On the Concentric-Circle Identity in Traditional Chinese Culture

By Guo Shuyong  Chen Jianjun

I. Why the Study of Concentric-Circle Identity in Chinese Culture?

(I) A Look at China’s Diplomacy of Today

The 21st century has seen the terminology of China’s diplomacy switch from such buzzwords as “the Third World”, “friendly relations”, “strategic alliance”, and “a new world order”, to such more realistic terms as “good-neighbor diplomacy”, “neighboring-country diplomacy”, “greater good-neighbor diplomacy”, “strategic partnership”, “all-round partnership”, “constructive partnership oriented toward the 21st century”, “mutual-beneficial strategic partnership”, “harmonious relations with neighboring countries”, “harmonious Asia-Pacific Region” and “harmonious world”. The terminological change, in one word, is an indicator of the reduction of cultural identity in China’s diplomacy in accordance with geographic distance. In this essay, “circle-stratum” is invented to refer to the unique Chinese diplomatic consciousness that has been an important part of Chinese diplomatic culture for thousands of years, framing Chinese diplomats perceptions of the world. It is important to discuss the significance of studying this phenomenon before a provisional definition is made.

China’s rapid development has aroused both the attention and apprehension of the world about where China will be heading and whether its rise can be a peaceful one. To respond, an explanation is made on the basis of China’s culture characterized by peace and prosperity, which has made a big difference in terms of winning the understanding and support of international friends.

However, Western scholars, discontented with a cultural interpretation, are now looking for a new angle at which China’s diplomatic policies can be better understood, for these policies have touched upon not only the issue of peace and prosperity but also the issues of cooperation and international responsibility. This is understandable as we are also getting discontented with the logic of Western superiority in its institutions characterized by peace based on shared democratic spirit or on hegemonic power. Oriental pacifism is supposedly based on Confucianism. If Confucianism plays a big role in China’s diplomacy, what can be the mechanism that may help bridge the logic gap between Confucianism and oriental pacifism? What is the typical way of thinking that the Chinese employ when they are considering such external relations as international cooperation and international responsibility? These are questions that Westerns are now vigorously studying in order to find satisfactory answers, and Chinese scholars must boldly join them with their own quests. This essay is an attempt to invent the concept of “circle-stratum” as an analysis instrument and a premise as well to reread the diplomatic mentality of Ancient China.

Two questions are of vital importance: Is the psychological existence of circle-stratum in China’s diplomacy conducive to a stable structure of relations between China and the rest of the world? Will it be in antagonism to the democratization of international relations? The expectation of the international community that China will shoulder more responsibility in international affairs proves China’s rise and China’s rise is a symbol of the rise of Asia, the rise of Oriental civilization in the new millennium. The concept of circle-stratum not only applies to the study of China’s diplomacy but also to the study of diplomatic strategies of East Asia. It has been estimated that
such conceptions as “East Asian Economic Circle”, “Great China Economic Circle” and “Asia Economic Circle”, etc. ever since Japan proposed so-called “Great Asian Mutual Prosperity Circle” during the Second World War.

While Westerners prefer to use “economic community” and “economic zone”, East Asians, under the influence of Confucianism, are more used to using “circle-stratum” mentality for strengthening their social solidarity and for achieving a sense of security, economic prosperity and political ambition in this structure composed of unequal circle.

This essay takes a bold step and argues that a very important reason why the East Asian economic integration has been lagging behind that of Americas and Europe may be the fact that a cultural structure of unequal circle, similar to the ancient oriental international system, has been missing due to the cultural and political chaos in modern East Asia. Without cultural synthesis like what Europe and America have, East Asian were unable to establish either an organization similar to EU or the economic community of ancient East Asia.

(II) Is “Concentric-Circle” unique to Chinese culture?

In an international system made up of nations-states, self-interest is the starting point of international behavior. In this sense, circle-stratum exists in every nation’s diplomatic culture. This can be seen as the universality in diplomatic culture study. However, China’s circle-stratum consciousness or identity has its own characteristics. A quotation of Liang Qichao may shed some light to this point: “All humanity has an identity consciousness, which ripples from self to immediate relatives to relatives and to acquaintances in accordance with blood distance. Therefore, identity affection is based on kinship and blood-ties, love for kinfolks, but not for outsiders, and compassion for compatriots, but not for aliens. Love and compassion are the expanded identity consciousness.”

According to Liang Qichao, the circle-stratum consciousness of the Chinese culture is an ever-expanding identity consciousness, a rippling process of love and kindness, which is totally different from the Western logic based on self-centered interest and national conflicts.

The question is how the Chinese concentric-circle came into being? There can be a number of causes for its formation and development. Aside from Liang Qichao’s theory of concentric-circle based on social ethics and the rippling effect of love and kindness, a more materialistic and thus more fundamental reason is how ancient Chinese states interacted and communicated with one another, which is very different from inter-nation relations of ancient Europe.

In comparison, ancient China was much more integrated with a much more closed-up international system, a much longer and more consistent history, and a much more advanced courtesy culture based on agricultural culture.

