

The Ghost of Asianism in China's Diplomatic Slogans

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Abstract: Coined in 2013, the year the Belt and Road Initiative was first announced, the slogan ‘Amity, Sincerity, Mutual Benefit, and Inclusiveness’ has become ever more present in the speeches of Chinese officials and diplomats. While the use of such phrases is often equated with earlier Japanese discourse to indicate China’s alleged imperialist ambitions, this essay calls for nuance in such comparisons through a reconsideration of the history of ‘Asianist’ diplomatic slogans in twentieth-century China.

Keywords: Slogans; Asianism; Amity, Sincerity, Mutual Benefit, and Inclusiveness; Belt and Road Initiative

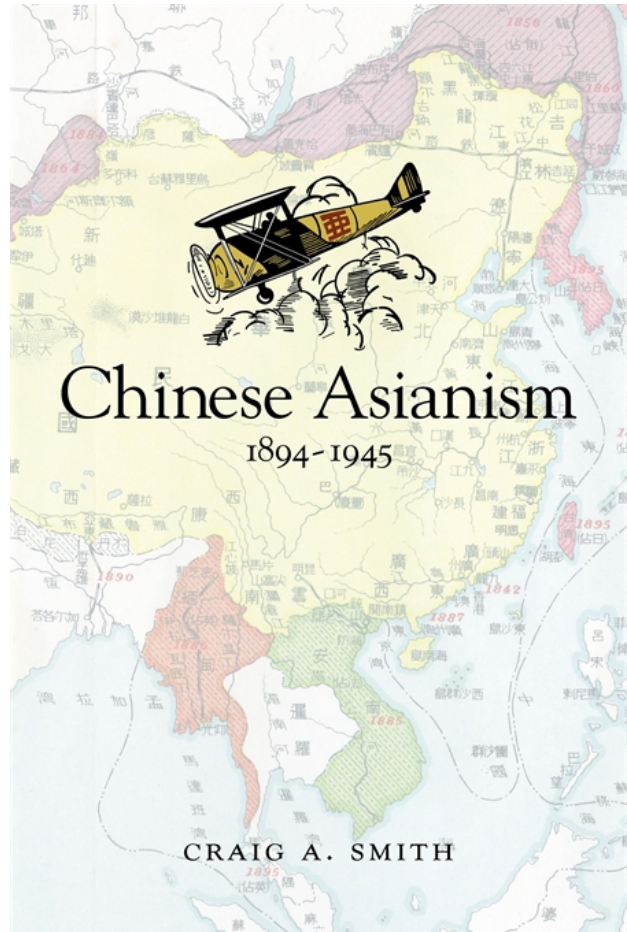


Figure 1: Cover of the author’s *Chinese Asianism, 1894-1945*, Harvard University Asia Center, 2021.

Although political slogans are common around the world, particularly in times of war, this type of rhetorical device has long played an extremely important role in all aspects of Chinese politics, expressing the vision of

China's political and intellectual leadership in digestible—albeit often enigmatic—short phrases. Still, despite the long history and apparent significance of this, the existing literature has some surprising limitations. First, much of the current research focuses on more recent slogans of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from the socialist and post-Deng Xiaoping periods, ignoring earlier manifestations from the Civil War and Republican eras (Song and Gee 2020; Karmazin 2020). Second, English-language analyses tend to dismiss these phrases as 'propaganda'. In Jacques Ellul's seminal definition of the term in his classic *Propaganda* (1973: 25), he noted that: 'The aim of modern propaganda is ... to provoke action ... To make the individual cling irrationally to a process of action ... [and] to arouse an active and mythical belief.' While slogans certainly relay government intentions, implying that such slogans are intended to influence citizens towards 'irrational' actions or 'mythical' beliefs risks Orientalising Chinese politics and ignoring how Western politicians also recurrently resort to this form—for instance, by offering citizens 'Hope' or purporting to 'Make America Great'.

