

## **China and ASEAN: The Evolution of Relationship under a Discursive Institutional Perspective**

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**Abstract:** China's relationship with certain institutions is a popular topic in international relation studies. In this article I will adopt a discursive institutionalist perspective to present how the transformation of China's foreign ideas influences China's relationship with the ASEAN, the most institutionalized regional arrangement in Asia.

This article examines China's foreign policy ideas from Mao Zedong's time until the end of Hu Jintao's mandate, separated into different time spans with historical conjunctures. China's foreign policy ideas will be analyzed according to three different levels of generalities (philosophical level, paradigm level and policy level), and two types of ideas (cognitive and normative) as suggested by Discursive Institutionalism.

The relationship between China and ASEAN will be examined under the larger framework of China's foreign policy ideas, and I attempt to contribute to a deepened understanding of China's relationship with the ASEAN.

### **Introduction**

China's foreign policy has undergone eminent transformations from 1949 until present. These transformations involve China's approaches, strategies and foreign policy ideas when dealing with the external world. There are many examples and perspectives that can help understand this transformation of China's foreign policy, and China's relationship with a certain institution is an interesting one. In this article, I would like to discuss the case of ASEAN through discursive institutionalism where ideas are emphasized as the main variable. China's relationship with ASEAN reflects how China's foreign policy ideas influence China's external relationship.

### **Why ASEAN?**

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), founded in 1967 (founding members being Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand), is a multilateral institution that covers almost all South East Asian countries except East Timor (accession

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negotiation ongoing)<sup>2</sup>. From the perspective of research on China's foreign policy, ASEAN is a case that combines many distinct characters: first, ASEAN is a multilateral institution; second, ASEAN's member states are closely related with China: they are closely linked with China in history, ethnicity, languages, culture, commerce and conflicts, many of them share borders with China; third, ASEAN member states have diverse economic and political profiles. From all perspectives, ASEAN is an organization that China cannot ignore, and the change of China's relationship with ASEAN will contribute to an understanding of China's change in foreign policies. In this article, I will discuss the change of China's relationship with ASEAN starting from 1967, when ASEAN was founded, until year 2012.



Fig 1. Map of ASEAN.

Source: The official ASEAN site

(<http://www.asean.org/asean/asean-member-states>), accessed on March 3, 2015.

### Theoretical Framework

“Ideas” can have many counterparts in the Chinese language. It might mean “thoughts” (xiang fa) or “concept” (guan nian). In research and discussions among Chinese scholars, ideas can correspond to “ideas of China's foreign policy philosophy” (zhongguo waijiao zhexue sixiang). According to the Central School of the Chinese Communist Party's foreign policy

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<sup>2</sup> According to the official ASEAN official concerning East Timor's ongoing negotiation with the aim of accessing ASEAN: <http://www.asean.org/news/asean-secretariat-news/item/timor-leste-remains-committed-to-join-asean>

expert, Men Honghua defines “ideas of foreign policy philosophy” as the most influential soft power, which forms the base of a country’s foreign policy philosophy and the context of decision-making. He adds that, “foreign policy philosophy” has been formed within a specific historical background, and these political philosophy ideas or values exert long term influences on foreign policy making and practices of diplomacy, and foreign policy ideas express more directly a country’s dominant ideas concerning foreign affairs and its overall interests<sup>3</sup> (Men, 2013b: 2).

From Men’s definition, we can see that Chinese scholars’ understanding of foreign policy philosophy implies two important factors. First, cultural and historical contexts are given great attention in its formation. Second, values and norms are focal points and the goals of foreign diplomacy ideas.

### **Ideational Approach**

After the discussion of the importance of ideas, it is now necessary to discuss the ideational approach that is applied in policy analysis. It is almost impossible to negate the fact that ideas have great influence on politics. Exactly as one of Telò’s most important works, *L’Etat et l’Europe: Histoire des idées politiques et des institutions européennes*, has shown clearly: it is undeniable that human being’s very first ideas of “state” and “Europe”, followed by the discussions, reflections and debates concerning them, have greatly pushed the shaping of contemporary politics and Europe (Telò, 2005). Similarly, in this paper where we are going to discuss how ideas shape China’s relationship with the ASEAN, I need to engage a methodological tool that emphasizes the role of ideas, i.e. the ideational approach.

The ideational approach tends to focus on “how behavior driven by ideas rather than self-interest determines policy-making outcomes” (Campbell, 2002: 21), and emphasizes that “what actors believe may be just as important as what they want” (Vanberg and Buchanan, 1989: 51). As early as in 1946, Marx Weber already made his famous dictum that “ideas have profound effects on the course of events, serving like switchmen who direct interest-based action down one track or another” (Webber, 1946: 280). However, the ideational approach has long been ignored due to two reasons pointed out by Berman: ideas are believed to be too

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<sup>3</sup> “Wai Jiao Zhe Xue Si Xiang wu yi shi zui ju you shen ke ying xiang li de ruan shili ,gou cheng yi guo wai jiao de zhe xue si xiang jichu he xian shi pan duan Beijing. Yi ban er yan, wai jiao zhe xue zhi de shi te ding li shi wen hua bei jing xia chan sheng de , dui wai jiao jue ce he wai jiao shi jian ju you chang qi zhi dao yi yi de zheng zhi zhe xue si xiang huo jia zhi guan nian ,er wai jiao si xiang ze geng jia zhi jie di dai biao yi ge guo jia zhan zhu dao di wei de dui wai yi tu he gai guo de zong ti li yi”.

fuzzy to study and too epiphenomenal to be the center of research (Berman, 1998), and interests, which are more visible and measurable, remained the central point of study of pluralist, elite, neo-Marxist, historical institutionalism and rational choice theories, and have dominated the social sciences researches and shaped people's understanding of the world.

Thus, ideational explanations of political analysis have undergone a period of neglect, and even a little bit of hostility. Burstein complained about the insufficiency of literature discussing the relative importance of ideas for policy making (Burstein, 1991: 332–334), and a direct result of this neglect is that discussions on the role of ideas are poorly theorized (Friedland and Alford, 1991: 237).