Another reason is seen in the great differences in diplomatic practices between the West and the East. A noticeable difference is that the diplomatic center of East Asia, namely ancient China, had not been dislocated throughout the long history of thousands of years, which is very different from what happened in Europe. This monism is s1een in the fact that “The royal court of central

1. 梁启超: 《先秦政治思想史》, 北京: 东方出版社, 1996年, 第86页。
2. 李云泉认为, 地理环境的相对封闭, 缺少与其它发达文明之间的对外交流, 增强了华夏人的文化优越感, 华夏中心意识成为一种普遍的社会心理。这种观点与美国汉学家费正清的观点是一致的。见李云泉: 《朝贡制度史论》, 新华出版社, 2004年, 第190页。
3. 黎虎认为, 古代世界形成了两个主要的外交圈, 即在帕米尔高原和喜马拉雅以东的东亚外交圈, 和在其以西的西方外交圈。西方外交圈由于古代航海技术的发达及贸易的通行，其中心不断转移，形成了多中心的特征，如汉唐时期，西方出现了以安息帝国等为代表的西亚北非外交中心，以罗马帝国等为代表的地中海中心，以及罗马帝国为中心的欧洲外交中心，而各个中心内部也不断转移主辅国家。而东亚则不同，中国始终是东亚世界的中心。见黎虎: 《汉唐外交制度史》, 兰州大学出版社, 1997年, 第6、7页。
4. 《国语•晋语四》。
region of ancient China had been the diplomatic center of East Asia.”

Therefore, it may be argued that the concentric-circle identity in traditional Chinese culture has more significance and thus has a greater impact on China’s diplomacy today.

(III) Understanding Concentric-Circular Identity

By inventing the concept of “concentric-circular mode of cultural identity”, this essay is not to create academic novelty. Instead, this concept is employed to describe a commonplace psychological tendency in ancient China’s diplomatic mentality. Namely, in dealing with external relations, the Chinese tend to define their identity in accordance with an expanding circle with differentiating circle centered on self-consciousness characterized by hierarchy, order and etiquette, thus deciding on the scope and intensity of their activities with the purpose of ultimately uniting the world into this ever-expanding circle. This mentality finds its way, more or less, into every individual Chinese, every Chinese family and every previous dynasty.

The history of this concentric-circle identity can be traced back to Zhou Dynasty when people were already used to this mind-set: “This is how the political system of the previous king goes: kinship officials are within the five-hundred li around the capital city, those outside of the kinship beyond the five-hundred li, the southern minorities farther, and the northern savages even farther.” Underlying the concentric-circle is the unity of ethics or clanship: “The same clan name means the same ethics, the same ethics the same intention, the same intention the same ideal.”

Having survived a clash with the world system, China has sped up its development. Many Western scholars turn their attention to the study of Chinese society and Chinese people’s way of looking at the world. “Since the Chinese tend to characterize external relations as a kind of manifestation of the domestic social and political orders, China’s diplomatic relations are also characterized by hierarchy and order like Chinese society.” says J. F. Fairbank, the American expert in Chinese culture. The foundation upon which the Chinese identify themselves with the rest of the world is rooted in the concentric-circle mentality. “The big circle of China, when dealing with the external world, starts with itself as the center and divides the rest of the world into circle in terms of kinship and distance, and these circle usually evolves into hierarchies.” comments Sun Jilong on Chinese concentric-circle consciousness.

Thus, the concentric-circle identity of ancient Chinese can be understood as: First of all, the center is the self-consciousness or will (at the national level: the superiority of Chinese culture) of the Chinese people; Second of all, the concentric-circle structure is composed of a multitude of circles with the same center and the same consistent cultural identity gluing the circles together; thirdly, the identity of the center with the components beyond the center dilutes with the distance of kinship and space, resulting in the differences in identities; last but not least, this difference circle has never been a solid one, but an expanding one that is employed flexibly in order to achieve the unification of the world by love and kindness.

II. Different Identities: Concentric-Circle Mentality of the East and Dichotomy Mentality of the West

(I) The Dichotomy Employed by the West to Perceive the World

It cannot be said that the concentric-circle identity encompasses the whole philosophy of the
Chinese about the world. There are other types of identity mentalities. However, a more systematic expression of concentric-circle mentality is found in the Chinese culture, in the various institutions and in the forms where it is materialized. Therefore, it may be safely argued that concentric-circle identity is the most fundamental physiological pattern of China’s diplomatic culture. Likewise, of the many types of identity patterns, dichotomy takes the leading position, which places emphasis on the division of self and non-self, friends and enemies, brightness and darkness, conversus and pagan, democracy and dictatorship and science and fatuity. This mentality has as its foundation dichotomy and Christianity, which stresses the irresolvable difference between domestic politics and international politics. A good example is how Wont, the most well-known American identity scholar, classifies identity: entity identity, category identity, role identity and collective identity, the first two of which prescribes the affirmation of self while negative otherness. Although enemy, friend and rival are discussed in role identity, but importance is given to the difference between enemy and friend. Collective identity does emphasize the importance of seeing others as family, but its existence of limited degree is only found in such security community as EU. A prerequisite for the existence of collective identity is that there exists a common enemy, thus making it marginal in identity politics. It is clear that Western identity theories are fraught with the dichotomy logic whose soundness (collective identity) is based on the presupposition of an enemy.

