

**METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY PRAGUE**

**International Relations**

# **HABILITATION THESIS**

Based on a collection of previously published scholarly works with commentary

## **China and Political Order from the Inside Out: Ideational Foundations, Domestic Institutionalisation and International Manifestations**

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Year of submission: 2026

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# **Introduction to the Habilitation Thesis and Author's Commentary**

## **1. Introduction**

China's rise in global politics has undoubtedly been one of the most consequential phenomena significantly shaping the international order in the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A large part of studies on this topic have focused on determining to what extent China has been a status quo or revisionist power and in which specific ways it has been reshaping the existing world order (for more, see Section 2). While this question overlaps with the central theme of this habilitation thesis and the individual articles included in this collection, my primary goal here is somewhat different. It is to analyse how China's approach to international order is connected with and shaped by the internal ideational and organisational foundations of Chinese politics. In other words, I primarily adopt an inside-out and intermestic perspective with the aim of illuminating specific aspects and nuances of the ordering of Chinese politics and China's orientation in international politics.

When doing so, I move beyond three widely discussed "bottom-up" ideational and organisational explanations of Chinese politics; i.e., Chinese nationalism (e.g. Boylan, McBeath & Wang 2021; Callahan 2010; Gries 2004; Hughes 2006, 2011; Wang 2014), authoritarianism (socialism/communism) (e.g. Brady 2018; Eisenman 2023; Jang & Yoo 2025; Owen 2021) and Sino-centrism (e.g. Callahan 2008, 2016; Lin 2023; Nuruzzaman 2016). This is not intended to disregard their relevance, which is well established in the literature, nor does it imply that these influences are completely excluded from my analysis. However, I demonstrate the role of other ideational elements in shaping domestic and international order. In particular, I highlight the importance of what I call developmentalism (or Chinese developmentalism), a concept that has received only limited conceptualisation and systematic analysis in the existing literature. For the sake of clarity, it is useful to state at the outset that what I term developmentalism refers to a normative political and ideological theme that is distinct from, albeit loosely related to, the better-known concept of the developmental state and broader development strategies that are primarily discussed in (political) economy (for a closer definition of developmentalism, see Section 5).

This habilitation thesis reflects my wider research interest in understanding the processes and diverse forms through which political orders are constructed and politics is organised through

a range of mechanisms, particularly discursive and institutional ones. Empirically, my research focuses on Chinese and East Asian politics as a key geographical setting for examining the intersections between domestic, regional and global scales and political dynamics.

This habilitation thesis is deliberately designed to present one line of inquiry that can be distilled from a broader body of my research and shows one way of approaching my wider research interest. As such, it does not necessarily bring together the best of my post-doctoral writings, although it includes some of them. At the same time, I have deliberately prioritised the inclusion of solely authored works (with one exception), as this habilitation thesis is intended primarily to be an individual scholarly contribution and a demonstration of the candidate's capacity to develop and pursue an independent research agenda.

Nonetheless, although this habilitation thesis is primarily based on five specifically selected articles, several other works overlap with, complement and further unfold my research interest. (In the overview provided in the two following paragraphs, articles marked with an asterisk [\*] are directly included in this habilitation thesis, whereas those without an asterisk are not.)

These works examine the following broad themes. First, they analyse how China advances international norms and interacts with established normative frameworks (Karmazin 2023a\*, 2023b). Second, they explore the organisation of the Chinese state, sovereignty, and the political system (Karmazin 2020\*, 2023c, and, additionally, my PhD thesis originally defended in 2019 and later published as Karmazin 2023d), as well as the connections between these domestic features and China's geopolitical aspirations (Karmazin 2025). Third, they investigate the role of narratives, ideas, and strategic aspirations in shaping Xi Jinping's ambitious foreign policy (Karmazin 2019\*; Karmazin & Hynek 2020\*). Fourth, they examine how Chinese intellectual traditions can contribute both to understanding Chinese politics (Karmazin 2024\*) and to broader theorising in International Relations (Karmazin 2016). Finally, they analyse the rise of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct, focusing on its regional implications and on the responses of China and other actors (Karmazin, Kolmaš & Qiao-Franco 2025; Karmazin, Qiao-Franco & Kolmaš 2026; Kolmaš, Qiao-Franco & Karmazin 2024; Qiao-Franco, Karmazin & Kolmaš 2025).

Some of my other publications likewise examine international order and its normative and institutional foundations, albeit without an empirical focus on China or the Indo-Pacific (Hynek & Karmazin 2020; Karmazin 2022a). In addition, I have recently developed a research interest in the sociology of academic knowledge production (Daniel & Karmazin 2025; Karmazin

2022b; Karmazin & Daniel 2025). This line of research is similarly not centred on China or the Indo-Pacific, although one of these publications applies this perspective to the study of China (Karmazin 2018).

This introduction to the habilitation thesis is organised as follows. The next (second) section reviews the existing literature on China's approach to international order, points out some of its limitations, and indicates how these open up space for my own research. In the third section, I briefly describe the composition of this habilitation thesis, the individual articles it includes, and their contributions. The theoretical background of this thesis is introduced in the fourth section. However, it should be highlighted that it does not constitute a framework applied uniformly across all the articles in this collection. Rather, it provides a broader and more flexible perspective that permeates the individual articles in different ways and to varying degrees, depending on their specific objectives. The fifth section discusses developmentalism as one of the key themes of this thesis, considers broader implications and briefly outlines the limitations of the thesis.

## **2. China and International Order: The State of the Art**

The rise of China, its geopolitical implications and the country's position in the international order have been among the most widely researched topics in International Relations. The existing works discuss China's approach to the current global international order in general (e.g. Chan, Hu & He 2019; Chen Weiss & Wallace 2021; Dai & Renn 2016; Doshi 2021; Johnston 2019; Larson 2024; Owen 2021; Wei Seow & Loh 2025) as well as a wide range of related aspects. Simultaneously, the extant literature analyses how China's approach to international order unfolds in specific regional settings or through relations with specific countries – from different Global South regions (e.g. Garlick & Qin 2024; Gaspari Cirne de Toledo & Cirne de Toledo Júnior 2021; Gilpin 2023; Murphy 2024; Seiwert 2024) to Europe (e.g. Cook, Ohle & Han 2022; Jones 2021), Russia (e.g. Kwon, Jeh & Lee 2022; Paikin 2021; Yu & Sui 2020) and the United States (e.g. Bahi 2021; Beeson & Watson 2019; Ho 2025).

What is typical for the vast majority of these studies is their (explicit or implicit) effort to assess whether and to what extent China challenges the current international order or whether its attitudes are compatible with the existing order. The conclusion depends on how these studies conceptualise international order: whether in terms of Westphalian principles, the UN system

and Charter or the liberal international order. Moreover, as Alastair Iain Johnston argues, China's position also varies across different dimensions of order, such as the military, political, and trade orders (Johnston 2019; similarly Chan, Hu & He 2019).

However, with these caveats in mind, it is still possible to provide a broad and rough overview of how the existing literature views China's orientation towards the current international order. Some studies portray China as a largely status quo actor, particularly with respect to the UN-based international order, highlighting its support for state sovereignty, formal equality, and non-intervention (Fravel 2025; somewhat similarly Foot & Haug 2026). Similar conclusions emerge from analyses of China's global initiatives, which rhetorically emphasise their pluralist vision of order rooted in the UN system and the equality of civilisations (Buzan & Zhang 2024). Most scholars, however, place China between the status quo and strong revisionism, arguing that it selectively contests and reshapes existing rules. While some emphasise norm entrepreneurship and incremental change, particularly in ways that appeal to the Global South (Benabdallah 2019; Kaczmarek 2017; Öniş & Kutlay 2020; similarly also Tang 2018; Chen & Zhang 2020; Chen 2016; Smith 2021), others stress more direct contestation of liberal norms (Dian & Menegazzi 2025; Kim & Kim 2023; Murphy 2024), China's ambition to create an alternative world order (Owen 2021), engage in constructive revisionism (Groitzl 2023), or displace the American-led order (Doshi 2021; Pillsbury 2015). The papers in this collection broadly align with the middle-ground position. However, the two articles that explicitly develop this argument (Karmazin 2019; Karmazin & Hynek 2020) predate the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent deterioration of Sino-Western relations.

Nonetheless, my primary aim is not to determine conclusively the extent to which China is revisionist. I focus on the ideational influences embedded in China's domestic environment and their role in shaping its approach to the international order. To be sure, this question is also widely covered in the existing literature, although less extensively than the question of China's status quo or revisionist orientation. It is possible to distinguish three broad strands of the literature that highlight the importance of specific domestic views, debates and motivations.

The first strand of works incorporates a realist assumption about the inherent aspiration of China to increase its security and/or power (Groitzl 2023; Hamilton 2024; Kwon, Jeh & Lee 2022; Murphy 2024; Son 2025) or focuses on material interests/logics more broadly (Artner 2020; cf. e.g. Bishop & Zhang 2020; Choi 2018; Lai 2022; Yue 2022). Although these studies examine the domestic preferences of Chinese elites and the motivations behind China's foreign policy (rather than relying solely on the systemic logic of power distribution), they offer only a partial

explanation of the internal drivers of China's approach to international order, largely reducing them to the logic of power accumulation. However, this perspective has difficulties explaining (preferences for) particular types of institutions and norms (cf. Reus-Smit 1999; Wendt 1999).

The second strand of the literature focuses on the influence of broader ideological and intellectual traditions on China's interactions with the West, international norms or different aspects of international order. These include nationalism (Callahan 2010; Foot 2019; Hughes 2011; Zhao 2013; partly Goldstein 2020; Zhao 2021a, 2018), socialism and communism or, more broadly, authoritarianism (Gurol 2023; Lim & Ikenberry 2023; Chen Weiss & Wallace 2021; partly Han, Han & Zhang 2026; Ho 2025) and traditions rooted in classical Chinese philosophy often associated with a distinctive Sino-centric worldview (Amako 2014; Callahan 2008; Carlson 2011; Lu 2016; Xue 2023a; Yan 2018; Zhang 2015).<sup>1</sup>

These ideologies are partly competing (Puranen 2025; Yan 2018) and partly overlapping (Callahan 2016, 2023; Chen & Zhang 2020; Smith 2021). Although noticeable overlap among these broader ideological traditions represents one analytical challenge, explanations of China's approach to international order that rely on such ideologies also face several further limitations. Recognising these limitations does not mean that we should disregard the importance of these broad traditions – far from it. Rather, it opens up space for uncovering additional dimensions of China's ideational environment (see Section 5).