The tide has begun to change as more attention has been drawn to ideas in response to the rise of rational choice theory (Jacobsen, 1995; Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). The founding assumption that all actors behave according to calculation and maximizing one's predetermined interests is itself filled with flaws: firstly, there is no clear explanation on how interests are formed. Secondly, there is no satisfactory explanation for changes in interests; something that has also been highly abstracted and thus does not do much with regard to empirically defined institutions (Schmidt, 2014: 113). In this context, attention towards ideas as important causal factors in policy making or policy changes has been widely engaged in research concerning European studies (Berman, 1998; Parsons, 2002), trade, monetary policy and developmentalism (Goldstein, 1993; McNamara, 1998; Sikkink, 1991), and most importantly social or foreign policy changes (Checkel, 1993; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993; Katzenstein, 1996; Kier, 1997). Among new theories developed in the ideational approach, discursive institutionalism is the most recent and comprehensive one.

### **Discursive Institutionalism**

Discursive institutionalism, proposed by Vivian Schmidt, in an attempt to complement failures and loopholes of precedent approaches, would like to construct a whole new approach to presenting the role of ideas in the policy making process. Discursive institutionalism focuses on a political reality that is based on two elements: first are the ideas and discourses that are used to legitimate actors' political action in an institutional context; second is the process of the communication of ideas within the institutions (Schmidt, 2006: 2,8; Telò, 2010: 119–120).

The most distinct characteristics of Discursive Institutionalism is its “insight into the role ideas and discourse in politics while providing a more dynamic approach to institutional change than previous three new institutionalism”, where “ideas are the substantive content of discourse” and “discourse is the interactive process of conveying ideas” (Schmidt, 2008: 303).

### **Classifications of Ideas in DI**

In Discursive Institutionalism, ideas are classified into three different levels of generality, which are policies, programs, and philosophies. DI adds a new way of categorizing ideas by adding two types of ideas: normative ideas and cognitive ideas, which differentiate the function of ideas from the types of ideas.

### **Three Levels of Generality**

The first generality, policies, concerns the specific policies or policy solutions proposed by policy makers; the second level, programs, encompasses the more general programs that underpin the policy ideas. Programs may be understood as “the underlying assumptions or organizing principles orienting policy” (Hall, 1993; Majone, 1989; Schmidt, 2002: 5), or as “frames of reference that enable policy actors to construct their visions of the world that allow them to situate themselves in the world” (Jobert, 1989; Muller, 1995). A more basic level concerns the worldviews that “undergird the policies and programs with organizing ideas, values, and principles of knowledge and society” (Campbell, 2004).

### **Two Types of Ideas**

Besides three levels of generality, Schmidt believes it is important to differentiate between two types of ideas: cognitive ideas and normative ideas. Cognitive ideas answer questions of “what is and what to do”, while normative ideas answers “what is good or bad about what is” in light of “what one ought to do” (Schmidt, 2008: 306).

As concluded by Schmidt, cognitive ideas “provide the recipes, guidelines, and maps for political action and serve to justify policies and programs by speaking to their interest-based logic and necessity” (Hall, 1993; Jobert, 1989; Schmidt, 2008), while Normative ideas instead attach values to political action and serve to legitimate the policies in a program through reference to their appropriateness (March and Olsen, 1989).

Cognitive ideas “elucidate ‘what is and what to do’, whereas normative ideas indicate ‘what is good or bad about what is’ in light of ‘what one ought to do’”(Schmidt, 2008). As Jobert pointed out, “the cognitive one” is “the first dimension of policy-making”, it implies “a drastic reduction of social complexity to a small number of significantly articulated variables” (Jobert, 1989).

### **Discourse in DI**

After the discussion of idea types, how ideas are conveyed and transferred to policies, the discourse should be attended to. According to Schmidt, discourse is a “more versatile and overarching concept than ideas” since

by using the term discourse, we can simultaneously indicate the ideas represented in the discourse (which may come in a variety of forms as well as content) and the interactive process by which ideas are conveyed (which may be carried by different agents in different spheres) (Schmidt, 2008: 309).

Hajer pointed out that a discourse may serve to articulate different levels of ideas (policy, programmatic and philosophical) (Hajer, 2003), while a discourse may bear different forms of ideas, be it narratives, myths, frames, collective memories, stories, scripts, scenarios, images (Schmidt, 2008).

### **Different Types of Discourses**

Schmidt suggests mainly two different types of discourses: “coordinative discourse”, and “communicative discourse”. Coordinative discourse consists of “the individuals and groups at the center of policy construction who are involved in the creation, elaboration, and justification of policy and programmatic ideas”. This is where

civil servants, elected officials, experts, organized interests, and activists, among others---who seek to coordinate agreement among themselves on policy ideas, which scholars have shown they may do in a variety of ways in a wide range of venues (Schmidt, 2008: 310).

Another discourse suggested by Schmidt is named “communicative discourse”, which suggests “individuals and groups involved in the presentation, deliberation, and legitimation of political ideas to the general public” (Schmidt, 2008: 310). These individuals form “policy

forums” of “informed publics” (Rein and Schön, 1994), “public of organized private persons” (Habermas, 1989), “strong publics” of opposition parties and political commentators (Eriksen and Fossum, 2003). However, communicative discourse is in “opinion sphere”, as pointed out by Eriksen and Fossum, which can be relatively weak in nowadays China, especially in the foreign policy realm. This is a part that this paper will not focus on, instead we will focus mainly on coordinative discourse.

### **The Framework of China’s Foreign Policy Ideas Since 1949**

Following Schmidt’s discursive institutionalism, I hereby try to provide a mechanism of China’s foreign policy ideas from 1949 until 2012.

Schmidt’s categorization of ideas provide a tool for analyzing China’s foreign policy according to the questions they are meant to solve and values to which they are attached to. Beginning with the three levels of generality of ideas, I choose to present China’s foreign policy ideas by answering three very simple but very fundamental questions, and the answers to these three questions reflect the transformation of China’s foreign policy. For the philosophical level of ideas, which concerns the world view, we must ask “what is the world according to China?” The answer concerns China’s perception of the world, and China’s judgment about its situation. This answer generally includes two aspects: the first aspect concerns the cognitive ideas that define and judge the world in a given time, and the second aspect concerns the normative ideas, which present a world that China deems good and correct. There are certainly differences and distances between the two worlds: these are exactly the difference between the “what is” and “what should be”.

The second level of ideas, the paradigm level, concerns organizing principles that orient toward policies. I argue here that these ideas seek to answer “what role does China play in the world?”, which is recognized in the first question. In other words, it concerns China’s self-recognition in a given context predefined by China’s understanding of the world. Similarly with the philosophical level of ideas, paradigm level ideas also imply two aspects of suggestions: the first aspect is the judgment of China’s actual position in the world in a given time (the cognitive idea); the second aspect is the role that China should take in order to realize the world that China deems appropriate (the normative idea).