A vivid metaphor is given by Fei Xiaotong to shed light on the difference in identity thinking between the West and East: “The way how Western society is formed can be compared to how straw in the rice field is made into bundles and each straw belongs to a bundle and defines their identity according to the bundle they belong to. This gives the society order and the bundles in Western society are called groups. These groups or communities have their boundaries and are clear about their membership. Chinese society is very different, as its formation pattern is similar to the expanding ripples in the water caused by the strike of a stone. Each individual stands as the center of the social influence he has initiated and relations occur when social objects are encompassed within the expanding ripples, forming different circles in different positions and at different times. ” Mr. Fei called the Western pattern of social relations organization solidarity while he described the Chinese pattern of social relations as one based on differences and circle. A psychological analysis directs to the fact that Western social organization solidarity is characterized by internal equality and solidarity with cut-and-dry boundaries that place value on the differentiation of justice and injustice, positive and negative. The psychological premise of the Chinese society, in contrast, is based on circle-circle, though a better term may be found to describe this phenomenon. On the one hand, each individual in Chinese society form social circles of different sizes with self as the center; on the other hand, these circles are always adjusted and expanded on order to develop more relations. The former attaches importance to the establishment of the circle while the latter places value on “relating”, which means, in Confucius understanding, “trying to stand in the shoes of others to look at issues”. This concentric-circle way of thinking determines how the Chinese, unlike Westerners, look at the world with fuzzy logic: the relations between family, society and state are always changing and evolving in accordance with instrumental needs.

Apparently, the concentric-circle thinking of the Chinese is aimed for fulfilling kindness while the dichotomy thinking of the West pursues truthfulness. The Chinese way of understanding
identity may be conducive to the creation of a harmonious community within the sphere of its influence, but it may falls short when it comes to modern diplomacy, which requires the support of industrial civilization. It has to be admitted that the advantage of the dichotomy-oriented identity has led to an international system founded on sovereignty of state-nations that are characterized by prosperity and advancement.

(II) Differences between Concentric-Circular Identity and Dichotomy Identity

It is important to see that both the Western and the Eastern identity thinking take their own nation as the focus of study, feel proud of their cultures, and devote themselves to the ideal of erecting a powerful international system. However, it is more important to distinguish the two modes of identity thinking.

First of all, the Chinese mode of identity thinking is more ethic-oriented while the Western mode is more religion-oriented. Culture is the soul of a society and Chinese culture basically is based on a system of ethics. “Ethics originate from the social relations in whose network individuals live from the moment they are born. Ethics are a set of binary relations and they are born out of the relations,” comments Liang Shumin. Therefore, to understand how the Chinese concentric-circle works is to understand how the Chinese Heart feels. The Chinese mode of identity thinking is determined by how the Heart feels and the distance of relations are gauged by the distances between Hearts. as the Chinese see their social relations as a network of the kinships on the basis of how thick the blood is and the international relations are thus pictured through an analogy, the concentric-circle mode of identity thinking is therefore nothing but an abstraction and conclusion of social ethical relations.

The Western society is very different. Being religion-oriented and Christianity-centered, the Western society follows the suit of Hebrew culture, which emphasizes the dichotomy, the prevalence of justice over evilness, freedom over dictatorship, the triumph of their own ideal through military means. The on-going Iraq War is nothing but a mirror of this mode of thinking.

Second of all, the Chinese concentric-circle mode of thinking is process-oriented while the Western dichotomy mode of identity thinking is structure-based. An examination of Chinese diplomatic culture reveals dynamic processes of ever-changing order and substance within the circles and between the strata. The commentary Confucius made in Spring and Autumn “In the center is the emperor while the kingdoms are outlying; in the center are the kingdoms while the savages are outlying” places Zhou Empire in the center and Lu Kingdom as the layer closest to the center and other kingdom farther from the center and the savages even fathers outside, but recognition is given to the importance of the rules of the sa’vague kingdoms, with changing recognitions in terms of changed time and location. Therefore, Hanyu say: “In Confucius Spring and Autumn you can see the barons are savage barons when they follow the savage etiquette and they are Chinese barons when they follow the Chinese rules.” This reveals the fact that the concentric-circle identity, from the very beginning, is defined by a kind of dynamic and dialectic cultural perspective. Liang Shumin also has it that the individuals in the circle of identity circles enjoy a kind of mobility: “Since affinity and alienation are interchangeable, how can one draw..."
lines between what is absolute self and what is absolute alien?” This mode of thinking determines
the dynamic and dialectic vision of the Chinese in handling external relations, which can be seen
in how the ancient kingdoms of China dealt with diplomatic relations. Basically, their policies
were multi-lateral oriented toward processes, which was different from the Western mode of
policy-making. In stark contrast, a structure-oriented mode of policy-making in the West is
dichotomous when it handles external relations.

Thirdly, the inherent philosophy of concentric-circle mode of identity thinking is the unity of
the world and reconciliation between the mainstream and the marginal while the dichotomous
mode of identity thinking is dominated by state-centered and confrontation-oriented political
philosophy.

The Confucian mode of identity thinking aims to reconcile the close relations with the distant
relations through the employment of kindness and etiquettes to achieve ultimate rule of love and
etiquettes, although in appearance the relations are determined in terms of distance in kinship.
Both Mencius and Xuncius theories about the rippling effect of kindness and etiquettes
respectively are a reflection of Confucius’ theory of love and etiquettes, thus directing
Confucianism toward “By restoring the etiquettes through disciplining oneself, the world will be
in peace.”