First, the literature on Chinese nationalism typically focuses on the types and content of Chinese nationalism (e.g. Callahan 2004; Wang & Westwood 2024; Zhao 2004, 2021b), identitarian tensions with the West or some of China's regional neighbours (e.g. Callahan 2010; Gries 2004; Gries et al. 2011) or specific ways nationalism influences foreign policy decision-making and specific steps in foreign policy (e.g. Chen Weiss 2014; Dixon 2014; Gries 2004; Gries, Steiger & Wang 2016; Reilly 2011). To put it differently, this research is designed to explain public attitudes, propaganda, regime legitimization, diplomatic crises and cases directly touching China's sovereignty, security or economic interests. China's position in international order, by contrast, is a much broader outcome, involving long-term institutional choices across security, trade, finance, development, technology, human rights and global governance. Many of these

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<sup>1</sup> This identification of the principal ideological traditions is fairly standard in the literature on Chinese politics, although some studies also recognise the impact of additional traditions, such as economic pragmatism or, in other words, selective incorporation of economic liberalism combined with technocratism (Yan 2018; cf. also Holbig 2013). However, I will disregard these for the purposes of this literature review.

domains lie beyond what Chinese nationalism, as a phenomenon, primarily speaks to and beyond what the literature centred on it can therefore explain.

Second, authoritarianism can account for some aspects of China's attitude towards international order, such as its preference for state-centric norms and for arrangements that limit the accountability of the Chinese state to supranational institutions. Yet even China formally accepts some norms that sit uneasily with its authoritarian orientation (as I discuss in Karmazin 2023a). Authoritarianism thus provides only a limited and rather vague basis for understanding China's preferences regarding international order and norms. This holds even when the broad category of authoritarianism is specified through China's socialist (communist) tradition. Under Xi Jinping in particular, the leadership has sought to reassert socialist ideology in politics and society. This revival, however, concerns form more than substance. Its central objective has been to strengthen Leninist centralism and the principle of "the Party leading everything" (Tsang & Cheung 2024), rather than to reintroduce philosophically deeper socialist ideas such as internationalism, class struggle or emancipation. It is therefore difficult to infer China's approach to international normative structures directly from its socialist ideology.

Third, one of the key characteristics of the accounts focusing on connections between international order and Chinese traditional values and philosophies (often Confucianism or Confucianism-inspired approaches) is that many of the most sophisticated contributions do not primarily analyse the principles underpinning China's official foreign policy. Rather, they develop normative and theoretical visions about how international order should be organised or analysed (Lu 2016; Qin 2018; Zhao 2006, 2009). This tendency is particularly evident in the emergence of the so-called Chinese School of International Relations (cf. e.g. Qin 2007; Zhang & Chang 2016) and has been further reinforced by debates surrounding Global IR. Another body of scholarship similarly draws on Chinese philosophical traditions but shifts the focus from broad visions of international order to more specific concepts, such as "face" or "saving face" (Amako 2014; Xue 2023b), which are employed to analyse particular features of Chinese diplomacy and foreign policy.

The third strand of the literature partly overlaps with the analyses of nationalism, authoritarianism, socialism and Chinese philosophical traditions, but it examines more specific expressions. It is typically represented by works employing the concept of strategic narratives (Chang 2020; Lams 2018; Li 2019; Yoshimatsu 2025; Zeng 2017) or similar approaches (Kaczmarek 2017; Smith 2021). These works reflect not only the growing influence of the strategic narratives framework in International Relations since the (late) 2010s, but also China's

departure from the Dengian “low profile” approach under Xi Jinping. The concept has proved well suited to capturing how diverse ideational influences are combined in prominent narratives such as the “community of common destiny” or the Global Development, Security, Civilisation and Governance Initiatives. As such, they provide important insights into China’s foreign policy and its approach to international order. Nonetheless, the narratives themselves are vague and conceptually flexible, which restricts what their analysis can establish. One could also argue that strategic narratives are best understood as political resources rather than as self-sufficient explanations of China’s behaviour. In this sense, I also deploy a similar approach in one of the papers in this collection (Karmazin & Hynek 2020), but complement it with the analysis of other layers of China’s approach to political order (see Section 4).

### **3. The Structure and Overview of This Collection**

*Article 1: Karmazin, A. (2020): Slogans as an Organizational Feature of Chinese Politics. Journal of Chinese Political Science, 25(3), 411–429.*

The first article analyses the importance and the key roles of slogans in Chinese politics. It demonstrates that the Chinese leadership slogans serve as institutionalised, ideological and rhetorical devices contributing to the internal organisation of Chinese politics as well as defining general (grand) strategic goals. While the importance of slogans in Chinese politics has long been recognised in the relevant literature, this is one of the first articles (alongside Song & Gee 2020) that systematically theorises and conceptualises the role and functions of slogans in the context of the Chinese political system, particularly in the post-Dengian era.

In this collection, the paper’s importance is twofold. First, slogans embed key values and normative visions and serve as devices for their narration and dissemination. Simultaneously, slogans function as general guiding principles that suggest a broad policy direction for both domestic and international policy while remaining open-ended signifiers whose concrete content is then practically shaped through political practice. In this sense, they connect *values and ideology* with a broad, albeit loosely defined, *policy programme*, being relevant to both *domestic politics* and *foreign policy*. Second, the key slogans discussed in the paper often embed developmentalist motives, which is an important recurring theme across the habilitation thesis.

The article was published in the Journal of Chinese Political Science, which has established itself as one of the leading journals in the field of Chinese politics in recent years (Q2 in Area

Studies in the year of publication and in subsequent years reaching and remaining in D1 in Area Studies, while also reaching D1 in Political Science in several years<sup>2</sup>).

***Article 2: Karmazin, A. (2023): Normative Overlaps between China and the Liberal International Society: China's Developmentalist Human Rights. Chinese Journal of International Politics, 16(4), 406–430.***

The second article analyses how China relates to the liberal international society, with a particular focus on human rights norms. It theorises normative overlaps and assesses their strength by examining how a shared norm is linked to the deeper layers of the orders concerned. It shows a real but narrow consonance between developmentalist (i.e., Chinese) and liberal human rights, underpinned by divergent fundamental constitutional structures that preclude deeper convergence or socialisation. The article contributes to the literature on norm dissemination (i.e. norm *dynamics*) and explicitly connects the literature with a perspective that analyses structural (more *stable*) aspects of international order. As such, it offers a systematic way of assessing the depth and strength of normative agreements.

In this collection, the paper's importance is twofold. First, it is the theoretical core of the collection with the most advanced theorisation of political orders (see Section 4). Second, the article provides one of the first explicit conceptualisations of Chinese developmentalism and of what it terms developmentalist human rights and shows how developmentalist human rights are connected with deeper layers of China's political order.

The Chinese Journal of International Politics, in which the article was published, is a generalist and theoretically oriented IR journal with primary empirical interest in China and East Asia. As such, it exemplifies my research interest situated at the intersection of broader theoretical debates and regional focus. The journal has been one of the well-established platforms for such debates (ranked in D1 or Q1 in International Relations in recent years).

***Article 3: Karmazin, A. (2024): China's Search for the Future to Answer the Past: Liu Cixin, (Science-)Fiction and Chinese Developmentalism. Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 37(4), 502–519.***

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<sup>2</sup> All references to rankings and quartiles are based on the Web of Science (Clarivate) Journal Citation Reports based on their journal impact factors.

The third article analyses the popular Chinese sci-fi trilogy, *Remembrance of Earth's Past* by Liu Cixin, and its connections to Chinese politics and Historical International Relations. From the broader perspective, the article contributes to the literature on popular culture and world politics, which tends to read cultural artefacts as proxies for political and ideological structures, by showing that popular culture can also furnish a critical voice (even unintentionally) from within a dominant tradition. It likewise recovers the continuing relevance of evolutionary and Darwinist thinking in Chinese political thought, a genealogy that contemporary scholarship rarely addresses.

Although this article is not concerned with China's official foreign policy, it traces tropes and themes that situate this work within the broader context of Chinese modernisation and culture. Among others, I demonstrate connections with the works of Lu Xun, who is widely regarded as the most influential Chinese writer of the 20th century and whose legacy has been extensively appropriated by the Chinese state. The article is therefore not only about the particular sci-fi novels but also about modernisation dilemmas that have been (re-)articulated over more than a century. In the collection, the article thus provides the deepest dive into the cultural and value foundations of Chinese developmentalism. In a later work, I analyse the same trilogy to show which geopolitical visions are intertwined with Liu Cixin's developmentalism (Karmazin 2026).

The article was published in the *Cambridge Journal of International Relations*, which is an internationally recognised, long-established and high-ranked journal in the field of IR.

***Article 4: Karmazin, A. & Hynek, N. (2020): Russian, U.S. and Chinese Revisionism: Bridging Domestic and Great Power Politics. Europe Asia Studies, 72(6), 955–975.***

The fourth article, co-authored with Nik Hynek, investigates the revisionism of three great powers: Russia, the United States and China. It studies intermestic configurations, linking domestic populism, the strategic narratives of national leaders and each state's international revisionist posture. Whereas the most theoretically developed accounts classify revisionist states according to their international aims or network positions (e.g. Cooley, Nexon & Ward 2019; Goddard 2018), the article demonstrates that revisionist postures rest on specific domestic conditions without which they would hardly be tenable. Its argument about an uneven and multi-directional reshaping of the liberal order also anticipated a perspective that has since become more widely shared.

The article has a distinct position in this collection. While the other articles provide depth by analysing various aspects of Chinese politics, this one provides context in the form of a comparison with other great powers. Such a comparison matters because it allows China's position to be assessed against a more dynamic baseline. The article shows that the current order is being reshaped from several directions simultaneously. It thereby establishes the systemic context within which the China-focused articles should be read. At the same time, its analysis of "China Dream" and Xi's domestic politics implicitly points to the developmentalist motives that inform China's international ambitions.

The article was published in *Europe-Asia Studies*, which is an internationally recognised and long-established journal in Area Studies that also widely publishes IR articles, typically ranked in Q1 or Q2 in Area Studies in recent years.

