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## CHINA BUSINESS WEEKLY

### How a Chinese superpower MAY BE DIFFERENT

Is China a superpower? This intriguing question was recently posed by Vanchai Srichana, president of Mae Fah Luang University, at a Bangkok Bank event.

In Professor Vanchai's view, there are three aspects to being a superpower – economic might, military might and global influence.

And although China has both economic and military might, plus a great culture and history, its global cultural influence is not yet enough to qualify for superpower status.

For example, other superpowers – either in the present, such as the US, or in past centuries, such as France and Britain – have disseminated their cultural influence to every corner of the world through language, food, fashion, media and social systems.

China's global influence is much more modest. One reason for this, according to Vanchai, is that unlike Western powers, China didn't colonise any overseas territories. Instead, China's foreign policy approach was to create mutually beneficial trade.



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This point has been repeatedly stressed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, who says that Chinese culture advocates harmony and diversity. He vows that no matter how powerful China becomes, it will not exercise hegemony over other countries but will support a multipolar world.

While of course some might be sceptical about this, Xi can support his claim by pointing to China's long history of peaceful engagement through many centuries when it was a major economic power.

For example, in the 15th century, as a major maritime power, China could have colonised Southeast Asia – but it chose not to.

Rather than establish colonies, China set up a tribute system – in return for access to the Chinese market and protection, neighbours were required to give gifts to acknowledge China's superiority.

This was symbolic, as the gifts were reciprocated, usually with even greater value.

While conceding that China is not yet a superpower, Vanchai is confident that it will become one as its cultural influence grows.

His Mae Fah Luang University is a good illustration of the growing influence of China, as students study in Chinese as well as Thai.

While I agree that China is on track to becoming a superpower, I think its style will reflect its own culture and history, and its behaviour will be very different to that of Western powers.

We recently celebrated Chinese New Year around the world with the usual exchanges of gifts, gatherings of families and demonstrations of respect.

This is a great model for the win-win philosophy of China's international engagement.

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