The third level of ideas, the policy level, keeping China’s position and role in mind, concerns specific policy solutions to bring the cognitive answer, “what the world is” closer to the normative answer “what the world should be”. This level of ideas is less distinct in

differences between cognitive and normative ideas because they are already results of a combination of cognitive and normative judgment at the previous two levels. The following chart presents the three levels of generality ideas and two types of ideas and their corresponding questions.

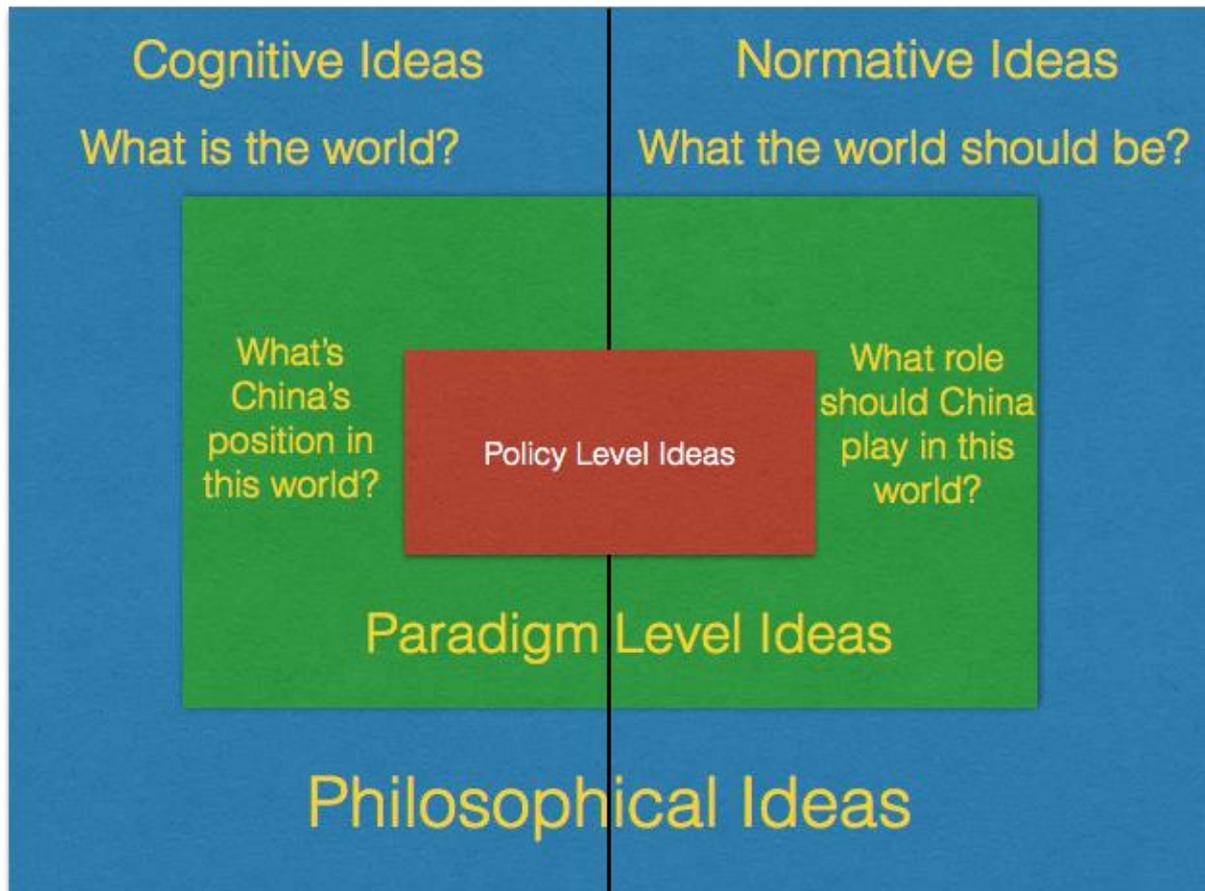


Fig 2: Ideational Analysis Framework according to Discursive Institutionalism.

Illustration by the author.

Certainly, the answers to these three questions vary, transform and enrich at different times. Here, I invite historical institutionalism in: historical conjunctures are the markers that indicate important points in the history where China's foreign policy ideas are changed.

### **Time Span Definition**

Historical conjunctures, or critical junctures, are an essential conception in historical institutionalism. It is related with Path Dependency theory in historical institutionalism. They are critical because "they place institutional arrangements on paths or trajectories, which are

then very difficult to alter” (Pierson, 2004: 135). Thus, the choices made during these conjunctures in history have very long lasting impacts, and these junctures constitute the starting points for many path-dependent processes (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007: 341–342). In the mechanism building part of this article, historical conjunctures in China are those relatively shorter periods within which decisions made have had a long lasting and visible impact on Chinese foreign policy ideas in the years following.

Following this definition, I identify three historical conjunctures in China’s history after 1949: the first one is the Opening Up and Reform in 1978, the second one is the 1989 tragedy and the end of the Cold War in 1991, the third one is 2001-2002 when September 11 took place and China’s power and influence increasingly grew. These three historical conjunctures separate China’s foreign policy ideas into four phases: the first phase is from the establishment of the P. R. China in 1949 until the Opening Up in 1978; the second phase is from the Opening Up until the end of the Cold War (1991), and the third phase is from 1991 until 2002, a short transitional period after the Cold War; the fourth phrase is from 2002 to 2012 when Hu Jintao was China’s president. In the following section, I will introduce these four phases and analyze them according to three levels of generality and two types of ideas.

### **First Phase: From 1949 until the Opening Up and Reform in China**

In the first phase, from 1949 until the Opening Up, was a time when China reassumed peace and tried to reestablish internal order after having finished its war against Japanese invasion and civil war. It was also the time when the Cold War intensified and China’s idea of foreign policy was influenced by the ideological perspective. China was weak, poor and fragile vis-à-vis the USSR and the US. China’s foreign policy had transformed a lot during this period: from “leaning on one side” (Yi Bian Dao) to “middle routine” (Zhong Jian Lu Xian), until China’s independence and non-alliance after its deteriorated relationship with the USSR in late 60s. Yet how does China see the world? How does China see its position and role in this world? And how does China want to achieve its role?