***Article 5: Karmazin, A. (2019): The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and China's Strategic Course. The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis, 31(2), 293–308.***

The fifth article analyses the establishment and early operation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a window onto China's strategic course (direction and ambitions) under Xi Jinping. Among other aspects, it shows China oscillating between its developmental, Asianist and great power identities, with the identity of a bridge between developed and developing countries emerging as the partially unifying one. From the broader perspective, the article contributes empirically to the debate on whether AIIB represents a revisionist project, being one of the early works that emphasise how China adapted the project during the early stages in a relatively flexible way.

In this collection, the article is the least theoretically ambitious and analytically sophisticated. It was also published in a journal with a regional rather than truly international significance. However, the article was selected because it complements the whole collection. First, whereas developmentalism is described broadly and theoretically (esp., Articles 2 and 3), here the focus turns practical. Development is examined as one of the priority domains through which China advances its rise and pursues changes in international order through projects like the Belt and Road Initiative and, more specifically, AIIB. Second, the article captures ordering as an adaptive practice, showing how China's strategic identities and institutional designs are adjusted in the course of implementation rather than following a predetermined plan.

## 4. Theoretical Background

This thesis is situated in the constructivist literature (broadly defined) on international order and the English School of International Relations, while incorporating institutionalist perspectives and approaches emphasising the importance of discourse and narratives. However, the theoretical background does not constitute a narrowly defined and strictly unified framework applied uniformly across all the articles in this collection. Rather, it is intended to provide a broader and more flexible basis and perspective that permeates the individual articles in different ways and to varying degrees, depending on their specific objectives.

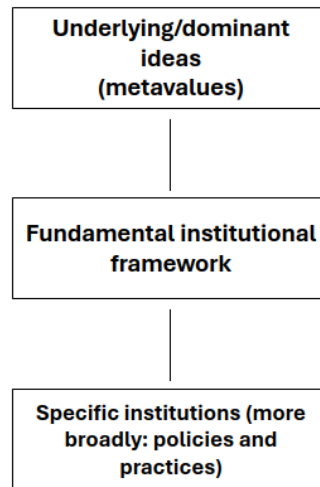
This thesis adopts the premise that political orders are complex, multiple and only imperfectly aligned. This threefold characterisation bears some resemblances to and is loosely inspired by a variety of recent theorisations of international order, ranging from multiplex order (Acharya 2017; Acharya, Estevadeordal & Goodman 2023) and multi-order world (Flockhart 2016), analyses of simultaneous changes of international order from above, below and within (Cooley & Nexon 2020) to investigations of heterogeneity in/of international order (Bátora & Hynek 2014; Phillips & Sharman 2015) and disordering mechanisms (Johnson, Basham & Thomas 2022; McKeil 2021, 2026). However, the specific articulation of this view is my own.

First, the idea that orders are complex is specifically unfolded by approaching them as multilayered. This perspective has been prefigured by the core theoretical claim of the English School of IR that international order (or international society, to use the English School terminology) is composed of and defined by a two-tier structure of the so-called primary and secondary institutions (Bull 1977; Buzan, 2004; Linklater & Suganami 2006). A somewhat similar perspective is offered by a range of constructivist works, including those sometimes referred to as holistic constructivism (Kratowil 1986, 1993; Nexon 2009; Reus-Smit 1999; Ruggie 1993). One of the most elaborate and specific theorisations of the multilayered structure of international order was provided by Christian Reus-Smit (1999), whose work is tied to this particular strand of constructivism and is also inspired by the English School tradition. Like other works within holistic constructivism, Reus-Smit treats actors (polities, states and potentially non-state actors as well) and the international system as embedded within one unified social and political order, whose intersubjective norms and identities shape both its actors and its historical transformation. At the same time, Reus-Smit introduces a three-tier (or, depending on how exactly we approach it, four-tier) framework for analysing the holistic composition of international order.

The framework consists of constitutional structures, fundamental institutions and specific organisations. (1) As Reus-Smit argues, constitutional structures are composed of specific subparts: (i) an understanding and definition of moral purpose of the state, (ii) organising principle of sovereignty and (iii) the fundamental norm of procedural justice. He posits that the prevailing idea of moral purpose of the state is the central one, while it is also closely linked to and informed by fundamental metavalues, which, depending on the definition, could be understood as a separate and the most fundamental (the deepest underlying) tier of his framework. (2) Fundamental institutions are general organisational frameworks that facilitate order and express general institutional features within a given order. (3) The previous layers are complemented by specific organisations which support, uphold or give specific form to fundamental institutions while also being based on and perpetuating constitutional structures and fundamental metavalues. For example, in Reus-Smit's account, the modern state system or, a bit more precisely, the modern liberal international order, is grounded in the metavalues of individualism, which conceive of human beings as kernels of possibility. These metavalues are institutionalised in a constitutional structure comprising (i) the "augmentation of individuals' purposes and potentialities" as the moral purpose of the state, (ii) liberal sovereignty as the organising principle of sovereignty and (iii) legislative justice (rather than, for example, ritual or authoritative justice, which characterised some earlier international orders) as the dominant norm of procedural justice. This constitutional structure gives rise to contractual international law and multilateralism as two of the order's principal fundamental institutions (Reus-Smit 1999: 7, 123–134).

This framework can, of course, be employed in its full complexity as a guide for analysing political orders. This is what I do in one of the articles belonging to this collection (Karmazin 2023a), where I use it as a tool for understanding the structure of political order and complement it with a more dynamic analysis of international norms. However, the framework can also be generalised and simplified to showcase how (international) orders are constituted through ideational aspects functioning as their principal ordering mechanisms. Such a simplified analytical framework comprises three distinct but mutually constitutive layers: (1) underlying and dominant ideas (metavalues), which may, for example, take the form of hegemonic discourses; (2) the fundamental institutional framework, consisting of the general institutional principles and arrangements and (3) the more specific institutions, norms, policies, and practices through which this institutional framework is expressed and reproduced. This is summarised in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: A generalised and simplified framework based on Reus-Smit (1999)**

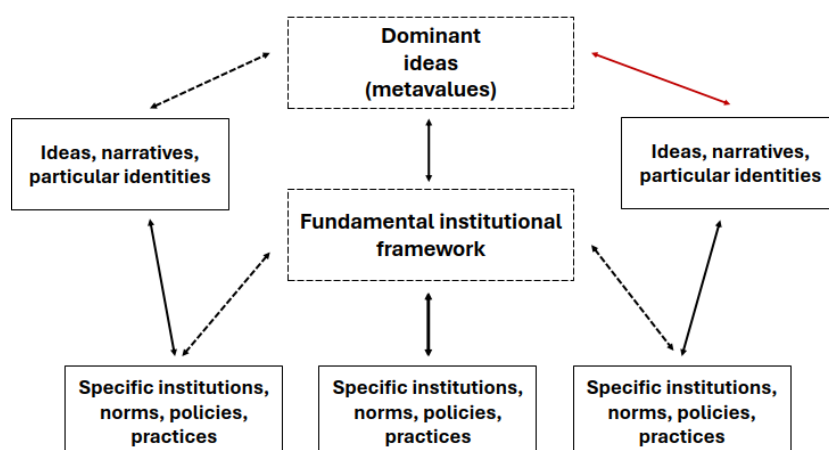


Second, the idea that orders are only imperfectly aligned moves beyond holistic constructivism and draws on a different body of scholarship. A similar view is reflected in the Stanford School of sociological institutionalism and its concept of institutional decoupling – i.e., the idea that actual practices (policies) may be decoupled from the institutional background (Buhari-Gulmez 2010; Meyer 2000, 2010). This can also contribute to institutional pluralism and the coexistence of multiple forms that may be differently influenced by international pressures, cultural models or may be tied to different ideational influences (cf. also Greenwood et al. 2011). Similar insights can also be found in other theoretical contributions to IR debates (Alter & Meunier 2009; Pavel 2014; Wiener 2018; Zürn 2018).

These insights add an element of dynamism to the previously introduced framework (Figure 1), leading to a refined articulation of the framework (Figure 2). They highlight that specific institutional elements, policies, actions or practices may be numerous and need not be fully aligned with one another. Sometimes, they might be tied to different ideational elements (different ideas, narratives, identities) and might have only a loose or conflicted relationship with the dominant ideas (metavalues) or the fundamental general framework. These possibilities are symbolically represented by the dashed and red arrows in Figure 2. Simultaneously, while Reus-Smit (1999) mainly presupposed ordering from dominant metavalues through the fundamental institutional framework to specific institutions, the revised framework emphasises the mutual constitution of all three layers. For example, the gradual accumulation of specific policies and practices may ultimately transform the fundamental institutional framework by altering constitutions or other broad institutions and norms. Moreover, dominant ideas (metavalues) may also evolve as alternative ideas gradually gain

prominence and either incrementally or more fundamentally reshape the prevailing ideational framework. This possibility is symbolically represented by the dashed outline of the metavalues in Figure 2, suggesting that they are not unchangeable.

