Abstract China has substantially increased its contributions to a range of areas of global governance in recent years, like humanitarian affairs. While greater commitments from China to humanitarian work can help narrow the widening gap between the surging humanitarian needs and donations, this development has also led to the debates on its implications for the humanitarian world as China’s approach seemingly differs from the dominant paradigm underpinning the international humanitarian system. It is timely and necessary to examine how China defines and uses the concept of humanitarianism and identify the factors that facilitate and limit China’s influence in this field. This article argues that while the state-centric and development-oriented approach has enabled China to materialize its comparative advantage in capacity and resources, it faces challenges to prove its approach as a robust alternative to the existing ones.

Keywords China · Humanitarianism · Culture · Humanitarian assistance

1 Introduction

China has substantially increased its contributions to a range of areas of global governance in recent years, like humanitarian work. Chinese rescue teams and volunteer groups, both governmental and non-governmental, have been seen responding to disasters in the Philippines, Nepal, Laos and Indonesia in the past few years. Beijing has also strengthened contributions to issues that it used to maintain limited involvement in, like the refugee issues. It offered at least 12.5 million USD to the UN Refugee Agency in 2017, up from 2.8 million USD in 2016.

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Greater commitments from China to humanitarian work can help narrow the widening gap between the provision of international humanitarian aid and assistance and surging demands (Tan 2017). Therefore, its thinking and behaviour will influence how the norms and practices of humanitarian assistance will evolve at the international and regional levels. However, this has also led to the debates on the implications of this development for the humanitarian world as China’s approach seemingly differs from the existing paradigm that is heavily influenced by liberal values.

Against this background, it is timely and necessary to examine how China defines and uses the concept of humanitarianism and identify the factors that facilitate and limit China’s influence in this field. This article argues that while the state-centric and development-oriented approach has enabled China to materialize its comparative advantage in capacity and resources, it faces challenges to prove its approach as a robust alternative to the existing ones.

2 Cultural Roots of Humanitarianism

Humanitarianism in Chinese literally consists of three parts—“ren” (human), “dao” (the way of things), and “Zhuyi” (a set of thoughts or values). Humanitarianism per se has been taken as a foreign term introduced to China together with the concepts like freedom, equality and human rights between the late 19th and early 20th centuries when China lagged far behind the West and the Chinese intellectuals sought to find a way to rejuvenate the country by learning from the then great powers (Luo 2005).

However, scholars point out that elements of humanitarianism per se and in a broad sense such as benevolence, compassion, dedication and sacrifice can be found in the classics of Confucianism and Taoism. For instance, it is written in Dao De Jing that the ways of harmony are creating without possessing, acting without expecting, and guiding without interfering (Lao 2006, 130). Confucianism advocates that the ruler should put people first, but the purpose of doing so is primarily to consolidate ruling. It also aspires for an ideal world that is well-ordered and truly shared by all and where one takes care of not just oneself and one’s families but others as well (Hirono 2013). This coincides with certain aspects of cosmopolitanism.

Regarding the agent and actor of humanitarianism, the state has been assumed to be the primary provider of humanitarian aid and assistance. In China’s ancient dynasties, as the emperor was believed to be the Son of Heaven (Tianzi), he was supposed to take care of its population (Zimin) in times of disaster. This way of thinking has influence how disaster is managed today in China, which remains highly state-centric.1 While factors like national interests, geopolitics and geo-economics also shape China’s current policy on humanitarian issues, the Chinese classics and traditional values has informed its understanding of the concept and provision of humanitarian assistance to other countries.

1There are studies showing that social forces in China are playing a growing role in domestic disaster relief and began to engage in disaster response in foreign countries. See, for example, Peng and Wu (2018). Nevertheless, the government remain the dominating actor in this issue in China.
3 Humanitarianism in the Context of Chinese Foreign Policy

However, as afore-mentioned, humanitarianism was spread to China together with notions such as democracy and human rights, and such association led to the cautious usage of the term in the Chinese official language, due to the concern that it can be an excuse for external interference. Humanitarianism and humanitarian are usually used in a restricted context, such as emergency humanitarian aid as in China’s white paper on foreign aid in 2011. The situations when China provides emergency humanitarian aid to other countries are referred to “natural and humanitarian disasters”.

It is interesting to note China’s preference to use humanitarian in the context of public health, referring to the efforts of medical personnel to rescue the dying and take care of the injured. For instance, the phase of ‘the spirit of international humanitarianism’ is often used to praise the Chinese medical teams that are dispatched to disaster/conflict-affected areas. Provision of emergency medical aid and technical support to countries affected by epidemics like bird flu and Ebola were cited as examples of China’s humanitarian aid to other countries in the white paper on foreign aid. In addition, food aid has been another major form of humanitarian assistance preferred by China. This is evident in the distribution of China’s donations through various UN agencies. According to the OCHA Financial Tracking Service, the World Food Programme has been the largest recipient of Chinese aid in the last two decades, followed by the World Health Organization (Fig. 1), which means China’s involvement in humanitarian action focusing on food and health issues.

China emphasizes the casual linkage between the lack of development and various humanitarian crisis and argues that economic development constitutes a key component of the long-term solutions to humanitarian situations. Speaking on the Rohingya issue, Wu Haitao, China’s Deputy Representative to the UN, stated that the international community should make greater efforts in poverty eradication and sustainable development so as to achieve stability and harmony in the affected areas (United

![Fig. 1 Distribution of China’s donations: 2000–2020. Source UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service, last accessed on 13 July 2020](image)
Shaped by such thinking, China’s humanitarian aid is usually delivered as part of broader development assistance. For instance, at the Belt and Road Forum in 2017, President Xi pledged one billion USD for addressing refugee issues in Asia and Africa through the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund (Government of China 2017).

4 Opportunities and Challenges

The international community has seen China’s growing interest and capability in contributing to humanitarian work. Institutional and financing developments reflect China’s interest in strengthening its aid programmes. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, between 2015 and 2017, the Chinese government committed over $3 billion to set up South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund and the UN Peace Development Trust Fund, which finance humanitarian projects ranging from post-disaster recovery to refugee issues. In addition to official aid, donations from Chinese companies and private foundations are also increasing. For instance, Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation were actively providing medical supplies across the globe during the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019. The growing material and financial resources support China’s expanding engagement with the humanitarian system which is severely constrained by a lack of resources and funding. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that China’s proportion in the global humanitarian funding remains small despite the substantial increases. China’s donations through the UN agencies between 2013 and 2020 amounted to $369 million while those from the Japanese government and the Japan International Cooperation Agency in the same period were over $7 billion. While there have been funding and donations from China not recorded in the FST, China’s humanitarian funding at the current level is modest if compared with major donors (Fig. 2).

![Humanitarian donations: China and Japan, 2008-2020](image)

**Fig. 2** Humanitarian donations: China and Japan, 2008–2020. *Source* UN OCHA FST
While the emphasis on the development agenda in humanitarian action is accepted by many developing countries, China as an emerging donor needs more stories of success to show the feasibility and robustness of its approach to humanitarian affairs. China remains very state-centric in terms of providing humanitarian assistance, while the international humanitarian community has seen the operation of diverse actors ranging from international agencies to non-governmental organizations and the private sector. China’s partnership with related international bodies has expanded as Beijing began to increase its commitment to humanitarian issues. For instance, the aforementioned pledge one billion USD in 2017 has been delivered through UN agencies like UNHCR. How to further engage with the variety of actors and develop multi-layered coordination and cooperation presents a challenge to China if it aims for a greater role in the humanitarian world.

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