As for the first question, we should not ignore the fact that China’s nationalism was nurtured by the invasion of foreign powers, from which it suffered much under colonialism and imperialism. Chinese leaders detest the involvement and interference of foreign powers, whether or not it is militaristic. From this perspective, the world after World War Two is a world divided by powers (no matter which ideology one follows), and dominated by US imperialism and the chauvinism of the USSR. The way that the US and the USSR dominate

the world is unfair and unjust, they are practicing ruling by force, “ba dao” instead of ruling by virtue, “wang dao”. The judgment of ruling by force is China’s cognitive idea in its foreign policy, and ruling by virtue is China’s normative idea about how a world should operate. The distance from “ruling by force” to “ruling by virtue” plays a fundamental role in China’s foreign policy starting from 1949. Following this idea, Mao considered China as the representative of those who suffer from this unfair world order, politically they are the oppressed, dominated; economically they are the exploited, impoverished, and culturally they are the contaminated.

This understanding of the world and China’s position, or role in this world, has allowed China to develop ideas of “three worlds” and the strategy of “middle way”. Countries in the world are categorized according to their distance from the super powers instead of their ideological choices, implying that China has many potential spaces to maneuver between these two seemingly cemented blocks. In order to answer how to act according to its role and position, and how to achieve this role, China had opted for the solution of providing as much aid and financial support to developing countries in Africa, Asia and Central Asia as possible, so as to preserve an amicable relationship with developing countries. China had also chosen the independent principle (Du Li Zi Zhu); that is, to stay independent from both the US and the USSR.

### **The Second Phase: From the Opening Up to the End of the Cold War**

The death of Mao Zedong marks the end of Communist China’s first generation of leadership, also the end of Mao’s dictatorship. On the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee in 1977, CCP had decided, after the death of Mao Zedong, that China should focus on “the construction of socialism modernization”, more specifically, concentrate on “economic development and technology revolution” and the goal is to make “Chinese economy develop rapidly and stably”<sup>4</sup>. The economic reform after 1978 was said to be “going far beyond anything being attempted in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe” (Whyte, 1992). Reforms including rural de-collectivization, reduction of the role of the state sector and central planning, opening to foreign investment and tourism, setting up of special export processing zones and private enterprises were allowed. Kim called it “the rapid post-Mao shift

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<sup>4</sup> See the report of the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee:  
<http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64563/65371/4441902.html>

from the ideological superstructure (the “politics in command” model) to the economic base (the “modernization in command” model) (S. S. Kim, 1984: 183).

On the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1982, Deng Xiaoping had proposed a very important idea of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”:

Our construction of modernization must start from China’s reality. No matter whether it is about revolution or construction, we must learn from foreign countries. But to simply copy foreign countries’ patterns and experiences could never work. We have learned our lessons. We should join the universal truth of Marxism with the reality of our country, find our own way, and construct socialism with Chinese characteristics<sup>5</sup>.

This new idea provides CCP’s ideological legitimacy, since it had begun to engage a road different from what the classical Marxism books told. Meanwhile, it also implied that CCP must keep its leading role. This reform after Mao’s death marked the fact that China’s rulers shifted from totalitarian dictatorship to authoritarian reformers, and “continued adaption of Communist revolution to the Chinese cultural context” (Oksenberg and Bush, 1982).

The Opening Up and Reform marks a new era for China: the understanding of communism, socialism and market economy has been renewed, and these renewals come from the renewal of China’s understanding of the world, China’s role and position in it, thus also how to play this goal.

First, at the philosophical level concerning how China looks at the world, Deng established two important ideas. The first idea is developmentalist thought that deems the world to be peaceful and the main theme of which is to seek economic development. I name the turn of ideas at Deng’s era as “back to history”: a return to Marx’s materialist development idea. Deng Xiaoping emphasized that “the development of technology is undergoing a great revolution”, “which will renew all aspects in production” (Deng, 1994: 87). This can be seen as a sharp turn from Mao’s vision of exporting revolution towards the world that came only from Mao’s own will.

The second important philosophical level idea brought on by Deng Xiaoping is the idea of seeking a better, fairer world, implying that the current world order is unfair and

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<sup>5</sup> Original words of Deng Xiaoping: “Wo men de xian dai hua jian she, bi xu cong zhong guo de shi ji chu fa. Wu lun shi ge ming hai shi jian she, dou yao zhu yi xue xi he jie jian wai guo jing yan. Dan shi, zhao chao zhao ban bie guo jing yan, bie guo mo shi, cong lai bu neng de dao cheng gong. Zhe fang mian women you guo bu shao jiao xun. Ba ma ke si zhu yi de pu bian zhen li tong wo guo de ju ti shi ji jie he qi lai , zou zi ji de dao lu, jian she you zhong guo te se de she hui zhu yi”.

unreasonable. Deng Xiaoping inherited from Mao Zedong the spirit of refusing a world order provided by hegemony, and the victimhood nurtured by history. He believed that the era of hegemony had come to an end and traditional great powers could no longer control the world according to their wills, and it was the time to conceive a new idea about how the international community should function, and a multipolar world was considered as a possible tendency.

Deng's two philosophical ideas, or his two basic ideas about the world, have strong traces of China's traditional philosophy of dichotomy: the philosophical view that the world is composed of pairs of inter-dependent and interchangeable contradictions. The Chinese saw the world with a positive side; that it was relatively peaceful and marching towards prosperity. At the same time, they saw the world as unfair and in need of change. China has been seeking both balance and change in this world system since Deng's Opening Up.

At the paradigm level, China positions itself as a country that needs to maintain a peaceful development environment, which was crucial to the success of China's opening up and reform. The great reform led by Deng Xiaoping transformed the emphasis of China's governmental work from class struggle to construction of the economy. This means that China needed to pursue a developmentalist path, and avoid being involved in the fight of the hegemonic powers.

At policy level, China had chosen to stay independent and adopted a non-alliance policy at the third plenary session of the eleventh central committee. According to the conference meeting report, China was willing to establish friendly relationship with any country based on five principles of peaceful coexistence. At the same time, promotion of multi-polarization and a fairer economic world order were added. During this period, China had turned to slightly more active in participating in international affairs than in the precedent phase.

### **The Third Phase: From the End of Cold War to 2002**

The 1989 tragedy and the collapse of the USSR did not change China's judgment about the world. Deng Xiaoping believes that peace and development remained the main theme of the world tide.