**Figure 2: A more dynamic framework**

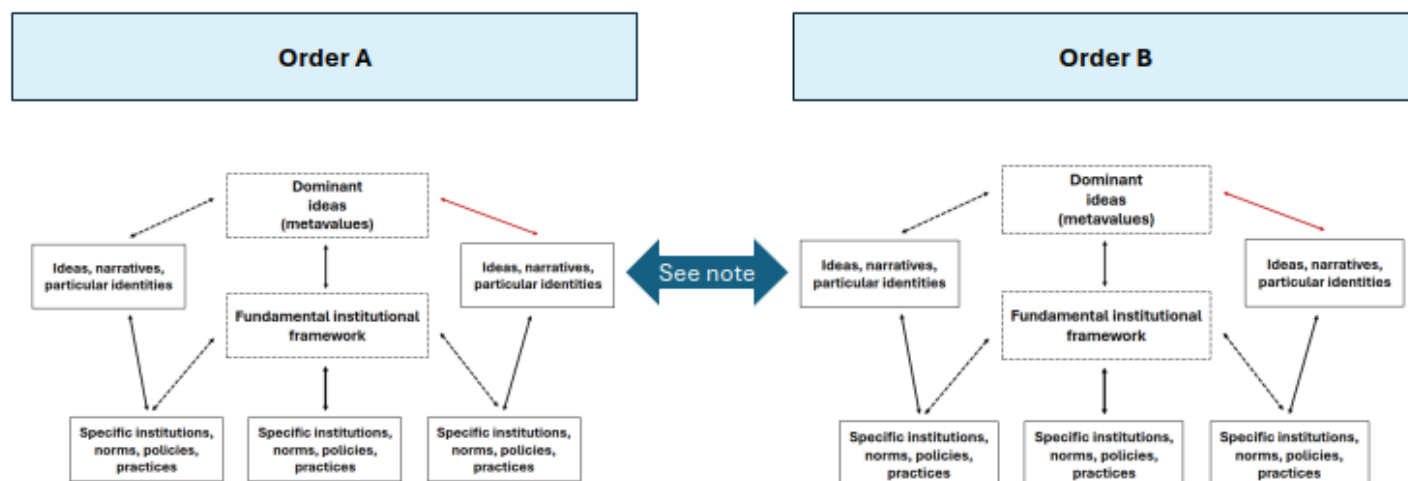


Third, the proposition that orders are multiple – or, by extension, that several orders may coexist – is relatively simple, but is not accounted for in Reus-Smit’s framework (1999). On the contrary, holistic constructivism’s defining theoretical pillar is to reject the analytical separation between the domestic and the international. As a consequence, the possibility of multiple or coexisting orders largely falls outside its theoretical scope. In this sense, acknowledging the coexistence of multiple orders represents a move beyond the theoretical core of holistic constructivism, as does the previously introduced idea that orders are only imperfectly aligned. Nonetheless, the coexistence of different orders at different levels has increasingly been recognised and theorised as an important feature of global politics, for example, in the English School literature on regional international societies (e.g. Buzan & Gonzalez-Pelaez 2009; Buzan & Zhang 2014; Karmazin et al. 2014) and, more broadly, in constructivist scholarship (Adler 2019; Costa Buranelli 2015; Fawn 2009; Flockhart 2016; Katzenstein 2005), including Reus-Smit’s later work (Phillips & Reus-Smit 2020).

For this collection, the implication of this is twofold. First, I treat China’s domestic politics as a political order that can be analysed using the same theoretical categories as international orders (this view is explicitly unfolded in Karmazin 2023a, more implicitly in 2020). Second, I also understand it as embedded in international orders which have in many ways different organising (ideational) principles. As indicated in Figure 3, there might be different ways of

interactions or different overlaps between order A (e.g. a domestic order) and order B (e.g. a regional international order or the liberal international order).

**Figure 3: Coexistence of different orders**



**Note: different influences, overlaps and conflicts between Order A and Order B**

Article 2 (Karmazin 2023a) is a theoretical centrepiece of this collection that draws most closely on this theoretical framework, specifically investigating connections and differences between China’s domestic order and the current liberal international order. Article 1 (Karmazin 2020) investigates slogans as one of the key features of the fundamental institutional framework in China’s domestic political order that also influences the general direction of China’s foreign policy. Article 3 (Karmazin 2024) offers deeper contextual insights into developmentalism as one of the aspects of China’s domestic metavalues. Article 4 (Karmazin & Hynek 2020) and Article 5 (Karmazin 2019) look at more specific ideational aspects – strategic narratives (Karmazin & Hynek 2020) and what I call strategic identities (largely in line with Shambaugh 2011) that define China’s understanding of its role and position in the world (Karmazin 2019). These two articles also demonstrate, first, how strategic narratives and strategic identities are tied to China’s geopolitical interests; second, how they adjust China’s broader normative orientation and make it more suited to ambitious foreign policy following Xi Jinping’s accession to power; and third, how they try to influence global political order.

## 5. Contribution and Takeaways: Developmentalism and beyond

While Section 3 presented the specific contributions of the individual articles, this section moves on to outline the broader significance of the thesis, which lies largely in its accentuation of developmentalism. A limited but important body of scholarship (see below) has already recognised developmentalism as an important feature of modern Chinese politics. Nevertheless, it has only infrequently and inconsistently been conceptualised as an analytically distinct component of China's political order or examined across domestic and international domains. In other words, the habilitation thesis consolidates and extends existing insights by conceptualising developmentalism as one important (although not exclusive) component of China's broader ideational orientation towards domestic and international order.

I refrain from providing one definitive conceptualisation of developmentalism. Admittedly, this does not help rectify the conceptual fragmentation of the debates on developmentalism that is present in the existing literature (see below). However, my hesitation to provide a single definitive definition reflects the fact that developmentalism has evolved and taken different forms across diverse historical and political contexts. Accordingly, the individual articles in this collection examine its manifestations and effects in specific situations. Moreover, much like thin ideologies, which rarely exist independently and instead attach themselves to more comprehensive ideologies, Chinese developmentalism is closely intertwined with other ideological strands in Chinese politics – Chinese socialism (socialism with Chinese characteristics), nationalism, economic liberalism and mercantilism, cultural relativism, technocratic pragmatism and others.

Nevertheless, I believe that it is possible to tentatively define Chinese developmentalism as an ideological theme, discursive nodal point or even as a thin ideology (for works on thin ideology, cf. e.g. Stanley 2008). At its core, it constructs social and economic development as the *raison d'être* of political communities, the principal means of addressing political challenges, and, to a considerable extent, an end in itself. As such, developmentalism extends beyond economic policy and permeates political values and the cultural environment. It is also predominantly collectivist rather than individualist, treating development as a defining attribute and shared purpose of the political community rather than of individuals.

Although not all the individual articles in this collection engage with developmentalism to the same extent, they discuss developmentalism's importance and identify its expressions at different levels: (Article 1) slogans as its institutional carriers within China's domestic order in the post-Dengian era, which articulate developmentalist motives and reinforce developmentalist aspirations (Karmazin 2020), (Article 2) the normative projection through

both overlaps with and gaps from the liberal international order, with the particular focus on developmentalist human rights (Karmazin 2023a), (Article 3) deeper debates about order and modernisation embedded in the broader cultural environment, (Article 4) more implicitly in how developmentalism informs Xi's ambitious foreign policy, strategic narratives and aspirational-revisionist approach to international order (Karmazin & Hynek 2020) and (Article 5) the practical advancement of these ambitions through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a development-oriented international institution established by China (Karmazin 2019).

In the remainder of this section, I further contextualise developmentalism by reviewing how it has (and has not) been discussed in the existing literature. I then consider the broader implications of the preceding analysis of developmentalism and China's approach to domestic and international order. Finally, I briefly outline the limitations of this thesis.

### ***The Existing Literature and Chinese Developmentalism***

The way developmentalism is considered in the academic literature on Chinese politics and society is inconsistent. There are numerous works on “developmental state” analysing China and other East Asian countries (e.g. Chen & Keng 2017; Knight 2014 among many others). These works primarily examine the model focused on economic modernisation, with a strong role assigned to state institutions, largely inspired by Japan's post-WWII economic miracle. Hence, these studies primarily examine the effectiveness of specific economic policies, GDP growth, the practical pursuit of technological modernisation and other issues closely related to economics. However, this is relatively far from the understanding of developmentalism I wish to advance. In other words, I see developmentalism not as a designation for a particular economic policy or strategy, but as a broader normative and political phenomenon that embodies a distinctive set of political values, helps shape a particular social and political identity and is embedded within the wider Chinese cultural context. As such, I understand developmentalism to be a more complex phenomenon.

Nonetheless, some of the works on China's developmental states indicate connections to the broader understanding of developmentalism. Some of them suggest that China's adoption of the developmental state model should be understood not only in the post-WWII context, but also as rooted in domestic intellectual and political developments dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, partly even before the Opium Wars (Helleiner 2022). Some intellectuals of the period argued for state-led development while acknowledging its significance beyond the economic sphere, e.g. arguing for “fighting with wealth rather than force” (Helleiner 2022: 917). Others

contributed to the historically significant Self-Strengthening Movement that emerged after China's defeat in the Opium Wars. More broadly, these developments reshaped China's intellectual landscape, creating the conditions for the reception of (Social) Darwinism (Jin 2022; Pusey 1983; Xu 2012), impacting Chinese views on international politics (Wojciuk, Górecki & Kowalski 2025), which became intertwined with developmentalist thinking and interpreted China's position through the logic of competition and the survival of the fittest. Other works examining more recent developments and while being rooted in (political) economy, emphasise that economic development has become not only an economic policy but also the defining ethos of the (post-)Dengian era (Zheng 2004). Others place greater emphasis on the political and ideational dimensions, showing how development-related themes have become central across a broad range of political debates in China (Keith 2009; similarly Yang 2017; cf. also Heberer 2016; Ferchen 2023) or how it became intertwined with Chinese nationalism (Barabantseva 2012). The same shift towards a broader understanding of developmentalism can also be found in studies on China's approach to peacebuilding, sometimes known as developmental peace or peace through development (He 2017; Jung 2024; Kuo 2015; Wang 2018; Wong 2021; Yuan 2022). Last but not least, Andrew Jones (2021) traces the notion of development as a trope and a more complex discourse in popular culture (novels and print culture) from the late imperial period to present China, showing the deeply embedded significance of developmentalism.

### ***Broader Implications: Ideology, Geopolitics and International Order***

Recognising developmentalism as a constitutive feature of the Chinese political order carries at least three broader implications that are important not only for understanding developmentalism itself but also for analysing China and its relationship to political order. They are connected with three issue areas: ideology, geopolitics and international order.

First, by looking at developmentalism, we can understand a seemingly contradictory feature of contemporary Chinese politics, namely that it is at once post-ideological and ever more ideological. This is perhaps because developmentalism unfolds rhizomatically. It does not expand through a hierarchical logic or linear development, but through recombinations and emergent linkages with other ideological strands and elements. As such, it characterises the broader ideological evolution of the contemporary Chinese political environment. On the one hand, the post-Mao decades are widely read as the triumph of pragmatism over doctrine when the views as “crossing the river by feeling the stones” combined with policy experimentation,

performance legitimacy and technocratic governance (Keith 2009). On the other hand, the Xi era has brought an unmistakable ideological intensification. Xi Jinping Thought extends across economic, ecological, diplomatic, legal, cultural and military domains (Mittelstaedt 2026; Tsang & Cheung 2024). Developmentalism is what runs through this sprawling production. It does not stand above nationalism, socialism or Confucian references as a master doctrine, nor does it compete with them for the same discursive space. It interacts with each of them, supplying the recurring motifs, such as growth, modernisation, catching up, stages, milestones, out of which their contemporary articulations are assembled and reassembled.

