Although China’s emergence as an active player in the international arena is not new, many observers have noted that, at least since the mid-1990s, China’s diplomacy has become less confrontational and less self-identified as a victim, more self-confident, sophisticated and responsible, even constructive on occasion, in regional or international crises. Under President Xi Jinping’s leadership, China renewed with a pro-active diplomacy more suited to its new global power status. At the last central conference on work relating to foreign affairs – the Communist Party’s highest-level meeting on foreign relations – in November 2014, Xi Jinping even said that China had to establish “big country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics”. This new posture, in which China tries to shape its new environment itself, is a clear departure from Deng Xiaoping’s long-standing policy to limit involvement in foreign affairs and put territorial disputes on one side. China’s diplomacy. Theory and Practice is part of the soft power aspect of such a strategy. This ambitious volume shows the values motivating Chinese diplomacy through history and since the foundation of the Popular Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, sometimes going back to the creation of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1921. Yang Jiemin, its editor and head of the research team who produced the book, is a well-known Chinese scholar. A former head and current senior fellow of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS), he has published numerous books on international relations, focusing mainly on security challenges in Asia and, among them, on Sino-US relations in post-Cold War era. He has deep connections not only with American think tanks and scholars, but also with CPC representatives, especially in Shanghai. Although the purpose of this book is more political than purely scientific, since it is obviously aiming at promoting Chinese foreign policy and lacking of a critical look on the dark face of its subject, it nevertheless contains some interesting insights and benefits from a truly Chinese prospect of the history and the success of Chinese diplomacy, mostly based on Chinese sources.

In the first part of the book, the authors revisit Chinese diplomacy through the prism of several theoretical concepts – the times; the international system; national interests; and development. They want, in a clear desire to compete with the American scholarship, to build an international relations theory with Chinese characteristics. In the second one, they develop an analysis of diplomatic practices in three distinct categories: ‘traditional’ or ‘strategic’ diplomacy, not only at the bilateral level, but more and more at the multilateral scale; ‘non-traditional’ diplomacy which arose...
during the 1990’s in order to meet some specific challenges (sustainable development; energy; environment; transnational threats, etc.); and then diplomacy conducted by the CPC itself through many exchanges, for instance between the international department of CPC’s central committee and foreign political parties, or through its own involvement in several critical issues.

The authors, without refraining from repetitions between their chapters, put a strong emphasis on continuities rather than breaks. They underline the extent of Chinese diplomacy’s accomplishments and its fundamentally pragmatic nature since the fifties, although barely softened by the excess of ideology under Mao’s (certain) years. Among the best Chinese contributions to the implementation of a new and peaceful international order, they quote China’s active involvement in the Geneva (1954) and Bandung (1955) conferences; its support of the five principles of pacific coexistence; its early independent stance from both the USA and the USSR during the Cold War; its support of the Decolonisation movement; Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in a context of a new wave of globalisation; its positive role during the financial crisis 2007; its contribution to development, to the reform of the international economic system and to the world peace, thanks to its participation in counter-terrorism operations and in UN peace missions (17 390 military staff in 19 peace keeping operations, between 1990 and 2010).

The authors are more innovative when they write about the early interest of the CPC for non-state actors and new forms of diplomacy – economic, sports, people, parliamentary, partisan... Eager to show a favourable and responsible image of the Chinese Party as well as of the Chinese people, the authors describe the Party as a guide as much as a practitioner of Chinese diplomacy: it has increased its relations with foreign political parties, including non-Communist ones; it has intensified its efforts to promote pacific solutions to several regional hot crisis (Taiwan, Korean and Iran nuclear issues, Israeli-Palestinian and Sudan’s Darfur conflicts...) (p. 186) and helped Afghanistan and Iraq’s reconstruction.

By contrast, however, the authors are less prolix about Chinese diplomacy’s dark face from which, however, many supporters of the ‘Chinese threat’ have had and still are nourishing themselves.

In the difficult search of a good balance between “national interests” and those of “Humanity”, they certainly confess some regrets and explicitly admit “deviations” or mistakes in the past. “Leftist tendencies” originated by the Sino-Soviet conflict and by Mao’s overestimation of the danger of war (p. 14, pp. 163–164) led to some very debatable choices, if not totally counterproductive in terms of Chinese interests. Did Beijing have to make such a commitment in both the Korean (1950–1953) and Vietnam (1950–1975) wars? Did it have to support liberation movements in Africa, especially in Angola, as well as local Communist movements in Southeast Asia, at the price of a long-lasting alienation of the relations with all concerned countries? The authors suggest it should not have. They also believe, on the contrary, that Chinese diplomacy should not have served very debatable political and ideological interests, especially during the Cultural Revolution. However, these are only brief acknowledgments. The reader would have been less frustrated if he could have read an in-depth analysis of the causes and consequences of these fateful decisions and of many others deliberately hidden by the authors. What about the disastrous influence of Maoism in the implementation of agrarian reform in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, which destroyed entire families at the end of what Vietnamese call the
“anti-French resistance”, as it would do during the Cultural Revolution in China? What about, worse yet, China’s support to the “Khmer rouges” genocidal regime? What about the dramatic consequences of the bloody repression of the Tiananmen Square student-led popular demonstrations in the spring 1989, especially on Chinese diplomacy, since it has to deal with the hostility of the West and the economic sanctions that the latter decided to impose on China?