Arguably, slogans should be taken seriously in that they provide us with insight into not only the latest political changes within China but also the image the CCP is eager to project domestically and abroad. When it comes to foreign policy, changes to these slogans often indicate shifts in how the political elite would like people inside and outside China to see their diplomatic efforts. The slogan 'Amity, Sincerity, Mutual Benefit, and Inclusiveness' (亲、诚、惠、容) is one such instance. Chinese President Xi Jinping first used it to refer to China's neighbourly relations in October 2013, when he was promoting the Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road (Xinhua 2013), a project that soon grew into what is now known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The phrase has since become increasingly popular, with Foreign Minister Wang Yi repeating it at

numerous media events in 2021 and 2022 and it coming now to be considered the guiding maxim of Chinese diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific.

While there is a questionable tendency, especially among Chinese scholars, to overemphasise the connection between current slogans and traditional Chinese thought, especially Confucianism (Xing 2014), in this case, the slogan 'Amity, Sincerity, Mutual Benefit, and Inclusiveness' is worth situating within a long history of discursive assertions of China's role as the benevolent and moral authority in East Asia that dates back to the Sinocentric world order of the tribute system (Smith 2021). Taking these four characters as a starting point, in this essay, I will examine how slogans that discuss positive relationships between China and its neighbours have changed over time. In so doing, I will show how the ghost of Asianism remains in current foreign affairs' slogans while also arguing that misunderstandings of Asianism that underlie larger issues of the false dichotomies of East and West have exceedingly simplified the dominant narratives regarding China's regional and even global power.

Chinese Asianism

What does the term 'Asianism' indicate? Instead of the more common 'pan-Asianism'—an English-language term whose origins could lie in racist and anti-immigration 'Yellow Peril' discourse of the early twentieth century (Saaler 2007: 6)—I use the term 'Asianism' to indicate the concept of an Asia united in defence against and competition with an imperialist West. As it was reappropriated in modern East Asian history, this concept contained endless interpretations and derivatives, proposed by a plethora of actors on a variety of stages. In recent years, academics and politicians have returned to these diverse Asianisms to better understand the

complications of the past and the potential for the future.

In such a context, I use ‘Asianism’ rather than ‘pan-Asianism’ because this is the phrasing that was used by many thinkers in early twentieth-century East and South Asia, not to mention the fact that the term is more inclusive, avoiding some of the baggage left by the Japanese Empire and the racism of the Yellow Peril discourse. It is also true that while English-language translators of Japanese texts preferred the term pan-Asianism, there were numerous variants in use in modern Japan, just as there were in other countries, and the diversity in intended meanings far surpassed the diversity of the terms themselves. These Asianisms were divided in their understandings of the geographic space signified by Asia, as well as assertions of cultural, racial, or civilisational commonalities. The common denominator was the West as an ‘Other’, a racist and imperialist monolith, sometimes imagined, but usually very real and tragically ubiquitous across the colonial systems that spanned the continent.

Although academia in the late twentieth century tended to follow postwar historical memories in labelling the discourse of a united Asia as Japanese and imperialist, recent scholarship has turned to numerous examples of Asianist writings in China, India, and Southeast Asia. In this process, we have come to see Asianism as being formed in dialogue with intellectuals around Asia who held a variety of opinions on what a united Asia could mean. Scholars have examined these Asianisms in several recent studies, including Torsten Weber’s *Embracing ‘Asia’ in China and Japan* (2018), my own *Chinese Asianism* (Smith 2021), and the edited volumes *Asianisms: Regionalist Interactions and Asian Integration* (Frey and Spakowski 2015) and *Beyond Pan-Asianism* (Sen and Tsui 2021). In addition to the various Japanese understandings of Asian unity, the voices and visions of intellectuals

from countries that were not in a position to lead Asia either militarily or politically in the twentieth century—such as India, Korea, China, and Indonesia—have proven to be a fruitful field of study due to their efforts to achieve equality and dispel hegemony. The most important conclusion that we can draw from these many different books on Asianism in the past decade is that the history of Asianism is no longer simply seen as an imperialist or anti-imperialist proposal. It is now being investigated from a critical perspective, respectful of nuance.