In contrast, the Western mode of identity thinking places value on the competition among
states and nations and the metabolism of the international system. “To understand how different
the Confucian political philosophy and the Western modes of political thinking are from the very
beginning one must understand the ‘species consciousness of the Chinese’ and ‘relate our
consciousness to others--Mencius’,” comments Liang Qichao. “The Westerners draw a clear
distinction between those who are close and those who are alien and thus develop hatred while we
the Chinese tend to find the commonality in different humans and thus foster affection. The
Western patriotism is actually narrow-minded nationalism that demonizes foreign countries while
we do everything we can to succumb radical nationalism so that there would not be anything that
is intolerable. The species identity seeks to expand the concept of the species as goodness, rather
than draws clearer distinction among the species or divides it into smaller units.”

Briefly, against the national culture and political philosophy, the concentric-circle mode of identity
thinking lay emphasis on the rule of etiquettes and the peaceful harmony of the world while the
political dichotomy stresses the metabolism of international system and power politics.

III. Concentric-Circle and Its Manifestations in China’s Diplomacy History

(I) The Interpretation of Concentric-Circle Identity

1. Material Foundation of Concentric-Circle Identity: Geopolitics and Security Elements

At the time when China was transitioning from primitive clan community to the Middle
Age, the combination between geo-centrism and individual security became an important referring
point in the Chinese philosophy of the world. This is because of the fact that the civilization of
central China was founded upon agricultural civilization, which, compared with the marine
civilization, was under stronger influence of blood-kinship, geo-economy and geo-politics.

It can be argued that the consideration of security is a key element of concentric-circle
mode of identity thinking. As individual security was scarce, collective security was needed to
achieve it. However, this community was not one that was organized in the principle of equality. Instead it was a collectivity based on circle-circle. Just as Mr. Sun Jilong says, “As a matter of fact, the Chinese culture excludes the possibility of seeing others out of the community as their equals, as there is no individual in Chinese culture if his self-identity cannot be related to people of his clique or circle. The Chinese even mark a small circle against very close relatives or kinfolks and a bigger circle against those outside of their species. The Chinese will never feel secure without marking such circles of people of their own.”

With regard to the geo-economic or geo-political elements, it is important to see that the central plains of ancient China became the center of the concentric-circle system with the less developed economies of nomads as the circumferences subordinated politically and administratively to the royal court of the “central empire”. This is a governance system composed of the royal center with circles of subjects distanced from this pivot of power toward the rim of the circle. It is important to see that the geo-political distribution of power overlapped with the geo-economic development, with the frontier-people most underdeveloped financially. However, the above-mentioned material elements of concentric-circle mode of identity thinking were not constants of the identity formula as the security focus of the country kept changing with the ups and downs of economy and the come and go of the dynasties.

2. The Core of the Concentric-Circle Mode of Identity Thinking: Cultural Centralism and Etiquette Order

Of the many elements comprising the concentric-circle of the Chinese identity, a strong sense of cultural superiority is the most fundamental formative constituent. This superiority came from the fact that, in comparison with the savage frontier areas, the central China then was the center of political power, and economically the most developed area with the most civilized population. This superiority lasted for thousands of years until a Chinese centralism, just as Prof. F. F. Fairbank named, came into being.

With the center, there were semi-center, semi-frontier and frontier whose indexes of culture and civilization decreased comparatively. The Chinese in central China saw ethnic groups or regions with the strongest economic and the most developed culture as people of their own while those of inferior economy and culture were called close neighbors, outsiders and savages respectively. It is clear that cultural identity took the center of the stage when it came to species identity in ancient China.

However, cultural identity cannot be substituted for concentric-circle identity because in Chinese context the culture involved in concentric-circle is ethic-based inherently linked to the rule by virtue or the rule by etiquette. In other words, the spiritual dimension of the concentric-circle identity is virtue and its formal dimension is etiquette.

3. The Institutional Guarantee of the Concentric-Circle Identity: Tribute-Paying International System

Etiquette at best is a formal institutionalization of the concentric-circle identity, but the tributary system is a more practical and more political institution designed for governing the
international system. As early as in Zhou Dynasty, such political systems as tributary system, Five-Fu and Nine-Fu systems were all devised in accordance with the distance from the power-center, which was the Son of Heaven. For instance, Hou Fu was the area within five hundred li around the capital city and was to pay tribute to the emperor annually in the form of articles to be sacrificed in the royal temple; Dian Fu was the area beyond the Hou area within five hundred li and was to pay tribute every two years in the form of articles to be used by the queen and concubines; Nan Fu was the area beyond the Dian area within five hundred li and was to pay tribute every three years in the form of household appliances; Cai Fu was the area beyond the Nan area within five hundred li and was to pay tribute every four years in the form of apparels; Wei Fu was the area beyond the Cai area and was to pay tribute every five years in the form of material, etc.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese emperors set a limit to the number of tributes made by the neighboring kingdoms, which can be seen as an indicator of the cultural identity of the central China with these frontier kingdoms. For instance, the Great-Great Emperor of Ming Dynasty had it as: “Previously the kings paid me the Son of Heaven a small tribute every two years and a grand one every three years and those of more distant regions paid me a tribute once a lifetime. …Now that Korea is adjacent to China and they are known to have similar culture to us like no other, they may be told to come to pay tribute every three years or every two years. As for the other kingdoms like Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia…they may also be told about my decision as well.”