After the collapse of the USSR, Deng's judgment that the world would be moving forward towards a multi-polar one was added as a new element into China's world view. As Chen Zhimin and Pan Zhongqi point out, it is not difficult to understand why China champions multipolarity over unipolarity and bipolarity after the Cold War. First, a multipolar

world can restrain the development of hegemonism and unilateralism by dominant power. As China has turned to non-alliance strategy in the second phase, it is clear that China refuses any form of dominance from a hyper power. Thus, multipolarism would certainly provide China with more choices. Second, developing countries can share more freedom to pursue their economic and social development without being intervened by foreign powers, not forgetting that these interventions are often motivated by the intention to universalize “Western values and systems” (Chen and Pan, 2013).

At the pragmatic level, the shock brought by 1989 and the Western world’s sanctions did change how China sees itself. China’s attribute of being a “socialist country” was emphasized as a distinction, while the attributes of a developing country and a rising power were preserved. As Yu Jianjun pointed out, this is a period during which China’s self-recognition was changed from “a socialist country”, “a third world country” and a “country of sovereignty”, and enriched into “a quasi-great power”, “a nuclear power”, “a developing country” and “a standing committee member of the UN security council” (Yu, 2009: 13). Men Honghua has elaborated China’s identity recognition by pointing out that China is “the only socialist great power” (Men, 2013a). A multi-polar world implies that a world has different powers, and these powers do not necessarily have the same profile: a socialist power can coexist with capitalist powers. Following this logic, a multi-polarized world is favorable to the great revival of the Chinese nation (X. Zhang and Sun, 2007: 85). China defines itself as a rising power that carries the responsibility of making this world fairer by allowing different political systems to co-exist, not just by providing more fairness and equality in economic development opportunity. The idea of establishing “a responsible great power” has entered into China’s core idea as new guidelines that coordinate China’s foreign policy strategies, and has been elaborated more in Hu Jintao’s time, which is to be discussed in the next part.

At the policy level, one can observe that China has gradually become increasingly active in participating in international affairs by accepting multilateral arrangements, prioritizing its neighboring countries and keeping the relationship with developing countries as fundamental in its foreign relations by setting its foreign affair guideline as “great powers are key factors, neighboring countries are the priorities, developing countries are fundamentals, and multilateral institutions are stages”<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> “Da guo shi guan jian, zhou bian shi shou yao, fa zhan zhong guo jia shi ji chu, duo bian shi wu tai”.

### **The Fourth Phase: 2002-2012**

China entered the new millennium with Hu Jintao's reign. The new century started with many global issues that involved every corner of the world. Starting with the September 11 tragedy, anti-terrorism has become one of the most urgent global issues. At the same time, China, at the doorstep of the 21st Century, is no longer in the same situation as it was at the beginning of the 20th Century. Under Hu Jintao's leadership, China's idea about the world and itself has developed and evolved on the basis of the previous generation. Accordingly, the policy level ideas also changed together with philosophical level and paradigm level ideas.

For Philosophy level ideas, or ideas about how China sees the world, Hu Jintao inherited the idea coming from Deng Xiaoping that sees that the world is multi-polarizing, and its orders are not fair and equal to developing countries. Hu Jintao introduced the conception of a "harmonious world" at the Asia-Africa Summit as Chinese government's new philosophical ideas:

seek(ing) the convergence while accepting divergence. We promote the spirit of openness and comprehension, the respect to the diversity of civilization, religion and value, to respect the autonomy of each country in choosing their own social system and development mode; we promote friendly coexistence of different civilizations, dialogues on equal basis, the prosperity of development, in order to build a harmonious world<sup>7</sup>.

At the paradigm level, China has begun to use "responsible great power" as its self-recognition. For policy level ideas about China's role in promoting a harmonious world, China after 2002 has provided many new ideas and concepts to explain its foreign policy system from a different level. First, there is the apparition of the "new security concept" which is different from Cold War thinking. Second, Hu insisted on mutually beneficial collaboration to promote mutual prosperity. Third, Hu responded to the "Cultural Clash" theory by proposing that each country has the autonomy of choosing its own social system and development mode, the international community should keep a spirit of equality and openness, to reserve cultural diversity and to promote democratization in international

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<sup>7</sup> Original words of Hu Jintao: "Yao fa yang ya fei hui yi qiu tong cun yi de you liang chuan tong, chang dao kai fang bao rong jing shen, zun zhong wen ming, zong jiao, jia zhi guan de duo yang xing, zun zhong ge guo xuan ze she hui zhi de he fa zhan mo shi de zi zhu quan, tui dong bu tong wen ming you hao xiang chu, ping deng dui hua, fa zhan fan rong, gong tong gou jian yi ge he xie shi jie".

relations, and to build a harmonious world within which all cultures may coexist peacefully<sup>8</sup>. Hu emphasized the importance of multilateralism in realizing the goal of a harmonious world, especially in building multilateral security institutions and open, fair, non-discriminatory multilateral commerce institutions.

Thus I have presented a framework of China's foreign policy ideas according to Schmidt's category of ideas. In the following section, I will analyze China's relationship with the ASEAN by putting the Sino-ASEAN relationship in the analytical framework established by discursive institutionalism.

### **China and ASEAN: Under the Lens of Discursive Institutionalism**

In the previous section, I have set up a framework of transformation of China's foreign policy ideas starting from 1949 until the end of the Hu Jintao government. In the following section, I will put the relationship between China and ASEAN into this framework with the hope of deepening the understanding of China's relationship with the ASEAN.

#### **The Hostility (1967-1991)**

When ASEAN was founded in 1967, the Southeast Asian region was not as united as it is today through an active multilateral institution, but divided into blocks of "six ASEAN countries", "three Indonesian countries" and "one Myanmar" due to the differences in ideology and political system patterns (Y. Ma, 2007: 52). Southeast Asia was one of the meeting points of the capitalist block and the socialist block, and was also considered as an important region to prevent further expansion of communism.

From the Chinese side, this period falls into the first phase of China's foreign policy ideas, when strong nationalism was elevated in responding to foreign powers' intervention (the USSR) and containment (the US). China's attitudes in fighting against the USSR and the US could be well presented from its relationship with ASEAN. The establishment of ASEAN was believed to be subjected to the US because its founding members are a non-communist country. Mao Zedong considered it as the "running dog of American imperialism" since it was designed to contain communism. China had no official contact with ASEAN, and cooperation was far from imaginable. After the normalization of the Sino-US relationship,

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<sup>8</sup> Please refer to Hu Jintao's speech at the head summit of 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN, 15, September, 2005: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2005-09/16/content\\_3496858.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2005-09/16/content_3496858.htm)

ASEAN had turned to a balance of great powers strategy instead of relying only on the US' support. But as China adopted a non-alliance policy, it avoided official contact with ASEAN but allowed bilateral relationship with its member states. Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand had, respectively, established a diplomatic relationship with China in 1974 and 1975.