To be more specific, these recombinations can be seen in different domains. In the economic realm, the developmentalist emphasis runs from the four modernisations and Deng Xiaoping's dictum that development is "the overriding principle" through the "advanced productive forces" of Jiang Zemin's Three Represents (and his simultaneous confirmation of the introduction of capitalism in Chinese politics, economy and society) and Hu Jintao's scientific development concept to Xi Jinping's "high-quality development" and "new quality productive forces". In diplomacy, "peace and development" as the theme of his times is updated with more ambitious declarations and projects like the Global Development Initiative. In social and cultural debates, developmental themes appear in modified forms. "Ecological civilisation" links development to environmental concerns, "common prosperity" ties it to the redistribution of wealth, and "Chinese-style modernisation" presents it as a distinctly national path. In each case, the basic developmental idea is combined with other ideological elements and adjusted to a new area. Xi's China Dream works in a similar way. It is a nationalist narrative about the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", but much of its practical content is developmental: the two centenary goals of building a moderately prosperous society by 2021 and a "great modern socialist country" by 2049.

Second, an important part of China's geopolitical conduct can be understood as a distinctive form of statecraft, which I call developmental geopolitics. Many scholars have noted that China's global expansion relies heavily on geoeconomics and economic statecraft. Developmental geopolitics incorporates this dimension but goes beyond it, and it constitutes an important, if not central, mode of China's power projection on the global scale.<sup>3</sup> Its foundations were laid in the Dengian era, when China's rise was pursued primarily through economic

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<sup>3</sup> To be sure, developmental geopolitics is not the whole picture of China's foreign policy. In areas touching the country's territorial claims and core interests, such as Taiwan or the South China Sea, more classical logics of territory, sovereignty and military power prevail.

strength and economic means. Under Xi Jinping, this approach has become markedly more ambitious. These are visible in the form of the flagship projects of the Xi era, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or the Global Development Initiative that loosely build on earlier efforts such as the so-called Beijing Consensus (an economic development model advocated by Beijing towards the Global South that in practice enhanced China's image and influence).

Yet it would be reductive to read it merely as geoeconomics or economic statecraft. They also project a narrative and mobilise a strategic identity, picturing China as the largest developing country, a leader of the developing world or a bridge between developing and developed countries. Developmentalism thereby provides China with a coalition-building logic. The vocabulary of the right to development and developmental sovereignty creates a structural affinity with the post-colonial Global South, which neither communist internationalism nor Chinese nationalism could supply today. Two articles in this collection capture these dynamics in the earlier phase of the Xi era, analysing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Karmazin 2019) and Xi's aspirational revisionism (Karmazin & Hynek 2020). The subsequent proliferation of development-centred initiatives suggests that this mode of projection has since deepened rather than receded (cf. also Dian & Menegazzi 2025; Garlick 2023; Garlick & Qin 2024; Murphy 2024).

Third, and this is the broadest and most open-ended of the three implications, developmentalism also bears on the question of China's status quo or revisionist orientation. Developmental geopolitics carries a built-in imperative towards revisionism. It posits the imperative to increase power and status and, by consequence, reshape at least some aspects of the existing order. Yet it also carries a built-in potential for flexibility. China's approach can differ across the components of international order, supporting some institutions, reinterpreting others and building parallel ones. Hence, it can shift over time as circumstances and China's own position change. That said, developmental geopolitics is not the only mode of China's conduct, while, for example, Chinese nationalism can be less flexible, more vigorous and sometimes (or, depending on interpretation, oftentimes) directly aggressive. The overall picture is therefore not settled. What developmental geopolitics does suggest, however, is order transformation without a clean rupture. China enters, uses, modifies and sometimes contests existing institutions. It shares parts of the order's normative language while also reconnecting that with different values (as argued here in Karmazin 2023a, and less directly implied in 2019; Karmazin & Hynek

2020). The result is a gradual and uneven reshaping of the existing international order and its different layers and variations.

### ***Limits***

Several limitations of this thesis should be acknowledged. First, although the theoretical framework outlined in Section 4 provides the collection with its central spine, it is applied flexibly rather than uniformly. In other words, the overall character of the thesis remains somewhat theoretically pluralist. This pluralist character of the thesis is also underpinned by the fact that the articles collected here were written over several years and for different journals. However, the plurality of approaches allows more facets of the problematique to be brought into view than a single framework could accommodate. Second, the thesis is primarily concerned with the ideational, discursive and institutional dimensions of Chinese politics and China's approach to international order. Realpolitik, material capabilities, military balances and the harder aspects of great power competition are addressed only to a limited extent, even though they also shape China's international conduct.

Third, the thesis focuses on the dominant perspective of those in power. When I speak of China, I refer to the party-state, its institutions, its official discourse and its leading representatives, precisely because these actors define the country's political and strategic course. Societal, regional, minority and dissenting perspectives, as well as the ways in which official visions are received, contested or ignored, remain largely outside the scope of this work, although they are of considerable importance in their own right. Fourth, while developmentalism occupies a important place in this thesis, I do not claim that it is the single most important ideological tradition in Chinese politics, nor that it can displace the analytical value of nationalism, socialism or Sino-centric traditions. My argument is that developmentalism has been consequential and, at the same time, insufficiently conceptualised, and that it interacts with these other traditions rather than superseding them.

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# Slogans as an Organizational Feature of Chinese Politics

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Published online: 7 January 2020

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## Abstract

Slogans (fixed or authoritative formulations, 提法) are ritually repeated elements in Chinese politics, appearing in strategic documents and main speeches. Building on new institutionalism in Political Science, this paper systematically introduces and conceptualizes the phenomenon of slogans. While slogans have been approached from the perspective of linguistics or (political or cultural) history and have often been dealt with partially or implicitly, the paper addresses a gap in studying slogans from the point of view of Political Science. I argue that they are an integral part of China's political system, playing a role of a crucial organizational feature, whose significance goes far beyond a mere behavioural regularity, replicating a centuries-long Chinese tradition of officially orchestrated language to support a ruling regime. The paper specifically focuses on leadership (grand) slogans as the most comprehensive kind of slogans and their role in the post-Dengian period. Leadership slogans are relevant for and contribute to: 1) propaganda, 2) ideological innovations, 3) policy and strategic direction, 4) structuring politics, and 5) upholding a unity of the Communist Party of China.

**Keywords** Slogans · Political system · Institutions · Communist Party of China · Three represents · Scientific development · China dream

*When names are not correct, what is said will not sound reasonable; when what is said does not sound reasonable, affairs will not culminate in success.*

*Analects of Confucius*

*One single [correct] formulation and the whole nation will flourish; one single [incorrect] formulation, and the whole nation will decline.*

*Mao Zedong ([94], p.3)*

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## Introduction

Official slogans (fixed or authoritative formulations, 提法), which range from ‘seeking truth from facts’ (实事求是) often used by Mao Zedong<sup>1</sup> to the China Dream (中国梦) and New Era (新时代) of Xi Jinping (cf. [61]), have been an integral part of Chinese politics for a long time. Such slogans are ritually repeated in numerous documents and speeches and influence the conduct of Chinese politics. While they may seem strange for outsiders, students of China are aware of their importance. As put by William Callahan, ‘[a]lthough it is easy to dismiss official slogans as propaganda, they are crucial in organizing thought and action in Chinese politics’ ([13], p.228). Despite that, they have been insufficiently conceptualized and theorized. While particular slogans have often been analysed carefully, the key purpose of my paper is to go beyond particular instances of slogans and systematize, categorize and conceptualize. I argue that slogans are an integral part of China’s political system, being a crucial organizational feature, whose significance goes far beyond a mere behavioural regularity.

Building on the new institutionalist branch of Political Science and being sensitive to the studies from linguistics and history or sociology of culture, I address the role and position of slogans in politics of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and theorize them as sanctioned semi-formal institutions, which fulfil a few important functions in the political system. I also scrutinize how they are embedded in the political environment through showing linkages to other institutions or principles of the (post-)Dengian politics. This step helps fully uncover and appreciate their functional importance and a high level of their institutional enmeshment. While political slogans can be found at different levels and in different functional areas, I specifically focus on a particular type of slogans that I wish to call leadership (or grand) slogans. This type most comprehensively illustrates the functions and the importance of slogans in the Chinese political system. They involve Jiang Zemin’s Three Represents (三个代表), Hu Jintao’s Scientific Development Concept (科学发展观), Harmonious Society (和谐社会), Peaceful Rise/Development (中国和平崛起, 中国和平发展), and Xi Jinping’s China Dream and New Era. The label ‘leadership slogans’ is chosen as these slogans are closely identified with respective leaders or leadership generations, outline their policy, strategic and ideological visions, abbreviate their political program and sketch out the main ways of the country’s overall development. In short, they do what a former poet Ai Qing expressed in his poem: ‘[t]he new slogan determines the new political direction’ ([14], p.253).

I focus on the period since the early 1990s during which the character of the current Chinese political system was formed and got more institutionalized than previously [28]. During this period, Jiang, Hu and Xi built upon Deng Xiaoping’s slogans (e.g. four modernizations 四个现代化, peace and development 和平发展) in order to define their own political agendas. I argue that, as part of the given process, leadership slogans have gotten institutionalized in a specific way in the post-Dengian period. They can be characterized by main roles which they play: 1) contributing to propaganda, 2) enhancing ideological innovations, 3) formulating policy and strategic program (direction), 4) structuring politics and political debates, and 5) expressing continuity in Chinese communist politics (among different leadership generations) and hence

<sup>1</sup> Although frequently used by Mao and others, it had originally appeared in the Book of Han.

upholding a sense of unity in the Communist Party of China (CCP). By demarcating their common characteristics and functions, I hope to facilitate further analyses of slogans as a distinctive phenomenon of Chinese politics.