Korea became the closest one to the Chinese concentric-circle identity among the foreign countries with the privilege of paying three tributes a year. Korea was followed by Lewchew which could pay a tribute every three years. Samara and Ramie could pay a tribute every five years and Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines either paid a tribute every ten years or periodically as they lied at the outmost layer of the identity circle. This indicated Ming’s reluctance to have any substantive connection with the countries at the outmost layer of the identity circle. As can be seen in some typical periods of Chinese history, China’s cultural identity took the form of concentric-circle pattern.

(II) The Concentric-Circle Identity Mode in China’s Diplomacy Today and Yesterday

1. Case Study of Concentric-Circle Identity: Tang and Qing Dynasties

Born long ago in Zhou Dynasty, the concentric-circle structure became a mature and solid identity framework of diplomatic culture in Tang Dynasty. Taking the royal court if Tang dynasty, the first circle includes such six administrative areas directly affiliated to the emperor as the East Chang’an, West Chang’an, North Chang’an and South Chang’an, Chanyu and North Court. The second circle includes such more autonomous areas as Tujue, Huihu, Tufan, Nanzhao and Bohai while the third circle includes such dependencies as Xinluo, Linyi. The fourth circle is composed of such sovereign countries as Dashi and Japan who maintained a kind of tributary relations with the royal court of Tang.

2. The Concentric-Circle Diplomacy of Qing Dynasty

“Qing has lost interest in soliciting tributes from foreign countries and is more concerned about the security issues of the northern, northwestern and northeastern frontiers,” commented Mr. Shi. This strategy took the form of concentric circle identity, with Northeast China and other
provinces as the center of power, Xinjiang, Tibet and Outer Mongolia as the first circle; and such dependencies as Haohan, Tashigan, Buhala, Boluoer, Badaheshang, Afghanistan. Qianlante, Korea, Annan, Lewchew, Burma and Thailand, etc. as the second circle; and such countries as Russia, England, France and other Western countries, as the third circle.

3. The Concentric-circle of Modern and Contemporary China: From Mao Zedong’s “the Third World to Harmonious World”

Mao Zedong’s “the Third World” theory is more about the international system of the 1960s when the former Soviet Union and the U.S.A were competing for world hegemony while China was pursuing an independent international strategy. This period saw China already evolving from the ideological mentality toward a comparatively stable concentric-circle mode of identity thinking.

The theoretical foundation of this concentric-circle identity system is the rise of Mao Zedong thought to become the leading theory of Marxism, thus becoming the intellectual center while helping create a unified frontline against imperialism. In the perspective of international politics, in between the hegemonies of the U.S.A and the former Soviet Union was the vast international space where the newly independent countries felt disgusted with the imperial and hegemonic policies of the two super powers and looked to China for leadership as they identified with the mode of Chinese revolution and development. In economic perspective, China was vigorously engaged in aiding the third-world countries, esp. the socialist countries considered as the members of the center of its concentric-circle identity system. How similar was this pattern of international identity to that of the feudal China when tributary system was the mainstream, though these two systems were totally different in nature!

The fifteen years between the mid 1960s and the end 1970s saw a clear concentric-circle mode of cultural identity in China’s diplomacy. The dramatic proof was seen in the funeral of Mao Zedong where the attendance of foreign guests was arranged in accordance with this concentric-circle pattern: the most inner circle included “our own people”—delegates of Albania and North Korea while the second circle had the guests of the three countries of Indochina. The third circle had representatives of the Third World countries while the fourth circle gathered people of the Second World. The fifth circle had representatives from Palestine and the outermost had American people who didn’t betray China. However, China’s diplomatic identity and strategy around the year of 1976 were on the verge of transition and the concentric-circle was not a solid one, with the Soviet Union and countries of Eastern Europe most difficult to handle.

In general, nonetheless, by summarizing the theories of “three worlds in the world” and China’s diplomatic practices, it can be argued that the inner circle of China’s identity pattern was the third World with East Asian countries at the most inner interior of the circle (except Japan), which involved geo-political and conventional historical elements as well. Also included in the inner circle were African countries who, together with the Third World countries of East Asia, helped restore China’s representation in the United Nations, as was shown by Premier Zhou Enlai’s attendance at the first congress of Asian and African countries in 1950s and visits to fourteen key African countries in 1960s. Latin American Third World countries belonged to the outer side of the inner circle.

The middle circle of the pattern had the Second World countries, including the allies of the U.S.A in Europe and Asia, like Germany, the Great Britain, Canada and Japan. The “Three Worlds
in One World theory” did not cover all the countries with which China had diplomatic relations, but it did include all the key strategic powers in the world. This theory was the embodiment of China’s efforts in constructing the international system during the Cold War years when the United States of America and the Soviet Union posed as the two poles of the world. As a matter of fact, the concentric-circle pattern of China’s diplomatic identity had long been centered on the “Three Worlds in One World” theory until the end of 1980s or early 1990s when this theory was unofficially terminated with its rhetorical function continued until the eve of the 17th Congress of the CCP. However, both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping had been repeating that China belonged to the “Third World”. It is important to note that the concept of “the Third World” conceived the concentric-circle pattern of China’s cultural identity and the concept of “the developing countries” is an extension of the concept of “the Third World”.

The termination of “the Third World” at the 17th Congress of the CCP was out of consideration of the rise of China’s international status, which has weaken the objective basis of China’s identity as a Third World country. Besides, with its economic growth and social development, China is obliged to take its due responsibility for international governance and the self-claimed identity of “the Third World” country has become out of place and could have raised suspicion on the part of the West who might well assume that China is intentionally evading its responsibilities. Furthermore, this concept is not in accord with China’s proclaimed objectives of building a harmonious world through peaceful means.