Despite its attitude towards the US, China was also working against the USSR's power reaching the Southeast Asia. Starting from the mid-70s, the Soviet Union had attempted to boost its influential power in Asia-Pacific after the weakening of the US' presence due to the Vietnam War. It had supported Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, and also sent troops to Afghanistan. In 1985, Gorbachev proposed his idea for a solution to Asia's security problems, and supported Vietnam's accession to ASEAN, which by the Chinese was considered as merely a stalling strategy to buy more time in the arms race with the USA (Gill and Green, 2009; R. Zhu and Shan, 1987), and to try to establish an "Asian Security System" based on the Soviet Union Power<sup>9</sup> (Liao, 2010). In order to stop ASEAN turning to the Soviet Union, Deng Xiaoping visited Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore in November of 1978 to lobby against Vietnam's accession to ASEAN.

### **China and ASEAN: the Change of Attitude (from 1991 to 2002)**

As Deng Xiaoping started the reform and the Opening Up, China entered into a new phase of foreign policy ideas. In the late 80s, although China had not had any real contact with ASEAN, China fully understood the strategic importance of ASEAN because it concerned Deng's conception of a multipolar world (Leng and Wang, 2004: 1024). The emergence of different regional institutions indicates cracks in the seemingly cemented Iron Curtain, and these institutions might develop into new power centers.

Thus, it is not difficult to understand that the China-ASEAN relationship has developed quite quickly after the Cold War. Immediately after the collapse of the USSR, the then Chinese Minister of Foreign affairs contacted ASEAN and expressed China's will to cooperate in May of 1991 and received positive responses from ASEAN. The end of bipolar contest has led to a subtle situation where there is neither full mutual trust, nor intensive contest between China and the US, thus allowing ASEAN to develop its relationship with

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<sup>9</sup> When Deng Xiaoping met Alejandro Orfila, Secretary General of Organization of American States, on February 19, 1979, he said that "Vietnam's accession to ASEAN serves the promotion of Asia Security System Strategy of Soviet Union".

China without worrying about choosing sides (J. Ma, 2009). Starting from 1992, China has started its official relationship with ASEAN.

### **China and ASEAN: the Starting of Regionalization since 1997**

Wang Yuzhu believes that before 1997, China did not have a clear vision of how to build its image among its neighboring countries, nor did China have a clear strategy with ASEAN. The turning point came in 1997 when Asian economy was heavily damaged by the financial crisis. Southeastern Asia needed new institutional solutions to their economic problems, and in the meantime, China promoted good neighborhood policy (Y. Wang, 2010: 5). Following this paradigm level idea, the relationship between China and ASEAN has developed in a new direction: China with great economic power combines the ASEAN with the great endeavor to nurture East Asia regional integration, and they two form into an accelerating power of East Asia regionalization (Xiao, 2005).

The strike of the financial crisis has not only proven the East Asian economies' interdependence, but also that common problems exist in the "East Asia" model. This has inspired ASEAN to propose "East Asian Regionalism", which attempts to include East Asia economic collaboration plans provided by Japan and Malaysia in the 1990s into this vision (Pang, 2001: 33). Thus, a new collaboration mechanism starts with a currency swap arrangement, the Chiang Mai Initiative has started under the new understanding of East Asian Regionalism and regional measures (Business ASEAN, 2000), by integrating China, Japan and South Korea into the plan. ASEAN+3 is the most important East Asian multilateral mechanism besides ASEAN+China, ASEAN+Japan and ASEAN+South Korea (10+1) and the ministerial meeting mechanism. In this case study, I will mainly focus on ASEAN+3.

The 1997 financial crisis took place at a time when China was attempting to construct an image of a responsible power, and had begun to gradually turn its strategic emphasis towards its own neighborhood. Seen from a global context, the 90s was when "new-regionalism" was germinated due to the end of the bi-polar world, the economic reform, the increasing importance of developing countries in the world economy and the non-tariff barriers in world trade (Fawcett, 1995; Wyatt-Walter, 1995). Chinese scholars believe that geographic and cultural closeness facilitates collaborations among countries that are in the same region; at the same time, smaller countries are also prone to stay united in order to become more competitive in the global economy (Li, 1999). Most importantly, this new round of regionalization is working in a spontaneous way (though largely led by

governments), and is totally different from “imposed regionalism” (tributary system, and *da dong ya gong rong quan*) and open door policy (R. Kim and Conroy, 1987).

As Pang Zhongying has pointed out, ASEAN+3 signifies that the international relationships in the East Asian region would adopt compromises and association as the new tendency; it means that political, social and security significances would be added into the East Asia which has been only a notion in an economic and geographical sense. More importantly, it is the first time that China and Japan are able to collaborate under the “East Asia” framework (Pang, 2001).

The tide of new regionalism is very strong and China is taking a positive attitude in involvement and promotion. This attitude is quite different from the time when China insisted on non-alliance and self-dependence. Though regionalization might cause worries about state-erosion and sovereignty problem, Zhu Feng has pointed out an important Chinese perspective to support regionalism: it regroups middle or middle-small sized countries through organization and institutionalization, and form a new power source or power center in international relationships. This would greatly change the power structure dominated by great power, thus facilitating multipolarization and democratization in international relationships (F. Zhu, 1997; 43). China’s participation in the East Asia regionalization reflects a change of different levels of foreign policy ideas: at the philosophical level, China’s foreign policy ideas are following the same cognitive judgment and normative principles: the world is unfair, and a multipolar world is good because it dilutes the powers concentrated in the hands of hegemons. Yet paradigm level ideas and policy level ideas have changed, i.e. ideas about how to achieve these goals have changed. As indicated in the fourth phase, China emerges as a regional power, and its interaction with the outside world means its national interests are closely connected with those of its neighboring countries, and vice versa.