The Asianism in Past Chinese Slogans

An examination of Chinese slogans over the past century shows how rooted Asianist ideals are in political discourses in China, going as far back as the final years of the Qing Empire. As the centuries-old tribute system ground to a halt in the nineteenth century, the Empire of Japan rose to quickly match Chinese military and economic power in East Asia. After the First Sino-Japanese War ended in 1895, the Chinese political and intellectual elite turned much of their focus to Japan to reassess their relationship with an increasingly problematic and threatening neighbour.

At this time, these intellectuals coined slogans that were directed not towards the illiterate peasantry but only at the educated elite. As China was facing challenges that endangered its national integrity and regional power, pro-Japanese intellectuals started employing various catchphrases to make their case for the unity of East Asia in the face of Western imperialism. One of the most enduring examples can be found in a famous speech on ‘Great Asianism’ given by Sun Yat-sen in 1924 (Sun 1941, 1985). In it, he argued for a return to the Confucian political ideal of the Kingly Way (王道)—that is, the rule of right—under the banner of Asianism, presenting it as a truly Asian alternative to the brutal rule of might,

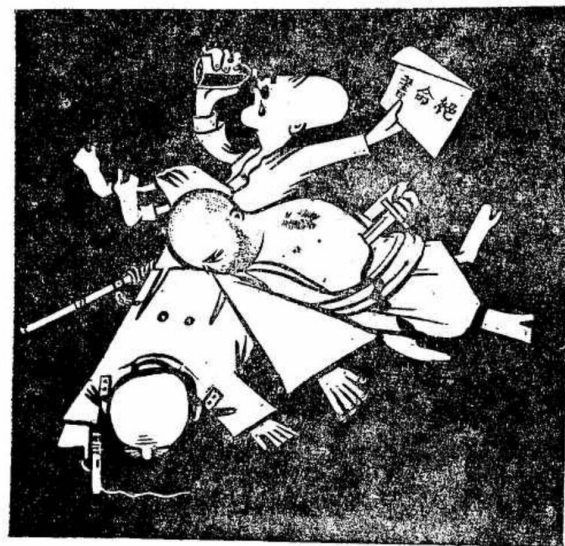
the Way of the Hegemon (霸道), favoured by Western powers.

Other slogans also returned to the Confucian classics. One of the most popular phrases used by intellectuals to demand Asian solidarity was: 'If the lips perish, the teeth will freeze' (唇亡齒寒). First found in the classic *Commentary of Zuo* (左傳) and the *Springs and Autumn* (春秋)—a text composed in the fourth century BCE—this expression is often accompanied by the similarly spirited 'the jaw and jowls are interdependent' (輔車相依). These idioms originally depicted the interdependent relationship between the two states of Guo (虢) and Yu (虞) but came to illustrate broader Confucian ideas of statecraft and, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were used to indicate the need for solidarity against the White Peril (Legge 1872: 145–46). These slogans did not entirely disappear even after the communists took power, as they continued to appear in calls for support for North Korea in the Korean War and throughout the Cold War (Chen 2003).

Another recurrent topic in assertions of Asian solidarity in China in the early twentieth century was the modern pseudo-science of race. Both Japanese and Chinese intellectuals repeatedly turned to the 'same script, same race' (同文同種) slogan to bolster Chinese support for pro-Japanese policies, ostensibly arguing for sameness but implicitly pointing to a mutual difference from the West. At the same time, Japanese intellectuals used even more explicitly Asianist slogans, such as 'Asia is One' and 'Asia for the Asians', with the latter directly borrowed from the American Monroeist slogan 'America for the Americans'.

