Moral Rationality: A Composite Logic of Action in China's International Humanitarian Assistance

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Abstract: *"Moral Rationality" is the core analytical concept proposed in this article. It names the distinctive logic of action in China's international humanitarian assistance, a logic in which ethical commitment and practical calculation are fused rather than held apart. The article first traces the roots of moral thought in traditional Chinese culture, then reviews how Western international relations theory has understood morality, and then breaks down the composite structure of instrumental rationality, strategic rationality, and communicative rationality in China's aid practice. On that basis it sets out how moral rationality comes into being and what it means theoretically. The central argument is that moral rationality is not simply morality added to rationality. It is a composite logic of action produced by the dialectical tension between historical tradition and modern governance. In essence it is a practical wisdom that weighs justice and interest together and seeks the win-win unity of the two. Read in this way, the concept offers a new theoretical frame for making sense of China's international humanitarian assistance, one that neither reduces aid to self-interest nor idealizes it as pure benevolence.*

Keywords: *moral rationality; international humanitarian assistance; the correct concept of justice and interests*

Introduction

"Moral Rationality" is the central analytical concept this article proposes. It is meant to capture a distinctive logic of action in China's international humanitarian assistance: in both decision-making and on-the-ground practice, ethical pursuit and sober practical calculation are woven together rather than kept in separate boxes. The concept builds on Max Weber's distinction between an ethic of conviction (Gesinnungsethik) and an ethic of responsibility (Verantwortungsethik), and it tries to bring the two together in a way that fits the Chinese context. Weber himself treated the two as sharply opposed ways of orienting one's conduct, but the claim made here is that China's aid practice refuses to treat them as mutually exclusive. The aim is a dialectical unity of morality and rationality, not a forced choice between pure moral commitment and pure utilitarian calculation.[1] The "the correct concept of justice and interests", which has become a standard way of describing China's approach, is in policy terms precisely the expression of this dialectical way of thinking.

1. The Cultural Origins of Morality: Three Dimensions of the Traditional Chinese Moral Conception

Morality (daoyi) is a core category in the spiritual lineage of Chinese civilization, its roots sunk into a cultural tradition that has continued without interruption for five thousand years. The concept is not a simple one, and three strands feed into it: the Confucian ethic of benevolent love, the political ideal of a world shared by all, and the value ordering set out in the debate over justice and profit. The first gives morality its emotional engine and its point of ethical departure; the second gives it a horizon, a vision of the kind of world it is meant to build; the third gives it a discipline, a rule for deciding what to do when interests pull in another direction. To understand contemporary Chinese aid, it helps to see how deep these roots go, because the categories that guide the practice today were shaped long before the modern aid regime existed.

1.1 The Confucian Ethic of "the Benevolent Person Loves Others"

The Confucian ethic begins with moral emotion. Its point of departure is the "heart of compassion" (ceyin zhi xin) and the "heart that cannot bear the suffering of others" (buren ren zhi xin). It sets respect for others as a golden rule through Confucius's saying, "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire", and it builds a practical path that runs from kin to strangers and from oneself to others through Mencius's injunction to "treat the elders of one's own family as elders, extending this to the elders of others, and treat the young of one's own family as young, extending this to the young of others." Between them, these give aid its emotional impulse and its ethical legitimacy.

Within Confucian thought, benevolence (ren) is the category that ties individual virtue and social ethics together. At the level of practice, Confucianism condensed this spirit of benevolence into what is called the "way of loyalty and reciprocity" (zhong shu zhi dao). Loyalty (zhong) means doing one's utmost; it is a demand to hold fast to one's moral responsibility. Reciprocity (shu) means extending oneself to others; it is a call to think from the other person's position and to tolerate difference. But its ultimate aspiration is the cosmopolitan sentiment that "a brotherhood of man across the world". It is this, rather than any parochialism, that still supplies solid traditional intellectual resources for a Chinese international humanitarian assistance practice committed to equality, inclusiveness, and sustainability.

1.2 The Political Ideal of "the World Shared by All"

"The world shared by all" (tianxia wei gong) comes from the account of the Great Harmony in the Book of Rites, in the chapter Li Yun. The phrase sets aside the narrow boundaries of dynasties and ethnic groups and establishes a lofty political ideal oriented toward universal welfare and harmonious order. Set against the private notion of "the world as one family's domain" (jia tianxia), it holds that the world belongs to everyone, and that the fundamental purpose of politics is to serve the common interests of all the people. The Great Harmony world sketched by the phrase "when the Great Way prevails, the world is shared by all" is one in which "the worthy and capable are chosen, trust is cultivated and harmony is maintained"; everyone has a proper place, and the widowed, the orphaned, the childless, and the disabled are all cared for. It gives moral action a sense of ultimate purpose, and it provides the cultural soil from which the idea of mutual benefit and win-win outcomes in international exchange has grown over time. The link to aid is direct: if the world is genuinely shared, then helping others to build stable and decent conditions is not an act of charity toward foreigners but part of the proper order of things.