In order to address a gap in the systematic studying of slogans (cf. the following part), I choose an institutionalist perspective. The existing studies of slogans focused on a micro-level or a meso-level of politics of slogans. For example, slogans were approached as ideographs analysed as justifications for action, a shared symbol for participation in a rhetorical culture and a means of persuasion [69], and similar approaches were adopted by other crucial works on slogans [50, 67, 94]. On the contrary, institutionalism provides a perspective that is capable of capturing a more macro-level role of slogans *vis-à-vis* the national political system. On top of that, approaching slogans as institutions allows integrating their (macro-level) functions into one account. Hence, while analysing slogans as signs, speech acts or ideological masks is certainly useful, it has partly been done before and the institutionalist perspective should allow capturing a more complex set of functions of slogans (for example, it can point to their ideological functions as well as to others). At the same time, the institutionalist perspective does not disregard the slogan's nature as cultural elements. However, it shows in which ways this cultural phenomenon has gotten institutionalized and, hence, gained a semi-independent status. It helps underline that slogans are not completely dependent on particular political strategies and approaches of specific actors but have a specific significance on their own.

While I believe these advantages justify how the paper is framed, it needs to be mentioned that institutionalism tends to be partially static and, on its own, is not best suited for capturing complex political dynamics, power effects and potential negative consequences on other segments of society (for a relevant discussion, cf., [81]). Hence, while negative effects and contestation have often been well described in particular instances of slogans (cf. the following section), a comprehensive critical assessment of slogans remains a topic for further research.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next part discusses what has and has not been covered by the existing literature on slogans. The second part outlines the paper's theoretical and analytical perspective. In the third part, I provide a definition of slogans and, especially, a categorization of their different types. Offering a taxonomy of slogans helps demarcate the paper's focus. It is also useful for structuring the research terrain especially as no categorization of slogans has been provided by the literature. The fourth part contextualizes how the practice of proposing leadership slogans (re-)emerged after Deng's retreat from politics. In the fifth part, I discuss their position and function in Chinese politics. The sixth part focuses on sanctions and contestations which help to enforce that slogans are followed so that they can fulfil their functions.

## Reviewing the Existing Knowledge

The literature on slogans in Chinese politics is both abundant and scarce. On the one hand, many works discussed particular slogans from various perspectives. On the other hand, what is typical for the state of the art is a lack of systematic and generalized assessments of slogans which is particularly evident as regards the analysis of the post-1990 period. A couple of authors from different academic disciplines acknowledged slogans as a distinctive phenomenon and implied their importance for political

processes in China (e.g., [13, 70, 87]). While these works typically did not engage in any detailed discussions about slogans, a few works made slogans the focal point of their analysis. They covered a wide range of topics: sociological and ideological assessments of slogans and their formalization [69, 93, 94], impact of slogans on conduct of cadres or other subjects [5, 87], a linguistic and cultural dimension of slogans [50, 63, 67, 105] including attempts to specify how slogans (co-)constitute political culture (esp. [50, 67]), or themes related to slogans and logic [116]. However, not many of the concerned studies aspired to provide a systematic or generalizable view. Even those studies with the most general ambitions [50, 67, 94] were still mainly related to a rather specific set of questions (how slogans influence official language or how they were utilized for specific purposes like increasing one's political influence). Moreover, with a partial exception of Perry Link's book [67], these works concentrated on the periods of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping [63, 69, 87, 93].

This is by no means to indicate their inferior quality or usefulness. They provide highly valuable and very detailed insights. They point to some key functions of slogans that I discuss and identify below (especially propaganda) [50, 69, 94] and some others are partially implied (slogans as a substitute for political and strategic program) although without explicit articulation (cf. [67]). However, some others (e.g., continuity in leadership generations) are not discussed at all. Moreover, their insights are limited when it comes to specifying slogans' relationship to other elements of the Chinese political system and disambiguating their overall incorporation to the institutional environment of Chinese politics. Hence, the ambition of the paper is to offer a systematic account that would capture and conceptualize slogans and their role in the contemporary (post-1990) period.

On the contrary, there has been a myriad of works that dealt with particular slogans, but they completely or mostly disregarded the fact that slogans form a specific kind of political occurrences. Due to an immensely high number of such works, I indicate, rather than comprehensively review, what they offer. A few key streams of analysis can be distinguished: first, micropolitics of slogans in the party-state structures [39, 120], second, specific (policy) areas ranging from economic performance [55, 83, 88] or legal questions [64] to some aspects of foreign policy [11, 39] and other topics including politics of legitimacy [41, 119] and propaganda [5, 6] or media analyses [6, 27], and, third, critical assessments related to deconstructing broader discourses and identities ([14], cf. also [31, 111]). The key strength of these works lies in their ability to meticulously examine specific consequences or contexts of particular slogans and explicate various kinds of their negative effects. While these works sometimes discuss some (but not all) of the roles of slogans which I point to in the following text, it can be noted again that the focus tends to be on their specifics.

## Theoretical and Analytical Perspective

The so-called new institutionalism will serve as the main lens through which slogans will be analysed. I specifically utilize literature dealing with both formal and informal institutions because slogans evince signs of both of them: slogans as a specific political category are not formally defined; their formalization is relatively general and unspecific; and sanctions for their violation are formalized very loosely or not at all. In accordance with new institutionalism, institutions shall be understood as 'relatively

enduring features of political and social life (rules, norms and procedures)’ ([72], p.4) and when being informal, they are ‘usually unwritten [and] created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channel’ ([42], p.727). A distinctive element at the beginnings of new institutionalism was its emphasis on the relative autonomy of political institutions and the importance of symbolic action [73] and, also, the conviction that these characteristics shape and impose a political order [56, 68, 74]. Similarly, authors dealing with informal institutions [2, 40, 42, 62, 108, 113] devoted their study to understanding how informal (or as the case may be, semi-formal) consolidate or unsettle a political order. To disambiguate and analytically comprehend a political order, I specifically focus on the political system which I understand as a set of political institutions (agencies, organizations and rules) with more or less standardized linkages between them (cf. [25]). Following this perspective, I intend to scrutinize slogans’ position in the Chinese political system which involves contextualizing how the institutional position of leadership slogans was (re-)established in the (early) post-Dengian period, addressing their functions and relations to other institutions of the political system and explicating sanctions that manifest slogans’ effects and importance.

First, as institutionalists make clear, institutions always need to be (re-)confirmed by social practice [16, 72, 73]. The fourth part discusses the (re-)emergence of the practice of proposing leadership slogans in the post-Dengian period when Chinese leaders initially encountered difficulties to propose this kind of slogans. Second, following a functionalist pedigree of the institutionalist accounts, I focus on which roles institutions play in Chinese politics. Although the literature on informal institutions partially distances itself from functionalism [40, 108, 113], it has created several semi-functional typologies [2, 40, 42, 62] which specify how informal (or semi-formal in our case) institutions relate to the formal basis of the political system. Specifically, I will utilize Helmke’s and Levitsky’s differentiation between complementary, accommodating, substitutive and competing informal institutions [42] to demonstrate the character of their overall enmeshment in the Chinese political system. Their typology is constructed along two analytical lines – whether informal institutions are convergent or divergent with the formal ones and whether formal institutions are effective or ineffective. Informal institutions become complementary (the combination of convergence and effective formal institutions) if they facilitate a political pursuit within a given institutional setting. Accommodating informal institutions (divergence, effective formal institutions) create ways for altering or adjusting formal institutions. Substitutive informal institutions (convergence, ineffective formal institutions) make up for a lack of effectiveness of formal institutions and substitute their role. Competing informal institutions (divergence, ineffective formal institutions) are those that explicitly challenge formal institutions with which they are incompatible. Discussing these issues will lead me to identify key institutions with which slogans are connected and to further discuss which specific functions or tasks they carry out. The fifth part discusses these issues.

Third, as institutionalists pointed out, it is important to distinguish institutions from other phenomena, especially a mere behavioural regularity [40, 42, 113]. Key aspects for doing so are showing that they fulfil certain functions in a political system (discussed in the previous paragraph) and that they involve sanctions and pressures with the aim to ensure that a given institution is followed and upheld ([42], p.727, [73], p.740). In other words, the latter is important from the institutionalist perspective

because it underpins the former. Two points shall be followed as far as sanctions are concerned. It is important to point to those moments when proponents of slogans wanted to ensure that slogans would be followed (trying to achieve confirmation and anchoring them within political structures) and, as such, wanted to preclude actual misuse [16]. It is also necessary to highlight situations during which slogans were violated, resisted or defied and to see whether there were any counter-pressures ([2], pp.40, 43). These aspects are addressed in the sixth part.

## The Initial Delineation of Slogans in Chinese Politics

Although there has not been any truly comprehensive *longue durée* analysis of slogans, literature richly documents that slogans of various kinds have played an important role in Chinese politics for centuries if not millennia (cf. [69, 105]). Language formalization has been typical throughout Chinese history [50, 93]. Slogans as a manifestation of language formalization were used during the period of imperial China [105, 116] as well as after the republican revolution [63, 67, 94]. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) quickly mastered slogans as a political tool [109]. Adapting the Confucian tradition of rectification of names, slogans have been utilized as an important instrument for achieving correct wording, cementing the regime's discourse and putting forward a desired worldview (cf. esp., [50, 63, 67, 69]). While the cultural revolution was a heyday of slogans [63, 105], they have not disappeared even after that [67].

The historical variety and the abundance of slogans beg the question of how to define and differentiate them. The task of systematically differentiating slogan is particularly important because nobody has attempted to categorize or taxonomize slogans. Before attempting to do so, I briefly discuss how to understand slogans. The creation of slogans involves the creation of new a lexicon or the recrafting of the existing lexicon. It typically leads to assembled phrases that start to embody (new) meanings and ideas [105]. The new phrases and meanings are meant to shape both language and thinking [69, 94, 105]. It is also typical that given phrases are habitually repeated and are easily memorable. In accordance with these aspects, Michael Schoenhals defines slogans as 'fixed units of discourse designed to produce a certain effect upon feelings, thought, or actions of a target audience' ([94], pp.9-10). I agree with this definition but stress that what I am interested in are those fixed statements that are used for political purposes and belong to or at least interact with official political language.