While Japanese leaders attempted to unify Asia against the racism and imperialism of the white Western powers, it quickly became clear to many that, as Japan rose to supremacy, the new rulers were often adopting imperialist hierarchies not too different from those of their

Western predecessors. Understandably, as this became more and more evident in the 1920s and 1930s, most Chinese rejected slogans such as 'same script, same race', favouring instead cooperation with the 'different script, different race' powers of the Soviet Union and the United States (Smith 2021: Ch. 3). It was only during World War II that Wang Jingwei's collaborationist government (1940–45) pursued Asianist ideals and revitalised the slogan 'Coexistence Leads to Mutual Glory' (共存共榮) to persuade the Chinese people to oppose war with Japan. However, this slogan was as short-lived as Wang's wartime government.



· 亡共存同 — 言諾的義主洲亞大 ·

Figure 2: A postwar parody of the slogan 'Coexistence Leads to Mutual Glory': 'The Vow of Asianism: Coexistence Leads to Mutual Death'. *Xinsheng Zhongguo* 6 (1946). Public domain.

From Regional to Global Leader

All the slogans mentioned above can be considered Asianist and provide us with insight into how China's elites framed their relations

with the country's immediate neighbours at a time when China was going through a series of crises that threatened its very existence as a national entity. Still, even during the 1930s, Chinese intellectuals often made a case for China itself as the leader of Asia. Most notably, Guomindang leaders such as Hu Hanmin and Dai Jitao called for the creation of a new international body guided by modern Chinese thought to rival the League of Nations and the Third International. They called this the International of Nations, basing it on Sun Yat-sen's 1924 speeches on nationalism in which he had advocated for China to lead the weak and small nations of Asia and liberate them from imperialism (Smith 2021: 211-14). War with Japan quickly brought an end to the many discussions of China's international leadership in the 1930s.

After the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, and especially after the Bandung Conference of 1955, the new communist government significantly changed its discourse, broadening the focus of Chinese diplomatic action away from immediate neighbours and towards a more global approach with what was then called the 'Spirit of Bandung' (Galway 2022). As Matthew Galway (2021) has pointed out, the 1954 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' (和平共处五项原则)—the PRC's diplomatic catchphrase of the day—were initially devised as diplomatic policy for relations with India and other neighbours but the scope was quickly expanded to socialist countries around the world and included a variety of material support for these allies (see also Rudyak 2021).

Not long after this, the concept of the 'Third World' rose to dominance as the Chinese leadership envisioned China's role as a global leader of nonaligned countries. In 1974, Mao Zedong declared: 'The people of the third world must unite.' This furthered the existing assertions on Chinese development of infrastructure in oppressed countries. Deng

supported and elaborated on Mao's theory, pointing out that the country would always be part of the Third World, and saying: 'China is not nor ever will be a superpower' (Teng 2019).

Alongside these global aspirations, in the twenty-first century, Chinese leaders once again began promoting regional integration and indicating China's ambitions for a leading role. In 2006, Wang Yi—then China's ambassador to Japan and soon to be Foreign Minister under Xi Jinping—turned to past discussions on Asianism to contemplate Asia's future. Skimming over Japanese and Chinese discourse on the topic, he referenced writings by Li Dazhao and Sun Yat-sen, both of whom are remembered as early twentieth-century thinkers who contributed to the rise and spirit of the CCP. Remembering their dreams to unite Asia against Western imperialism, Wang envisioned a cooperative (合作), open (开放), and harmonious (和谐) 'New Asianism' (新亚洲主义) for the twenty-first century, one in which Japan and China would work together to defend and raise Asia. Wang wrote this article to support Sino-Japanese rapprochement at a time when the two countries' relations were marked by growing distrust (Weber 2011). However, unlike the previous century, infrastructure and financial projects, such as the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), were about to accompany and alter this discourse.