However, it is not hard to find that China’s diplomacy is characterized by the concentric-circle mode of cultural identity, more through the national character in its striving for a “harmonious world” than through strategies or polices for a unified frontline. The harmonious world in Chinese conception differs greatly from that constructed in American mind in its time and space dimensions.

Harmony in Western conception must be harmony of the whole world without exceptions, for which every race, every country, and every culture should make sacrifice for the realization of a universal ideal. If there is a region where harmony is endangered, other countries are obliged to root it out because the world is never harmonious unless every component of the world is harmonious. In the eyes of the Westerners, there is only one good culture that can be conducive to the harmony of the whole world and those heretic culture and civilizations that may do harm to the harmony of the world must be modified or eliminated by all means, including violence or war. The Chinese, with the concentric-circle consciousness, have a very different way to understand harmony and a harmonious world. To begin with, harmony has to start with the center because the whole system will never be a harmonious one unless the center is harmonious. Therefore, to build a harmonious world, the Chinese nation believes, a harmonious China has to be constructed before it can serve an example for other countries to model after. The Chinese believe in the power of role model. This power can ripple through the concentric-circle if China constructs and maintains good relations first of all with the closest neighbors and then with Asian-Pacific countries and then with the whole world. China believe a harmonious and prosperous China will certainly makes its due contribution to the harmony and prosperity of its neighbors before it helps create a harmonious and prosperous East Asia. This benevolent rippling effect, China believes, will reach the whole world if it can hold fast its steady growth and development. The concentric-circle
consciousness determines the patience and pragmatic character of the Chinese nation. The course of constructing a harmonious world, in the Chinese opinion, must be a long and zigzagging one that requires flexibility, adaptability, priority and continuity. Therefore, the peace and development of the Asia-Pacific region comes first, for its turmoil and instability may destroy the potential for a harmonious world. The Chinese believe their first priority is the peace and stability of their own country before they can contribute their due part to the peace and prosperity of the world, for they all believe in a proverb: How can you clean the whole neighborhood if you do not clean your own room?

IV. The influence of the Concentric-Circle Mode of Identity on China’s IR Theories and China’s Diplomatic Theories

The concentric-circle pattern of cultural identity, representative of China’s age-old philosophy of world, has grown into the collective unconsciousness of the Chinese that determines how they handle social relations. It also has an impact on the diplomatic culture of this country at a time when it is opening itself up to the outer world.

On the one hand, this identity psychology is an indispensable trait of the national character, without which the cultural revival and innovation will never be complete. On the other hand, it is inherently linked to cultural feudalism and centralism, whose negative implications must be rid of in the course of the integration of the Chinese civilization into the political civilization of the world. It is important to note how this concentric-circle psyche works on China’s diplomacy today and take measures to make use of it in the construction of China’s soft power.

(I) Lessons to Learn from the Study of Concentric-Circle Pattern of Cultural Identity

The last years began to see the unprecedented criticism of the Chinese culture. Such diplomatic systems and practices as strata of differences and concentric-circle pattern of cultural identity, clan-centered society, and tributary system were all the targets of strong criticism. What drew most criticism was the overemphasis of this backward psyche on the importance of the domestic politics, for it was impossible to run domestic politics well without good diplomacy against the grand background of the international politics today.

The Chinese centralism can be seen as the manifestation of concentric-circle psyche in international politics, which could work all right when the East was stronger than the West. But today the rise of China as a major power of the world has made it a major cause for the West’s suspicion of the threat China may pose to the security of the international system.

In addition, three more aspects of the concentric-circle psyche deserve the attention of China’s diplomacy parishioners and scholars as well.

1. The Theoretical Conflict between Concentric-Circle Identity and International Democratization

The Concentric-Circle Identity advocates an international hierarchy with the royal court of China as the center that is surrounded by the tributary satellite kingdoms. That hierarchy could be legitimate in an order-oriented international system, for the tributary system and concentric-circle psyche were borne out of nature evolution of human society. This concentric-circular hierarchy,
impacted by geo-politics and kinship politics, was originated from agricultural economy and self-closed productive relations. In a sense, it supported or implied the suppressive behaviors or unequal logic of international relations.

However, the changing winds of the world, esp. the industrialization and globalization, have long since weakened, if not wiped out, the foundation upon which the concentric-circular identity was based and replaced it with the modern international system characterized by equal sovereignty. Coming along with the changing winds were the globalization of sovereignty and Wilsonism, which advocated mutual respect and mutual benefit among the international actors. These have become standard elements of today’s international politics. Against such a background, the concentric-circular identity has been marginalized and can only play a complementary role in the construction of the international system or world community. As China is also pursuing the democratization of international relations, it must be on guard against the possible harm this psyche may do to this endeavor.

This, of course, does not mean that the concentric-circular identity has nothing in common with the democratization of international relations. It has to be admitted that international relations on the basis of complete equality takes time to come along and all noble ideals have to fall back on pragmatic means for its realization. It is possible that the democratization of international relations may come along through various means. The targeted equality presupposes unequal processes and imperfect conditions through in a certain period of time. The global society or regional society may have authority centers, which can serve as a model to show democratization has been achieved. This means a sequence of the realization of democratization of international relations in different regions of the world in different times. In this sense, concentric-circular identity has the legitimacy for its existence before a genuinely harmonious world comes along where liberated humans can enjoy true equality.