In this context, China being active in East Asia is not only necessary, but also unavoidable. ASEAN+3 was formed at an appropriate time for China to join in and accept of the multilateral arrangement set by the ASEAN. ASEAN+3 is significant in that it is a multilateral institution that is driven by smaller powers (Z. Zhang, 2004). Due to the competition between China and Japan, a dominant power has never been recognized in the contemporary history of the region. Put differently, there has been no country that is apt or capable of taking this role. For China, under Deng Xiaoping’s guiding idea of “hide one’s ability and bide one’s time”, China is not inclined to assume a leading role in the East Asian regionalization, which would only attract more suspicion about the Chinese threat; nor does

China have the capability to provide all regional public goods (Dai and Zhou, 2006). As for Japan, the historical burden has always been an obstacle for Japan to take the leading role of the East Asia regionalization because the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere” (Da Dong Ya Gong Rong Quan) was closely associated with Japan’s invasion of its East Asian neighbors.

Thus, the acceptance of ASEAN playing the pilot role in the East Asian regionalization is a compromise among China, Japan and the South Korea. Sun Ge also argues that the debate and discussion of a country that assumes the leading role in East Asia itself shows that East Asia is a region constituted of countries that have difficulties in reaching homogeneity. East Asia would become a real region in a cultural, economic and political sense when there is no need to find a center for it (Sun, 2011: 17–24).

### **Deepening of Regional Integration: 2002-2012**

During Hu Jintao’s mandate, China has begun to participate in global governance more actively, and has proposed “harmonious world” as China’s vision for a world “should be”. China seeks collaboration with emerging powers, both state and non-state, because this conforms to China's normative ideas about the world after the Cold War: a multipolar world. China's collaboration with ASEAN is undoubtedly the most important one as its member states are both China's neighboring countries and developing countries. It is also an important platform for China to put into practice what they believe is a “harmonious world” and how should a “responsible power” should be. ASEAN-China FTA and the construction of East Asia Identity are two important projects during this time.

#### *ASEAN-China FTA*

ASEAN-FTA is the result of a series of negotiations between China and ASEAN member states. The agreement to build an ASEAN-China Free Trade Area was reached by the end of 2000, which plans to construct an FTA among China and older member states (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) of ASEAN in 2010, and then, in 2015, expand the FTA to ASEAN member states that joined later (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar).

The ASEAN-China FTA includes not only zero tariff barriers for products and services, but also includes many important investments, developments and collaboration projects that

would promote ASEAN-China economic integration: this includes information technology conference institution, investment in Grand Mekong Sub-region Economic Collaboration and non-traditional security cooperation (Lin, 2003: 14). China also promised to offer the same treatments received by the most favored nations to all non-WTO member states in ASEAN.

Controversial opinions concerning the advantages and disadvantages of building an FTA between China and ASEAN have been many since negotiation started. On the one side, the elimination of tariff in FTA would boost trade among member states and promote Foreign Direct Investment (W. Xu and Li, 2005). On the other side, this FTA plan has many evident defaults. For example the similarity of product structure between China and most ASEAN members (Q. Wang, 2003: 10; W. Xu and Li, 2005), and the huge contrast in economy quantity between China and ASEAN members would also make some Southeast Asian countries doubt the advantages of doing business with China (Lin, 2003).

These practical difficulties soon became apparent through product negotiations. Due to the diversified profiles, China has opted for bilateral negotiations with ASEAN member states and designed the “Early Harvest” program. This is a strategy designed to allow a part of products to enjoy lower tariffs than others, and these tariffs would be lowered down gradually to zero until the FTA is fully established. The Early Harvest program works as a pilot test for the feasibility of a China-ASEAN FTA, which allows China and ASEAN member states to observe if the FTA really works.

Zhang Yunling believes that the China-ASEAN FTA is a very creative way for China to participate in economic regionalization, because it is a strategy that China adopted in order to integrate itself into the East Asian economy. Zhang points out that after China’s accession to the WTO, it still could not fully enjoy the world market’s benefits because it is divided by regional economic arrangement and bilateral agreements (Y. Zhang, 2010). In order to break through this exclusion, China needs to integrate and offer benefits to its neighbors, in order to ease the fear of Chinese goods dumped into the ASEAN market after China joins the WTO (Q. Wang, 2003: 2).

Seen from this point, ASEAN-China Free Trade Area is not just meaningful in an economic sense, but also a critical step for China’s integration into the East Asian regionalization and putting an end to its isolation. This explains perfectly why China has ceded many profits in order to finalize the negotiation.

The ASEAN-China FTA is considered as one of the most successful cases of multilateral diplomacy since China's engagement of multilateralism. The success of the ASEAN-China FTA also signifies that ASEAN+China is the most developed collaboration in the three 10+1 mechanisms, and has set a positive example of feasibility of a regional FTA (Ruan, 2007).

At the same time, there are two defaults that one should not ignore in the ASEAN-China FTA. First, though this FTA has greatly boosted trade between China and ASEAN members, it does not mean that it would improve trade structure between China and ASEAN member states. According to two ADB working paper series' investigation on ASEAN-China FTA trade, due to tariff policies, the percentage of intermediate product exports from ASEAN to China is dropping and primary product exports are rising (Estrada et al. , 2012: 17; Sheng, Tang, and Xu, 2012: 12–24).

Second, due to many concerns (competition or fears), the ASEAN-China FTA attracted many competitors as soon as negotiations were launched. For example, Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea all established their FTA with ASEAN as Dialogue Partners, and the US is also negotiating with ASEAN on an FTA. These FTAs in competition reflect from an economic perspective that suspicions and fears towards China's growing influences in the region remain high among China's neighbors. On the other hand, it also reflects that East Asian countries' economies are far from integrating, but remain fragmented. As the center that is able to unite Southeastern Asian countries, ASEAN is benefiting from its dialogue partners' competition, yet will all the ASEAN+X FTAs merge as a single huge FTA? The difficulties on all levels are many. These all lead to one deeper question concerning regionalization: that of East Asian identity building.

### *The Building of East Asia Community, the Construction of East Asia Identity: Soft Power Projection*

Besides economic collaborations, the construction of East Asian identity has become increasingly important. There are two reasons that building an East Asia Identity is not only important but also necessary. First, the absence of a common identity has been identified as the core reason for unsuccessful political collaboration among East Asian countries (Ziltener 2013, 353). Second, the construction of a so-called East Asia Identity is a projection of soft power of different players in the region, and in this article, I am going to discuss only that of

China.

Chinese scholars have realized that whether an East Asian Identity can be established relates greatly to whether “East Asia” can become a “region” in the political, economic and social sense.

Yet it is important to note that China and ASEAN have very different understandings of East Asia. From China’s perspective, China naturally belongs to East Asia, and the concept of East Asia is a historical and natural product of a tributary order whose center has been China. Thus, China’s approaches to building the East Asia Identity are inevitably closely related to identifying and defining an “East Asian way” that has Confucianism as the central philosophy of it.