Likewise, if the reader turns his eyes to the very recent years, he will have to be content with general phrases of appeasement guaranteeing that the CPC’s only strategic purpose is to create a peaceful and stable environment, convenient to China’s development. The authors have chosen not to address the serious challenges that China, feeling itself an insecure power, currently faces outside. They almost never mention worries and fears, tensions and crises sometimes directly provoked by Chinese statements and activities, especially in the South China and Eastern seas, even if it might be linked with Obama’s ‘rebalancing’ strategy. And yet, presence of the PLA in Chinese foreign policy and especially naval diplomacy, which could have been the subject of an entirely new chapter in this book, are increasingly visible and active, not only in its neighbourhood, but also in the Indian Ocean. And yet, China’s military modernisation, projecting assertiveness on maritime issues and pursuing a muscular trade policy, are at the centre of security concerns in the region and beyond. While China’s current dramatic expansion through the construction of artificial islands on disputed South China Sea reefs shows that it “continues not just to create new facts on the ground, but to create the ground itself on islands and reefs in the South China Sea”10, it is not difficult to anticipate that neither concerns about Beijing’s territorial ambitions nor regional tensions will decrease in this area.

Yang Jiemin’s confidence in CPC Central Committee’s “invincible position in the international arena” (p. XXIII) and in “China as a growing and responsible big power” (p. 479) is reflecting the ambivalent feelings that China’s rise is provoking in the world and more especially in its regional environment. ‘Invincible’ implies that China can act arrogantly and safely, as if it had no challenger. It might be interpreted as a new proof of a Chinese superiority complex, especially by smaller countries which already had to struggle against Chinese ambitions in the past. ‘Responsible’ suggests that China has to take into account concerns of other countries. Since many Western and Asian scholars often describe these contradictions, it would have been useful to read at least a discussion of their core arguments.

To limit ourselves to leading French scholars on China, Jean-Pierre Cabestan has convincingly elaborated on China’s determination to become not A but THE world biggest Power in 20 or 30 years’ time. At the beginning of the 2000’s, he interpreted as a tactical move its willingness to present a better face, to appease foreign criticisms by appealing to reassuring concepts such as ‘Pacific rising’, by increasing its soft power, playing a more active multilateral role and choosing a more indirect strategy against the US power. He was convinced, however, that China’s ‘big duplicity’ would not be able to last for a long time and would inevitably create serious tensions in the future2. If the last few years seem to confirm his interpretation, several questions

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1 The Wall Street Journal, 18th February 2015.
remain open. Do the Chinese intend to use military force in maritime disputes or to recapture Taiwan? Do the leaders themselves have a clear picture of how to use their new power – whether hard, soft or smart? Does everyone in the CPC agree with their more assertive policy? Does everyone support nationalism in the way it has been boosted by CPC authorities as an outlet for the most criticizing faction, not only of the Japanese initiatives in the Eastern Sea, but also of corruption, economic and social inequality, expropriations, and even, lack of political and expression liberties, as recently seen in Hong Kong?

“A Rising China is a Perplexing China” concludes another leading Chinese expert of international relations, professor Shi Yinhong, director of the Centre on American Studies at Renmin University of China in Beijing, in a collective book to be published by the French publisher L’Harmattan in mid-2016. According to him, China, as a fragile Super Power whose ideology, principles and policy are partially obsolete, suffers from a lack of grand strategy, revealing a lack of internal consensus, at least among the intellectuals and experts close to the CPC.3 Aware of the growing success of the ‘Chinese threat’ theory in the world, numerous Chinese intellectuals and experts have not hesitated to express their support for China’s respect of international norms, the primacy and reforms of its economic development, and good neighbourhood diplomacy, as well as their rejection of the use of force and of a challenging policy of US hegemony, in order to avoid German and Japanese failures during the Second World War. It is difficult, however, to assess the real influence on the CPC of the split between this ‘low profile’ school, gathering ‘integrationist liberals’, and ‘the hyperpower’ school, made of ‘assertive nationalists’, which seems to be the most powerful under Xi Jinping’s strong leadership.4

Despite all the authors’ description of the achievement of ‘harmonious world’ in the name of Chinese values as Chinese diplomacy’s core objective, China’s diplomacy is leaning more to the second school than to the first. But the readers would like to know more about the structural interactions between foreign policy and internal priorities, between diplomacy’s contribution to promote China’s best possible image and the huge challenges that leaders have to deal with internally. Hence, if we may welcome the publication of such a book, as a first and useful step, we can also hope that it will be succeeded by a next one challenging all the criticisms aroused by Chinese statements and activities in the world, going further into the analysis of China’s responsibility in regional crises and very tense relations with several countries like Japan, India, Vietnam, the Philippines... Promotion of Chinese values, style, and products, is very comprehensible but it is also necessary to recognise that China’s rising has been greatly boosted by its integration into the ‘international community’ and its multilateral institutions. In other words, Chinese leaders owe part of their successes to the Western-inspired standards that they have chosen to espouse, even if it is sometimes detrimental to the ‘interests’ of the ‘West’. They also all know, however, that, in order to find the best answers to the most

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3 See the strategic issue on Chinese foreign and defence policy in the IRSEM electronic Newsletter, La lettre de l’IRSEM n°6, 2014 (http://www.defense.gouv.fr/irsem/publications/lettre-de-l-irsem-la-lettre-de-l-irsem).


5 On domestic growing influence on China’s foreign policy: Stuart Harris, China’s Foreign Policy, Cambridge (U.K.), Polity Press, 2014, chap. 8.
difficult bilateral and multilateral issues like territorial disputes, China will have to negotiate, bargain and compromise, with or without Chinese characteristics so that China’s diplomacy will have promising days ahead.