In order to distinguish slogans, I propose a basic taxonomy based on two axes. The thematic axis is concerned with the scope of topics (themes) that slogans cover. It distinguishes broad slogans that relate to multiple topics and aspire to be fairly general. On the contrary, narrow slogans' thematic span is limited and they may communicate only one narrowly defined issue. The second axis defines political outreach of slogans or, more precisely, the range of audiences (actors and levels) they speak to. We can distinguish general slogans that intend to appeal to a wide audience and limited slogans whose audience is smaller. The combination of the two axes produces four basic types of slogans (see Table 1) which I discuss in the following paragraph. However, two caveats are in order. First, categorizing slogans is not easy due to their multifaceted character. They serve as ideological frames and some of them may conflate with political (ideological, rectification) campaigns (e.g., the three stresses 三讲 and the related campaign) while other define concrete policies and policy practices (e.g., being

internally strict and outwardly relaxed 内紧外松 – a policy concerning CCP’s approach towards the general public). While some of these nuances are not reflected in the proposed taxonomy, the usefulness of the taxonomy should be vindicated by its relatively general applicability as far as slogans and their position in the political environment are concerned. Second, it would be more precise to work with these axes as continuums. However, developing this perspective is a goal for further research as it exceeds the limited space of this paper.

Leadership or grand slogans can be found in the quadrant A of the taxonomy. They typically encompass a broad range of policies and bear a broad message that is supposed to influence the overall (national as well as local) political environment. They are connected with the top political leadership that initiates or adopts these slogans. Other types of slogans are less likely to exhibit the same complex set of functions in the general political environment (the national level of the political system) due to their limited thematic scope and political outreach. Hence, the complexness of leadership slogans increases their likelihood to be utilized in multiple ways. This also provides a reason why it may be particularly important to focus on leadership slogans although it should be noted that other types of slogans may embrace other, more specific, rationales and functions. As shown by other authors, these grand slogans are also likely to be interconnected with discourses that are fundamental for defining Chinese politics [9, 13, 14, 21]. Besides leadership slogans proper (discussed in more details below) that are supposed to mark a rule of specific leaders out, we can speak of other grand slogans that, for different reasons, did not become main ideological flagships but were similarly comprehensive (e.g. a central slogan and policy in the mid-1990s – ‘grasp the opportunity, deepen reform, expand openness, promote development, maintain stability’ 抓住机遇, 深化改革, 扩大开放, 促进发展, 保持稳定 or four comprehensives 四个全面战略布局 initially declared by Deng Xiaoping and reinstated by Xi Jinping).

Slogans belonging to quadrant B are supposed to address a wide range of actors and subjects but are limited in their thematic scope. To give an example, ‘seize with both hands, both hands must be strong’ (两手抓两手都要硬) informs a broad range of actors that CCP bases its legitimacy on economic performance as well as ideological aspects (cf. [5]). Similarly, Deng’s well-known ‘getting rich is glorious’ (致富光荣) phrase promoted a new economic mentality in the entire nation. Slogans that are thematically broad but limited in their political outreach (quadrant C) may be found at the level of local politics. For example, the ‘better city, better life’ slogan was declared in relation to the Shanghai Expo and aspired to provide a vision for life in the modern city but lacked a real outreach to national politics (cf. [86]). Particular slogans whose thematic scope is narrow and political outreach is limited (quadrant D) are numerous. ‘top-level design’

**Table 1** Taxonomy of slogans

|                    |         | Thematic scope |        |
|--------------------|---------|----------------|--------|
|                    |         | Broad          | Narrow |
| Political outreach | General | A              | B      |
|                    | Limited | C              | D      |

(顶层设计)<sup>2</sup> and ‘comprehensive diplomacy’ (全民外交) are recent examples which address a specific topic as regards CCP’s organization and China’s foreign policy respectively (cf. [95]).

### The Emergence of Leadership Slogans in the Post-Dengian Period

Slogans have never disappeared from Chinese politics [67]. Various specific slogans have been used since Mao and Deng to Xi. However, since Deng’s retreat from (day-to-day) politics at the beginning of the 1990s, it took almost a decade until Jiang officially announced his Three Represents in February 2000 and, hence, delineated a new official grand slogan and vision. In this part, I discuss the context in which leadership slogans proper were (re-)asserted as well as suggest why it took a relatively long time. The reasons for that will be analysed at three levels – first, macro socio-political and cultural influences, second, leaders’ motivations, and third, interactions with institutions and development in China’s political environment. As will be shown, these reasons are closely related as they all correspond to a need to address changes in Chinese politics happening in the post-Dengian period.

First, the formulation of leadership slogans during Jiang’s, Hu’s and Xi’s rule follows the tradition of sloganeering deriving from Chinese and communist ideological and cultural sources (cf. [67, 94, 105]). As Jiang Zemin, his successors and other politicians emphasized, there was a pressing need to ‘keep up with the times’ (与时俱进) when it comes to ideological and strategic direction [22, 110, 118], which certainly intensified a quest for new ideas, ideally expressed in the form of intelligible phrases. Following the tradition of slogans and current needs to philosophically and practically adapt to the post-Cold War politics, leadership slogans interconnected theoretical contributions to the party-state socialist ideology and practical knowledge for political guidance.

Jiang’s speeches in which he introduced the Three Represents in 2000 and 2001 discussed Marxism as an open-ended (i.e. flexible) system, which provides an epistemological tool for orienting oneself in the world, and they also reassessed the theory of labour, (surplus) value and exploitation [52, 53]. This opened space for practical changes such as closer cooperation with merchants (capitalists) and allowed their incorporation into the party (cf. [84, 85]). Hu’s Scientific Development Concept and Harmonious Society extended Deng’s theory while they – at least rhetorically – aimed to mitigate the negative impacts of China’s rapid growth. Continuing with a flexible approach to socialism, Harmonious Society articulated specific values that go beyond the usual socialist cannon and which connected China’s modernization with the ancient Confucian culture but also promoted China’s benign rise in international affairs (through the slogans of Peaceful Rise/Development and Harmonious World). These views signified a theoretical shift from an emphasis on necessary conflict embedded in the traditional Marxist worldview to a possibility of cooperation [20, 34, 46]. While Xi connected his version of the China Dream with various aspects related to socialism ([114], pp.3–33) – these links were made even stronger after he had introduced the slogan of New Era at the beginning of his second term [115] –, he mainly presented the

<sup>2</sup> While top-level design should be mainly relevant for CCP members, not wider audience, I categorize its political outreach as limited.

China Dream as a national(ist) philosophy of national rejuvenation through which the Chinese people should overcome historical difficulties while linking it with a practical policy through two centennial goals: becoming a moderately well-off society by 2021 and becoming a fully developed nation by 2049 ([114], pp.37–70).

Second, all the leaders in the post-Dengian period aspired to delineate their impact and legacy, which arguably stimulated their effort to formulate what might be seen as a signature slogan. At the same time, they wanted to assert their authority in opposition to what many perceived as an erosion of (central) governing authority on the background of increasingly fragmented authoritarianism [66]. However, they faced two major obstacles. Firstly, rapidly changing international and domestic conditions required ideological creativity which has not been the main merit of post-Dengian technocrats in the CCP leadership. This issue, most apparent throughout the 1990s, is documented by manifestos (1995–1997) directed against Jiang’s (in)ability to define his own ideological line [33] and helps to explain why it took Jiang until 2000 to formulate his Three Represents. Additionally, despite being chosen as the main leaders, Jiang, Hu as well as Xi had to fight for consolidating their power especially but not only during the early stages of their leadership. Jiang remained in Deng’s shadow in the early 1990s as implied by Deng’s 1992 southern tour and his influence over selecting the key personnel (esp. the Central Military Commission). The cases of power struggles between Jiang and other politicians followed (esp. Yang brothers in 1992, Chen Xitong in 1995, Qiao Shi in 1997) ([106], pp.45–48), which happened before Jiang was able to formulate the Three Represents. During the early stages of his succession, Hu contended with Jiang to consolidate his position as China’s prime leader [60] and even after that, Hu was considered to be a relatively weak leader. Although Xi eventually emerged as the strongest leader since Deng Xiaoping if not Mao Zedong, he was initially seen as a compromise candidate for the leader and needed to consolidate his power position as well (cf. [4, 8]).

Thirdly, the way leadership slogans emerged in the post-Dengian period was also conditioned by broader characteristics of China’s political system, which underwent fundamental changes pre-designed by Deng but fully realized only after his retreat from politics during the 1990s. A shift towards collective leadership and consensual decision-making meant that leaders needed to find support for their slogans; especially during Hu’s rule, leadership slogans were portrayed as a collective product and not exclusively attributed to the top leader [20, 76, 101, 102]. These trends were accompanied by an increasing formalization of Chinese politics. Jiang’s technocratism and the initial power-consolidation struggle combined with, at that time not-inevitable, focus on consensus-building, consolidating formal institutions and procedural legitimacy [28, 60], which all conduce to why he was not quicker in putting forward the Three Represents.

### **Position and Functions of Leadership Slogans in China’s Political System**

Throughout this part, I primarily focus on the leadership slogans proper by which I mean flagship slogans of each respective leader or leadership generation (cf. above). I briefly discuss other grand slogans at the end of this part. Leadership slogans are mainly formalized through the party constitution [17] which is a part of China’s broader constitutional framework [51] and which incorporates slogans contributing to socialist

thought.<sup>3</sup> All leadership slogans are also often mentioned in other numerous documents which, however, are even less important for their formalization as parts of China's political system. However, I argue that leadership slogans should not be taken as truly formalized. The party constitution and other documents prescribe neither official definition and functions of leadership slogans, nor any sanctions for their violation. Hence, their specific significance and roles evolve rather informally and organically. Moreover, when announced, leadership slogans often have to wait a few years before being incorporated into the party constitution while they already fulfil their functions. And, although the hierarchical party-state structure allows overseeing whether lower units embrace and work in accordance with slogans, this is a question of organizational superiority/inferiority which happens in relation to many other policies or proposals rather than of an officially predefined procedure.

It shall also be noted that leadership slogans are announced and established more quickly with each generation. Jiang came up with the Three Represents at the very end of his rule in 2000 (and more closely elaborated on the slogan in 2001 and 2002) [107]. Following the inception of Scientific Development Concept at the Third Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee in the fall of 2003 ([58], pp.72–73, [89]), it was mainly and publicly discussed during 2004 and 2005, as well as other related slogans were [34] (i.e. 2–3 years since Hu's promotion to the position of the Secretary General). The China Dream was announced almost immediately after Xi became the Secretary General in the fall of 2012 [12]. Although the trend of slogans' quicker formulation is limited when it comes to the number of occurrences, it arguably suggests its routinization in the sense that the Chinese leaders accept leadership slogans as a natural part of their rule.