1.3 The Value Ordering of the "Distinction between Justice and Profit"

The third strand insists on "thinking of justice when profit appears" (jian li si yi) and on "placing justice above all" (yi yi wei shang). It establishes a rule of behavior in which justice comes first, it rejects the pursuit of profit for its own sake, and it holds that profit should be governed by justice and, ideally, united with it. This is the philosophical ground for the principle of "no political conditions attached" in China's foreign aid. None of this is a simple rejection of interest. It is an attack on the mentality of acting purely for profit, and a search for the dialectical unity in which justice governs profit and the two are brought together rather than opposed. In foreign aid and international cooperation, this philosophy directly underpins the principles of "no political strings attached" and "respecting the other party's choice of its own development path". The value by which an action is judged is whether it accords with justice, not merely whether it serves one's own short-term gain. The tradition does not tell the actor to ignore interests; it tells the actor to judge interests by a standard that comes before them.

In sum, traditional Chinese culture gives the concept of morality a solid threefold foundation. This is the inheritance that Chinese aid carries into the international arena, and it is the reason why the moral dimension of the practice cannot be understood in purely Western terms.

2. The Theoretical Mirror of Morality: The Genealogy and Debates of Morality in International Relations Theory

International morality can be understood as the set of value standards and codes that regulate the relations between international actors, the international society, and other actors. It covers the rules of behavior and the norms that states should follow in their foreign relations, norms grounded in the

obligation to show humanity and the obligation to do justice, and its core content is the duty of the state. It takes concrete form as normative constraint, as expectation about how states will behave, and as evaluation of legitimacy, and in this way it becomes a normative dimension of interstate interaction that no serious analysis can ignore.

Within international relations scholarship, Western theory has accumulated a range of different accounts of what international morality means and what it does. Charles R. Beitz's cosmopolitan theory of morality breaks through the state-boundary assumption of older views. It holds that actors in international society owe fundamental duties of justice to people outside their own borders as well, so that justice cannot stop where a border begins.[2] David H. Lumsdaine, working from empirical study of foreign aid institutions, argues that the main motive behind state foreign aid is essentially the donor's ethical outlook and humanitarian concern rather than any purely political or economic calculation. Morality is not an external decoration on the interstate game, nor a subordinate instrument that states pick up when convenient. It is an internal, constitutive element that shapes how states act abroad and that regulates the order of international interaction.[3] The significance of this move is that it makes moral judgment a normal, unavoidable part of how states behave, and it clears the ground for taking China's own moral claims seriously rather than treating them as noise.

The realist tradition, for its part, keeps a more cautious distance. Hans J. Morgenthau held that morality cannot be exported by force; it can only attract other nations through the force of example.[4] He also conceded that international morality can play an objectively positive role in international politics, but he insisted on distinguishing "genuine international morality" from its counterfeit. The former points to universal human well-being; the latter is frequently turned into rhetorical packaging for national interest. Arnold Wolfers added a strategic angle. Acting morally reassures a state's allies, he observed, and competing on shared moral ground can consolidate a state's international support; morality thus has a real functional value in alliance politics and in building reputation.[5] George F. Kennan went furthest in the opposite direction. He opposed morality as a guiding principle for diplomacy, argued that state policy should rest on the pursuit of interest, and held that international morality and national interest are entirely separate things.[6]

In the Chinese context, morality is not the product of the binary opposition between "norms"and "interests" that runs through Western international relations theory. It is a composite category that draws on the tradition of Chinese civilization, on the spirit of socialist internationalism, and on contemporary global governance practice. But what it stresses most is the relational nature of moral responsibility. Morality, on this view, is not a universal obligation between abstract individuals; it is a mutual responsibility generated within specific historical, cultural, and relational settings. If moral duty is relational, then what a country owes another is worked out in the concrete relationship between them, with its history and its shared interests, rather than deduced from a timeless rule that treats everyone alike. This relational view of morality offers a distinctly Eastern vantage point from which to move beyond the Western "norms-interests" dichotomy, and it is this view that the rest of the article builds on.

