‘Great Power Style’ in China’s Economic Diplomacy: 
Filling the Shoes of a Benign Hegemon?

Yang Jiang*

Asia Research Centre, Copenhagen Business School, Dalgas Have 15
DK 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark
yj.int@cbs.dk

Received: 27 August 2010; revised: 11 January 2011; accepted: 4 February 2011

Summary
China’s ascendance attracts concern, even though Beijing claims to be a responsible great power and tries to demonstrate its ‘great power style’ in economic diplomacy. This article therefore discusses the following questions: to what extent does the current notion and practice of Chinese ‘great power style’ in economic diplomacy comply with, or differ from, the criteria of benign hegemony; and what are the major constraining factors? Conceptually, China’s ‘great power style’ is rooted in ancient Chinese political philosophy and institution, but it highly resembles the Western notion of benign hegemony. Empirically, China has started to provide more public goods in trade, finance and aid, and it seeks voting powers at international institutions. However, it is still far from being a benign hegemon because of its level of development, domestic political constraints, and tension between political and economic interests.

Keywords
‘great power style’, benign hegemony, China, economic diplomacy

Introduction
Once positioning itself as a victim of imperialism and capitalism, China has changed its stance in international relations in recent years. China watchers have been discussing how to deal with ‘China rising’ or the day ‘when China rules the world’,¹ while others think that China is ‘fragile’ or even ‘collapsing’.² This article does not try to predict whether China will assume supremacy in economic and military power, but it analyses China’s aspired image of ‘great power style’, its

* The author wishes to thank organizers of the ‘Economic Diplomacy Beyond 2010’ conference, and to thank anonymous reviewers and guest editors for their useful comments.


similarities with, and differences from, benign hegemony, and the constraints that China has in achieving that image.

Dismissing criticisms of self-interested economic diplomacy, Beijing has lauded itself for ‘great power style’ (大国风范, da guo feng fan) on numerous occasions. The term ‘great power style’ is most frequently used in economic diplomacy, such as when China maintained the value of its renminbi (RMB) during the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis, when it exempted Africa from US$ 10 billion in debts in 2000, and when Chinese leaders went on shopping sprees across continents during the recent global financial crisis.

Economic diplomacy here refers to the use of economic means to achieve foreign policy objectives, as well as the use of diplomacy to pursue economic benefits. In Chinese rhetoric, ‘great power style’ is closely related to ‘responsible great power’ (负责任大国, fu zeren daguo), an image as well as a status to which China aspires as the paramount objective for foreign policy, but ‘great power style’ is in particular used in relation to smaller or developing countries, in particular in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Such praise is ostensibly used in contrast to other great powers, and the United States in particular, implying that the United States shows predatory, selfish behaviour. It is notable that China’s self-portrayal of ‘great power style’ bears resemblance to ‘benign hegemony’, a form of leadership that is considered crucial, if not optimal, for order by some Western theories. It seems to suggest the single existence of a benign hegemon, which had been sorely desired in international society before the arrival of China.

It is not clear, however, what China means by ‘great power style’; nor is it clear to what extent China has behaved like a benign hegemon in practice. Since economic diplomacy is the policy area where China most frequently refers to this style, and it is arguably the most heavily used instrument for pursuing great power status, it is a hard case for investigating China’s distance from its desired status as a benign hegemon. This article therefore explores the following questions:

- To what extent does the current notion and practice of Chinese ‘great power style’ in economic diplomacy comply with, or differ from, the criteria of benign hegemony?
- What are the major constraining factors?

The article argues that China’s concept of ‘great power style’ has some similarities with benign hegemony, in so far as they both emphasize the provision of public goods across finance, trade and aid policy. However, China is far from a benign hegemon. It has neither the domestic capacity nor context for projecting an altruistic image or for leading international institutions.