But this approach is far from justifiable from different angles. First, as Ziltener has questioned, can shared historical and cultural heritage work as a glue to combine several countries as a region? (Ziltener, 2013: 413). Second, as Sun Ge, one of the most distinct Chinese scholars in East Asia studies, has argued, adopting Confucianism to justify the ontology of “East Asia” is dangerous because it is totally impossible to explain why countries that followed Confucianism (assuming that China, Japan and South Korea are all homogeneous Confucian countries) have developed into socialist and capitalist countries (Sun, 2010, 2011: 17–24).

From the perspective of the Southeast Asian countries, the recognition as a part of East Asia is still a process of development. Historically, Southeast Asia has been on the periphery of the Chinese tributary order and open to non-Chinese influences, and certain Southeastern Asian countries were even in competition with China in a state-imperial relationship (Ziltener, 2013: 97–99). Southeast Asian countries share less Confucianism in their social structure, and they are also different from Northeastern Asian countries in language, history and ethnicity (Ziltener, 2013: 172). ASEAN has been more prone to emphasize the construction of the Southeast Asian identity, and East Asia was proposed by ASEAN, only during the financial crisis with the purpose of inviting Northeastern Asia in, to shoulder the economic crisis together.

As a previous center of the tributary system and also a huge socialist neighbor with rapidly growing speed, Southeastern Asian countries generally hold a feeling of mistrust towards China. Worries about China becoming the regional hegemon are widely shared and many Southeastern Asian countries pursue great power balance strategy in order to avoid being forced under China’s influences without any alternatives.

The Cold War has divided East Asia in a new way by splitting the region into a capitalist block and a socialist block, and into countries that are prone to the West and those who are not. Mistrust towards China as a socialist power is also an important point confronting China: it involves doubts about whether China's development pattern and China's value system, or the Beijing consensus, can be a possible alternative to Washington consensus.

For China, the construction of the East Asian identity is also of strategic importance, which lies in its function to differentiate between East Asian and non-East Asian members. Undoubtedly, the US has played an important role in East Asia's order after World War Two (Keohane, 2004: 182), and it still keeps a strong presence in the region. As I indicated in China's philosophical ideas, the US, which by China is considered as adopting "ruling by force" instead of "ruling by virtue", is an intruder from outside who imposes its order over East Asia. Thus, constructing an East Asian identity with its origins from East Asian culture and history conforms to China's foreign policy ideas' normative judgment.

These huge differences, from diverse aspects, demand an innovation in East Asian Identity building. East Asian countries' collaboration used to adopt a constructionalist view, believing that economic collaboration and interdependence will naturally turn into political issues and help to conceive a common identity. But the reality is not as promising as it is believed: Regional recognition remains low in East Asia, nationalism remains high and is nurtured by territorial conflicts with China.

From China's perspective, an East Asian Identity is not possible if East Asian countries keep a mistrustful attitude towards China. Xu Liping points out that it is urgent to change the situation: neighboring countries are close to China "geographically" but not "sentimentally" (L. Xu, 2014). After the 5<sup>th</sup> generation of CCP leaders took power in 2012, China has placed much emphasis on expanding bilateral and multilateral people-to-people exchange mechanisms in order to demonstrate China's soft power and amicability (Yang, 2012).

Though its existence has been proven necessary, the East Asian Identity is still a concept in development. There has not yet been a concrete and widely accepted system of values related to and definition of the "East Asia Identity". China's involvement in shaping the East Asian Identity is also a process of competing with Western values. Challenges that China encounters in building a more integrated East Asia community reflects challenges and questions confronting China globally: how to clarify China's role in the world and how to erase doubts towards China. These require further discussion and new positions about China's foreign policy ideas in the new era.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have examined China's relationship with the ASEAN under the perspective of China's foreign policy ideas. I adopt Vivien Schmidt's discursive institutionalism to categorize China's foreign policy ideas in different time spans divided by prominent historical conjunctures. China's understanding of the world, China's understanding of itself and how to manage its position in the world constitute China's foreign policy idea system at a given time. We can see that the three levels of ideas evolve and transform in different time spans, and also in different degrees. China's judgment about the world varies very little, and it expresses China's deepest philosophical understanding of the current world.

Through this analytical tool, I try to outline how China's foreign policy ideas act as important factors that influence the China-ASEAN relationship. Of course, China's foreign ideas are not the sole factors that lead to these changes, but I try to use an ideational approach to offer a different angle to deepen the understanding of China's foreign policy.

From China's aloofness towards ASEAN to the first contact, and to China's deepening involvement in East Asian regionalism, China's relationship with ASEAN becomes more deepened and complicated. As shown in China's foreign policy idea form, China's foreign policy ideas, especially in policy levels, have greatly complicated, indicating that China has more and more policies to realize its strategic-level ideas and philosophical level ideas.

Current East Asian regionalism is a process that demonstrates this point well: current East Asian collaboration is following a unique mechanism: ASEAN, as an association of small and developing countries is piloting the East Asian regionalism. China's acceptance of ASEAN's position involves many considerations from philosophical level ideas to policy level ideas. In terms of philosophical ideas, China supports East Asian regionalism because it conforms to China's idea of establishing a fairer world, and in the current world China believes that the best way to do this is to promote a multipolar world. Making East Asia, to which China belongs, one of the poles in the world conforms to China's understanding and normative judgment. In practice, detailed arrangements are decided by China's need to maintain a peaceful development environment, to maintain a good relationship with neighboring countries, to erase fears against a fast growing China and to exclude influences from powers that are external to East Asia, especially influences from the West.

Above mentioned considerations can be found in China's actual policies in East Asian regionalism: settling down the ASEAN-China FTA by compromising and ceding profits in negotiations; investment in people-to-people exchange mechanisms with ASEAN,

construction of the East Asian Identity by emphasizing Confucianism and historical connections and excluding Western factors.

The development of China's foreign policy ideas and China's relation with ASEAN show that China's foreign policy keeps diversifying from Mao's time till Hu Jintao's mandate. China's attitude towards multilateral institutions turned from rejection to acceptance, from passive collaboration to positive participation. Now multilateralism is considered as a way of discourse for China's foreign policy ideas, and China's relationship with multilateral institutions, the ASEAN for example, has become an indispensable part in China's great strategy to push the world into a multipolar one.

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