3. The Practical Unfolding of Rationality: The Composite Rationality of China's International Humanitarian Assistance

"China's foreign aid keeps to the principle of attaching no political conditions, but this in no way means that it ignores national interests; rather, aid serves the overall layout of China's diplomacy." In the practice of China's international humanitarian assistance, rationality is not a single calculation of value. It is a composite system made up of several mutually reinforcing dimensions, and it shows up concretely at three levels: instrumental rationality, strategic rationality, and communicative rationality. Each level answers a different question about how aid should be run, and together they cover the operational, the strategic, and the relational sides of the practice. If instrumental rationality asks whether aid is done efficiently, and strategic rationality asks whether it serves long-term purposes, then communicative rationality asks whether it is done with the recipient as a partner rather than an object.

3.1 Instrumental Rationality

Instrumental rationality means maximizing efficiency or utility through careful logical reasoning and precise scientific calculation. In aid practice it focuses on whether things actually get done, and its core work is the fine-grained weighing and systematic management of aid costs, implementation benefits, and potential risks. Aid modalities have to be matched to actual conditions: material delivery,

cash assistance, technical support, and others are combined as the situation demands, and the most cost-effective and best-suited implementation path is chosen among them. Recipient needs and the capacity of the recipient to absorb resources are assessed on the basis of field research rather than guesswork, so that aid is not handed out blindly and does not end up unused or misplaced. And risks are identified and steered around in advance, in geopolitical volatility, in project implementation, and in later operations.

3.2 Strategic Rationality

In their book How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy, John J. Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato define a state as acting rationally when its policy or strategy rests on a credible theory and is the product of a deliberative decision-making process. Strategic rationality in China's international humanitarian assistance means stepping out of the frame of short-term, immediate cost-benefit accounting. It looks at the whole from a long-term developmental angle and balances the nation's core interests with the common interests of the international community. Its practical value shows mainly at three points. First, it shapes a favorable international environment for development. A sincere and pragmatic aid philosophy helps build mutual trust among states and dissolve cognitive bias in the international community, and this in turn creates a stable and peaceful global and regional environment for China's own long-term development. Second, it builds a shared bulwark of transnational security. By helping vulnerable developing countries cope with natural disasters, calm social unrest, and restore the order of development, aid checks the spread and spillover of security crises at the source and helps prevent non-traditional security risks such as terrorism, transnational crime, and refugee flows. Third, it strengthens national soft power and gives China a voice in international discourse.[7] Sustained and normal assumption of international responsibility keeps shaping China's image as a responsible major power, and it steadily increases China's moral appeal in global governance and its say in institutional participation.

3.3 Communicative Rationality

Jürgen Habermas argues that reason is not a solitary instrument for getting to know an objective world; that is the instrumental view of rationality. Its primary purpose and essence, on his account, lie in dialogue, communication, and mutual understanding between people.[8] Its central concern is to respect the recipient country's standing as a subject and its autonomy in development. The model rests on joint consultation built on equal dialogue and two-way negotiation. Needs are assessed together with the recipient, aid programs are planned together, and implementation paths are settled together, instead of delivering a one-way program or forcing a model on the other side. Through two-way communication and collaboration, aid projects can be made to fit the recipient's real needs from the start, to foster the recipient's own capacity for self-sustaining development, and to avoid waste and misallocation of resources.

China's international humanitarian assistance combines instrumental, strategic, and communicative rationality. What moral rationality pursues is the wisdom of "balancing justice and interests and achieving the win-win unity of the two." Pure morality, cut off from reality, may not be sustainable; pure rationality, having lost its direction, may slip into short-sightedness. China's international humanitarian assistance practice tries to find a middle road. Its morality is not romanticism that ignores cost; it is a sustainable commitment weighed and accepted through rationality. Its rationality is not a profit-driven utilitarianism; it is a calculation that keeps the compass of morality in view and keeps its warmth. The result, on the argument of this article, is not a compromise that waters down both terms but a synthesis in which each term makes the other possible.

4. The Generative Logic of Moral Rationality: Conceptual Definition and Composite Structure

As a composite concept, "moral rationality" describes how China, in its international humanitarian affairs, fuses firm moral standards with clear-headed practical consideration to form a distinctive way of knowing and acting. The concept is designed to avoid two extremes. One is "moralism", which acts on pure moral passion and takes no account of consequences. The other is "instrumental rationality", which reduces everything to cost-benefit analysis and loses sight of values. Moral rationality requires action to do two things at once: to answer to intrinsic value norms and cultural identity, and to weigh circumstances and get real results, serving long-term legitimate interests while producing positive effects. Neither requirement can be dropped without breaking the concept. If the first is dropped, the practice becomes indistinguishable from calculated self-interest; if the second is dropped, it becomes

unworkable goodwill. The definition is thus a discipline on both sides, and that discipline is what makes the concept useful for studying real aid rather than merely for praising it.