However, this instrumental legitimacy can never be a replacement for value, for its role is an existential one based on the limited reality, a complementary role for the purpose of helping solve the problems with the Western dichotomy, not for the purpose of replacing such universal values as equality and justice. In one word, concentric-circular identity can never serve as the theoretical flag of China’s diplomacy.

2. Strengthened Sense of International Responsibility and Overcome the Self-Interest of Concentric-Circular Identity

Most diplomats of ancient China had a very bad tendency in their mind: the interest of their clique had the priority over the interest of the community. Of course, there would be no problem with this mentality when the clique itself was the community, supposing the clique was the empire and the self-interest of the emperor was the interest and well-being of the empire. Nonetheless, the pursuit of an emperor for self-interest was still a selfish pursuit.

As the circles of the concentric-circles and the comprising strata were always in change...

18. 50年代的中国外交虽然有着和平共处的旗帜,以及一边倒的战略方针,但总起来没有形成制度化和理论化,因此,它的圈式认同并不明显。然而,我们还是可以看得出,中苏关系是核心,中国与社会主义阵营国家的关系次之,然后才是民族主义国家的关系,最后是西方发达国家的关系。最外围是美国。
19. 当时,与中国关系最为密切,多次为中国内政外交搭起秘密桥梁的国家多为东亚国家,即朝鲜、柬埔寨、越南和巴基斯坦。见中共中央文献研究室编:《周恩来年谱》(1949—1976)下卷,中央文献出版社,1997年。
20. 谢益显：《中国外交史》(1949—1979)，河南人民出版社，1988年，第443页。
21. 邓小平曾经说:“中国的对外政策, 在80年代, 实际上到90年代, 甚至到21世纪, 主要是两句话, 一句话是反对霸权主义, 维护世界和平。另一句话是中国永远属于第三世界。”见邓小平：《邓小平文选》第3卷, 第56页。
inwardly and outwardly, the actors within different circles showed no real interest in the interests of those of other circles. An even worse consequence was that a small circle harmed the interest of a big circle. Fei Xiaotong made a remarkable interpretation of this problem: “The centrism of Confucianism presupposes a social scope that can expand or shrink for self-interest and this is key to understand the problem of selfishness of traditional Chinese society. Studying Confucianism impressed me with this conclusion: ‘A Chinese in the traditional Chinese society can sacrifice his family for his own sake, his party for his family’s sake, his country for his party’s sake and the world for his country’s sake.’ This can be seen as a formula functioning in everyday Chinese life.”

Although it cannot be denied that the modernization campaign of China has made great breakthroughs and has successfully introduced China into the modern international system, with the Chinese population vigorously engaged in making contributions to the well-being of the whole humanity, there do exist such elements as concentric-circular identity and self-protection that prevent the Chinese nation from making more contribution. Faced with the pressures from developed countries on such global issues as environmental protection, China must be careful not to impress the international community with an image of “being willing to sacrifice the world for their own benefits.” China must respond to the call of the times.

3. China’s New Diplomacy Calls for Core Values in the Concentric-Circular Identity

It can be argued that the concentric-circular identity can play an important role in reconstructing the leading contents of China’s diplomatic culture. The above-discussed concepts have revealed that concentric-circular thinking does exist in China’s diplomacy characterized by harmonious culture, neighboring-country diplomacy and strategic partnership. However, this concentric-circular identity is basically based on geo-politics and strategic interests. This pattern of thinking cannot solve the issue of how to define China’s international identity. National interest cannot maintain a country’s identity, though it is the fundamental premise of all its diplomatic behaviors. Besides, national interest cannot be seen as sheer combination of national security and economic benefits, for it has as its important components the international interest, the international institutional interest, the national belief system and the international cultural elements. The concentric-circular identity belongs to the sphere of the international culture.

This essay holds that the core issue for China is to reconstruct a series of value systems, which include the socialist core value system for domestic governance and the international cultural value system for international integration. The inward and outward reconstructions must achieve a kind of coherence as they are of the two sides of the same coin.

The reconstruction of the center is of the greatest importance as concentric-circular identity starts with the center. The center has been evolving all the time—the blood-kinship of Zhou, the Confucianism of feudal China from Qin to Tang to Qing, the socialist ideology of the China before the Opening-Up and Reform, and the flag of national interest ever since the 13th congress of the CCP, which, as a matter of fact, was a kind of economic instrumentalism employed to decide on international relations.

The introduction of scientific development has news demands upon the evolution of the concentric-circular identity. The center of the identity system must be something metaphysical, the missing of which requires spiritual search and intellectual reconstruction. This essay holds that China badly needs such a center to establish its international cultural identity, without which China will never be what it can be in the diplomatic interactions with other countries, for an
obscure center in this concentric-circular system cannot give the country an identity.

(II) Concentric-Circle Mentality and the Reconstruction of International Politics and China’s Diplomacy

The development of the political civilization in the world is a process of absorbing the best part of political and ideological thinking from different regions, though in an imbalanced manner. With the tides of modernization and globalization, the dichotomous Christian culture has led the world for more than 400 years. However, while recognizing the strengths and values of Christian culture, humanity has never stopped looking for more cultural nutrition in such non-Western civilizations as Confucianism, Islamism and Hinduism. A reconstructed concentric-circular identity, this essay maintains, can have positive impact on the international culture in the following aspects.