China as a Global Economic Superpower

More than 15 years later, we can return to Wang's words within the context of China's growing power and confidence and the new slogan of 'Amity, Sincerity, Mutual Benefit, and Inclusiveness'. In 2013, when Xi Jinping first began using this phrase, he announced the BRI. Many international observers see the BRI as a massive infrastructure project with China as a hub, allowing goods and people to be transported by Chinese-built high-speed

railways, accessing most corners of Asia, with one corridor even extending into Europe. The Chinese Government, however, prefers to emphasise the diplomatic elements of the BRI when evaluating its successes (Zhang 2021).

At the same time, China has also started pushing a new rhetoric encapsulated in the advocacy for the creation of a ‘Community of Shared Destiny’ (命运共同体)—one of the dominant slogans from the early days of the BRI. Although President Hu Jintao (in office from 2003 to 2013) originally began using this slogan in 2007 to indicate the inevitability of Taiwan’s future as part of China, in 2013, Xi used it to refer to Asian and even global unity at the Boao Forum for Asia. The slogan has since been expanded in scope to encompass a ‘Community of Common Destiny for Mankind’ (人类命运共同体) (Barmé 2015). Critics occasionally connect the terminology of China’s discourse on foreign relations to past iterations of Asianism, such as Japan’s wartime Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (Mitchell 2022), but the history of this discourse and the implications of such a comparison are complicated.

What about Japan’s role in this endeavour? China’s once-threatening neighbour is no longer included in this project. Under new economic realities, China no longer feels the need to gaze eastwards but instead looks to neighbours in all other directions. Discursive shifts have accompanied new economic and political hopes. While in 2006 Wang Yi spoke of a future East Asian Community led by China and Japan, since 2013, the Chinese Government has shifted its focus towards an emphasis on mutually beneficial economic development in a future Sinocentric order.

In the published version of the famous 1924 speech on ‘Great Asianism’ mentioned above, Sun asked whether Japan would lead Asia through the Kingly Way (the rule of right, following the Confucian path of benevolent

kingship) or turn to hegemony (the rule of might, utilising military power and hegemony). This was not a Gramscian division between consent and coercion, but rather an adaptation of a classical Confucian binary to what Sun saw as the essential difference between Asia and the West, between benevolent kingliness and hegemony. Sun was in fact questioning whether Japan was still Asian, indicating, not unlike Wang in 2006, that Asianism must be benevolent and oppose hegemony.

Alongside the rise of China and the announcement of the BRI, Chinese-language media has at times returned to this distinction between the Kingly Way’s ‘rule of right’ and the hegemonic ‘rule of might’, with most China-based commentators arguing that the project firmly puts the BRI in the former camp (Wang et al. 2015). At the same time, popular Chinese media has made connections between China’s ambitions around the world and these same concepts, pointing out that engagement with the Global South is an example of the Kingly Way politics that have typified China since antiquity and provide contradistinction with the West (Zhang 2019).

Superficial Connections

As Chinese ambitions have shifted from regional to global leadership, the culture of diplomatic sloganeering has been adapted to this new stage. Connections to Asianism remain superficial at best. While slogans such as ‘Amity, Sincerity, Mutual Benefit, and Inclusiveness’ bear cursory resemblance to the Asianist slogans that came before them, the historical and economic contexts of the twenty-first century are remarkably different from those of Japan’s wartime Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Even admitting that there were some similarities, the variety of Asianisms from the prewar and wartime periods makes real comparisons unhelpful. Current Chinese foreign policy is beyond what we might label as

Asianist and is further complicated by the global stage on which these diplomatic efforts now play out.

One could argue that alongside the expansion of Chinese interests and support in Africa, South Asia, and the Pacific, the benevolence of infrastructure development is coming into conflict with the hegemony of profiteering. However, the false dichotomy of the Kingly Way and the Way of the Hegemon is as problematic as that of East and West. The essentialist categories needed for such paradigms obfuscate our understanding of the contemporary world, but they also serve the purposes of media reports bent on Orientalising or Occidentalising, to simplify and other. Just as we are now seeing the diversity of histories that were once black and white, we need to take heed of the complexity of our contemporary world.

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