“Donor countries weigh interests and aid effectiveness while also attending to international norms and domestic opinion. They play both the role of homo economicus and the role of homo sociologicus. These two roles stand in a dialectical relation of mutual opposition and unity, and striking a balance between them is the central concern in formulating and implementing official development assistance policy.” Within this balance, the moral dimension of moral rationality draws mainly on the three traditional resources discussed above. The distinction between justice and profit supplies the ethical cornerstone of value ordering, with justice placed first. The sentiment of tianxia (literally “all under heaven”, carrying a cosmopolitan sense of moral responsibility) and its modern transformation into the consciousness of a "community with a shared future for mankind" supply a transcendent vision of order and an ethic of responsibility. And the spirit of benevolence supplies a universal emotional impulse and a moral-psychological foundation. The rational dimension, for its part, comes mainly from the demands of modern state governance, from a realistic reading of the international system, and from the pragmatic spirit formed since reform and opening-up. It takes several specific forms: rationality grounded in national conditions (acting within China’s means and accepting that China is still a developing country), effectiveness rationality (insisting that aid achieve real and sustainable effects), strategic rationality (recognizing the long-term value of aid in fostering a peaceful environment for development, building the image of a major country, and promoting common security), and learning rationality (absorbing international experience to improve China’s own system). The two dimensions are not merely juxtaposed. The moral side tells China what it ought to aim at, and the rational side tells it how much it can realistically give and in what form, and the concept holds the two together in a single logic rather than leaving them to pull apart.

Moral rationality did not appear ready-made, and it is worth stressing that its emergence is a historical process rather than a logical deduction. It is dynamic and charged with dialectical tension, and reform and opening-up was the pivotal turning point and the catalyst of “rationalization”. Before that, foreign aid was at times dominated by a strong revolutionary ideology (internationalism), and the traditional spirit of “valuing justice” was pushed to an extreme form that could exceed the limits of national strength. After reform and opening-up, with the center of national work shifted to economic construction, the philosophy of foreign aid moved from a revolution-oriented approach to a development-oriented one. The principles announced in 1983, “equality and mutual benefit, emphasis on practical results, diversity in form, and common development”, marked the moment when sober practical rationality was raised to a position equal to moral commitment. The logic at the core of this shift is a threefold awakening of rational consciousness. The first element is rationality grounded in national conditions: only when China itself is stable and developing, and commands greater comprehensive national strength, can it fulfill its international moral responsibilities steadily and effectively. The second is effectiveness rationality: genuine morality must produce tangible developmental results, or it becomes a waste of resources and a moral duty left unfulfilled. The third is strategic rationality: in an age of deepening interdependence, helping other countries toward stability and development serves China’s long-term interest. On this pragmatic foundation, the traditional moral resources were reactivated, sifted, and reinterpreted. Outmoded forms, such as tributary ceremony and the export of revolution, were stripped away; the spiritual core of responsibility, benevolence, and the primacy of justice was drawn out and combined with modern ideas of development and the global governance agenda. In this way the old moral vocabulary gained a new life for the present age, and moral rationality emerged as a genuinely modern form of the tradition rather than a return to it.

Conclusion

Moral rationality is a theoretical generalization of the logic of action in China’s international humanitarian assistance. It is not the Weberian split between an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility; it is a distinctive practical wisdom produced where traditional Chinese culture meets modern governance experience. Theoretically, moral rationality moves beyond the “norms” versus “interests” dichotomy of Western international relations theory and offers a new paradigm for understanding state foreign aid. On this view, a state is neither a pure moral actor nor a pure rational egoist. It is a composite actor that fuses moral aspiration with rational consideration within a specific historical, cultural, and relational context. This concept does two things at once. It helps deepen our understanding of China’s foreign aid practice, which has too often been read through one lens or the other, and it brings a non-Western theoretical perspective to the long-running discussion of the relationship between morality and interests in international relations theory. The point of the concept is

not to claim that China has found a perfect solution to an ancient tension. It is to give that tension a name, to show how it is managed in practice, and to insist that a state can hold moral and rational commitments together without either cancelling the other. Whether the balance is struck well in any particular case is an empirical question, one that turns on the concrete conduct of specific programs and the responses of the recipients. What the concept supplies is the vocabulary in which that question can be asked and answered at all. In this sense moral rationality is offered less as a finished doctrine than as an opening move: a way of bringing China's humanitarian assistance into view as a serious object of theoretical study, on terms that do justice to both the moral and the rational dimensions of the practice.

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