1. A reconstructed concentric-circular identity can help diversify and harmonize the mainstream international politics.

Established by several Christian powers, the culture of modern international system is characterized by Christianity and dichotomous identity. As mentioned above, the strengths of this identity pattern are its clear logic and easy operation as it encourages science and technology and the conquest of nature. These strengths, esp. its efficiency, were most dramatized by such events as industrial revolution, modernization, colonization and commercial wars. Exposed along with its strengths in the 19th century was its ugliness, which includes such weaknesses as being too mechanical, too antagonistic, too suppressive, too aggressive and too inhumane.

By comparison, concentric-circular identity belittles antagonism. Instead, it emphasizes the harmony of the acting subject with its external environment, though it does give importance to distance and differences. By emphasizing mutuality, concentric-circular mode of identity recognizes the other subjects far from the center as a member of the system, though differences do exist in terms of closeness or trust. The ultimate goal of the concentric-circular mode of identity is to promote his system for voluntary identification. This mode of identity is characterized by its accommodativeness, flexibility, diversity and its mutuality. This mode is more adapted to the demands of this post-modernist international society where co-existence, win-win strategies and harmony have become the mainstream in terms of global governance.

However, with the Western dichotomy dominating the mainstream international culture, concentric-circular mode of identity has a long way to go before it can have any real impact on the non-westernization of the world’s economic foundation or political structure. This, nonetheless, will not stop concentric-circular mode of identity from becoming a force to promote both the development of the international culture and the development of “Chinese School” of international theories in the near future.

2. The concentric-circular identity, with its inner moral reference, may help localize the global governance theories.

The modern IR history reveals that the dichotomous pattern of identity has the material culture—the market economy—as its inner reference, emphasizing the growth of self-interest, in
spite of its Christian spirituality and democratic crusade. In contrast, the IR history of ancient China shows that the consciousness of Heart and the expression of virtue are the inner reference, emphasizing the incremental realization of the ideal of “Central Empire”—good governance of the world. This is an ideal whose realization depends on the supreme moral goodness of the ruler while the tributary system is aimed to maintain the order of the world through virtue and etiquette.

The Western IR scholarship has long since transcended the realistic tradition by emphasizing the cooperation of plural actors in international affairs. This is good. However, the phantom of dichotomy is still there when they try to underscore the separation of state and civil society. Although they do stress the importance of common interest, they do not give any importance to common culture. Here, the traditional Chinese culture may be of complementary use.

Concentric-circular identity, with its intrinsic ethical culture characterized by rule of virtue and a world with the same mind, may help blaze a local road in Chinese IR scholarship.

3. The symbolic ambiguity of the loose concentric-circular identity is conducive to the establishment of the soft institutions in the reform of the international system.

International order is one of the core issues of international relations. It is also a hot issue for Chinese IR scholars. Order is the trinity of power, institution and culture. The three components are indispensable one to another. Of the three, institution and institutionalization is key to the integration of a growing power into the world system, for it is the focus where power struggle happens and cultures conflict. This essay holds that the process of institutionalization is affected both by the mode of identity and cultural traditions. The dichotomous identity generates hard institutions while the concentric-circular mode produces soft institutions.

The hard institutions of dichotomous identity, with its legal division of power and interest (constitution and international law), cut-dry boundaries between nations (sovereignty), substantive implementation of institutions and complete systems of financial and juristic supervision, and even deification of the systems (the deification of the rule of law), are contributive to the arrangement of the domestic production, economic development and international trade.

However, the hard institutions based on the dichotomous mode of cultural identity presuppose national conquest, colonial war and military occupation, thus creating a world characterized by injustice, monotony and disharmony.

The thinking of concentric-circular identity is very different. Not underscoring the arrangement of interests and creation of boundaries, it emphasizes moral and conduct of behavior, more symbolically than practically.

For example, under the influence of the concentric-circular soft institutions, the East-Asian integration and multi-lateralism are fuzzier and more defuse with goals more principle-bound than practice-bound, negotiations more symbolic and more random, and memo language more ambiguous. Still, economic integration and community construction can still be promoted.

4. With process rationality as its pragmatic foundation, concentric-circular identity is contributive to the materialization of international responsibility and to the realization of harmonious world as well.

Chinese culture, as mentioned above, is characterized by its lack of spirituality of the Western culture. It is a culture that emphasizes instrumentality and process over spirituality and results. Concentric-circular mode of identity thinking is the embodiment of the typical Chinese
instrumentality and rationality as the Chinese are used to living on a social bond that links the distant with the close, the real with the imagined, and the easier with the harder. The Chinese know how to achieve their distant goal by making firm steps on the road right under their nose. They believe in incremental accumulation. “A long journey starts with even steps,” goes a Chinese saying. This illustrates the Chinese mentality of combining lofty goal with down-to-earth work.

Against the international background of international interest (international responsibility) and world order, Chinese IR scholars might as well reconstruct the concentric-circular pattern of cultural identity, for it may help link the efforts of China’s IR scholarship with the international IR endeavor in understanding the growth of China as a major power. The reconstruction of concentric-circular identity can both help localize and internationalize China’s IR scholarship so that a “Chinese School” of IR study may also rise during the rise of China as a major power.