's autonomy in his strategy for formulating European sovereignty. This means that the interest of the PRC in taking over Taiwan is not a disinterest for sovereign Europe. In Su's view, however, this would actually be a weakening of first Taiwan, then the US, then other western states, as per the domino effect Su described in his analysis. This then leads us to the final lesson Macron can learn from Su, that is: who is the taker in the international system now? In Su's argument, the state of Qin was the taker, which demands cession of territory from other states incessantly. In Macron's proposition, there is no clear identification of the taker in the international order, nor the state that takes from France and Europe – between the US and the PRC, which demands concession from Europe? If Su's teaching serves, Macron would benefit from identifying the taker first, and then propose to 'stop following the taker'.

Conclusion

In this article, I reviewed Macron's proposition for Europe, that is to (1) stop following the US, (2) avoid being forcefully involved in the Sino-Taiwan conflict, and (3) establish a third superpower to safeguard European sovereignty, by extracting a Chinese perspective from Su Xun's classical text, 'On the Six States'. I did so by following the method of theory-building of Chinese IRT, that is: appropriating sources of traditional Chinese political thought to reinterpret the international order and actions. This is of course not the only perspective that can be extracted from Chinese traditional thought, considering the rich civilisational legacy of China. However, as the major trends in Chinese IRT avoid an in-depth explanation of military conflicts and the annihilation of states, Su Xun's text is one example that is worthy of exploration. The perspective that Su provided is similar to realist logic, but it could also be a Chinese contribution to the maintenance of an interstate system. Macron, as the philosopher president of the sovereign state of the Republic of France, could consider a different approach for the enlarged sovereign bloc of European states, in light of Su's analysis, the inspiration for which could actually also serve the interpretation and prediction of the PRC's behaviour, since the PRC is, fundamentally, China. Su's article could therefore help Macron develop an interpretative framework and gain insight on how the PRC might evaluate the overall situation in the changing international system, and this insight could be extremely valuable for France and Europe, if becoming the third superpower is indeed their aspiration.

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Macron's 'Strategic Autonomy': An Interpretation Drawn from Chinese International Theory

Written by Chia-Yu Liang

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About the author:

Chia-Yu Liang is a Doctoral Student at the department of International Relations at the University of Sussex. His research interests include Chinese IR Theory, Civilisational Politics, Political Theologies, and Comparative Political Thought. Twitter: @CYLiang0331.