Assessing the role of leadership slogans with the help of the previously introduced typology by Helmke and Levitsky, leadership slogans can be regarded as a complementary institution as they mostly – though not always – work in accordance with, supplement or cultivate other elements of Chinese official politics. To further illustrate this argument, I point to five main functions which they fulfil (see Table 2). Firstly, they are important as tools for propaganda at home [5] but partly in international affairs as well, since Hu and Xi intended to build a positive image of China through their slogans (Peaceful Rise/Development and the China Dream respectively) [1, 82]. This aims to uphold the legitimacy of China's political system as well as of respective leaders and leadership generations.

Leadership slogans, as indicated above, are theoretically elaborated and crucial for developing the party-state's semi-formalized ideological system and alongside that they relate to intra-party politics and institutions (party schools, party ideologues and intellectuals) (cf. [18, 97]). It is also a way how to define a personal imprint within internal ideological debates. As shown by manifestos pressuring Jiang Zemin to be clear about his ideological position [37], ideological advancements are expected by party members especially as China's political position has been rapidly evolving, while the population has only a marginal interest in these issues (cf. [43]).

<sup>3</sup> The party constitution refers to Mao's and Deng's thought in general terms, Jiang's and Hu's contribution is acknowledged through references to their slogans (Three Represents, Scientific Development) without mentioning their names and Xi Jinping's name is explicitly stated but connected with a particular perspective of 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.'

**Table 2** Leadership slogans and their functions in the Chinese political system

| Role                                            | Target audience                                                                                           | Related institutions (aspects) of political system                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Propaganda                                      | Primarily domestic population, partly international audience                                              | Legitimacy of political regime and CCP as such, collective leadership, personality of the leader        |
| Ideological innovations                         | CCP members including party intellectuals                                                                 | Semi-formalized ideological system of the party-state, collective leadership, personality of the leader |
| Political and strategic program (direction)     | Party and state structures, interest groups connected with the party-state (army, SOEs) as well as others | High-level decision-making bodies, five-year plans and 'grand strategy' (including key policy domains)  |
| Structuring and management of political conduct | Party and state structures at different levels (including provincial and local)                           | Party-state system (coordinating fragmented authoritarianism), other particular slogans                 |
| Continuity in leadership generations            | CCP members, domestic population                                                                          | Collective leadership, rule/system of one (hegemonic) party                                             |

Leadership slogans also serve the purpose of formulating the main policy visions when it comes to China's general strategic course (orientation). While there are some differences in their focus, all leadership slogans deal with the main aspects of socio-economic modernization, creating connections with Deng's policies and reformist style of governance. Besides other issues more or less covered by all leadership slogans (political reform, domestic challenges and others), Hu's slogans, as well as Xi's China Dream, were also important for guiding China's foreign policy. Addressing these aspects, leadership slogans complement and overlap with a formulation of strategic policies in five-year plans and contribute to a formulation of China's grand strategy. This forms a link to important players like army or SOEs, whose fortunes might be influenced by that, but especially to high-level party-state decision-making bodies which, then, are supposed to transfer leadership slogans into a framework that can be put into practice. Although the transformation from an idea to a policy is never perfect, the Three Represents did lead to a significant increase of party members or facilitated several capitalist reforms [59, 80], Scientific Development and Harmonious Society turned attention to sustainable development or to addressing some of the concerns in rural areas perceived as most pressing (e.g. phasing-out land tax, increasing land subsidies) [24, 117], and the China Dream was explicitly connected with the super-ambitious Belt and Road Initiative [13, 54]. Moreover, leadership slogans substituted the role of electoral programs (or campaigns) which would inform the population about the main intended policy steps and which do not exist in China in the same form as in Western democracies.

Not only do they co-specify overall policy direction, but leadership slogans also help to structure and guide politics and discussion within the party-state. They serve as frames for various party documents or as key concepts that help to narrate the purpose of Chinese politics. This role of leadership slogans is supported by party circulars or study sessions which often instruct cadres how to understand and abide by leadership

slogans ([34], p.6, [35], p.1). Moreover, they subsume or connect with other slogans, which further help them to fulfil the role of coordination and structuring politics. For example, to strengthen its impact on (foreign) policy, the China Dream was connected with slogans that aim to streamline or control political conduct (top-level design 顶层设计,<sup>4</sup> three stricts and three honests 三严三实) or help to narrate the China Dream's purpose and contribution (community of shared destiny 命运共同体, comprehensive diplomacy 全民外交) [13, 104].

From the perspective of communist elites, traumatic experience connected with political chaos following the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square incident provides a historical lesson that a fundamental danger for CCP lies in internal rifts, especially if they turn public. Leadership slogans serve to demonstrate and uphold a continuity of CCP leadership. They reinforce the system of one hegemonic party by showing an essential unity of CCP and demonstrating that each generation builds upon the previous one. Leadership slogans and their elaborations typically refer back to Deng and at least partly to Mao as well as they demonstrate a strong interconnection among post-Dengian generations of collective leadership [44, 45]. For example, the China Dream's general focus on development and modernization derives from Deng's ideas on development [114] and ritually praises previous leadership slogans, reinstating their importance [114, 115]. The same applies to previous leaders, including Hu Jintao, who repeatedly acknowledged the Three Represents although he was struggling with Jiang Zemin for influence at the same time ([47, 48], cf. [3]). Moreover, the China Dream also utilizes various more specific ideas or concepts introduced earlier. For example, 'moderately well-off society' (小康社会) as one of the ambitions of the China Dream was discussed even during Hu's rule as well as the theme of dreaming was used before Xi's succession in unofficial but also official discourse, e.g. during the Beijing Olympics [19, 71]. On the other hand, Xi's drive for personalization of power is partly connected even with his usage of the China Dream or New Era although the politics of slogans is not the main mean for his power accumulation [59, 112]. From this perspective, the role of these two slogans changes from complementary to accommodating (or perhaps competing) *vis-à-vis* the institution of collective leadership.

Besides the aforementioned leadership slogans, there are other grand slogans also fitting into quadrant A of the proposed taxonomy (e.g., 'grasp the opportunity, deepen reform, expand openness, promote development, maintain stability', four comprehensives or the confidence doctrine 自信论 re-articulated by Xi Jinping into a new form of 'four confidences' [32]). These slogans typically exhibit the same functions as the leadership slogans proper. However, since they are less visible and there is a less emphasis on these grand slogans than the leadership slogans proper, some of the discussed functions may be partly side-lined. For example, the instances of grand slogans I indicated in this paragraph may not be so important for propaganda or, perhaps, for structuration of political conduct although they have some significance in this regard as well (cf. [49, 100]). On the other hand, they clearly express the continuity in leadership generations as they fit into the general Dengian frame of reform and development, more or less contribute to ideological advancements and formulate China's political orientation and program.

<sup>4</sup> It was originally used even earlier, but Xi Jinping put more emphasis on it.

## Sanctions and Contestation

This part focuses on sanctions and contestations related to slogans. As leadership slogans are relatively broad and abstract phenomena, sanctions and contestations take place at a relatively abstract level as well although they might have a concrete influence on specific people. To analyse that, I will distinguish between, first, preventive actions aimed against misuse of leadership slogans and actual sanctions and, second, actions happening before and after an official announcement of official slogans. Combining these two distinctions, four options of when and how sanctions and contestations appear are possible.

First, although such processes are relatively invisible, it can be expected that leaders seek a degree of support for their slogans even before they announce them. It may involve testing what is ideologically possible and preparing the ideological system for a change. We could see this in the case of the Three Represents, whose actual announcement was preceded by the Three Stresses mass campaign which highlighted some similar themes as the Three Represents did ([26, 29], p.36). Process of bargaining, more or less limited power struggles, building interest coalitions or utilization of nepotism also likely take place. Xi probably achieved a reasonable degree of support for his China Dream even before being elected as he signalled the theme of national revival (which is key for the China Dream) at the 18th National Congress of CCP during which his official election took place ([23, 79], pp.2–3).

Second, a relatively open contestation impacting a position of leadership slogans may take place before their official announcement as well. Perhaps the most significant example is related to Bo Xilai, who was seen as a major competitor to Xi Jinping. Besides the aspects of power struggle, the clash also involved a competition of different political, strategic and ideological conceptions. Bo Xilai had his own slogans (e.g., striking black and singing red, 打黑唱红) [7, 30], which he used for his relatively open populist campaigning – a problematic moment in itself as open political campaigning is not expected by the norms of the current Chinese political system – and which endangered Xi's visions, influence and by extension his own prospective slogans [75, 112].

Third, after an official announcement, leaders often make sure that their slogans are followed and well understood. Besides using the party circulars (e.g. [89]) or influencing ideological studying at different levels of the party or party schools (e.g. [65]), they sometimes launch (rectification) campaigns aimed at party members. The Three Represents slogan was originally prefigured by the Three Stresses campaign followed by a campaign with the purpose to 'maintain the advanced nature of Chinese Communist Party members.' As the latter started in January 2005, i.e. after the end of Jiang's rule – although original intentions to launch this campaign may date back to 2000 or 2001 – the character of the campaign was partly influenced by Hu Jintao's ideas [36]. During Hu's rule, another campaign was organized in 2007 and 2008; however, this time to promote Scientific Development Concept [76, 77]. After his succession, Xi launched two interrelated campaigns ('mass line education and implementation campaign' and an anti-corruption one), which, among other things, promoted his China Dream [78] with a similar purpose like those previous ones, i.e. to rectify ideological direction of party members.

Fourth, there were also cases of direct sanctions against disagreements or misuse of leadership slogans after they had been announced. Jiang Zemin focused on stopping leftist dissent<sup>5</sup> against his Three Represents around 2001, which appeared in some party journals ([92, 99], p.1181). The formulation of Scientific Development Concept and Peaceful Rise/Development provoked tensions in high political circles, too. It was not easy for Hu Jintao to defend his vision of these concepts. At the same time, it is difficult to say whether and to what extent opponents were sanctioned ([103], pp.5–6). Following the promotion of the official version of the China Dream, several debates defining diverse versions of particular China Dreams, including those associating the China Dream with constitutional governance, appeared [57, 90]. Subsequently, China's leadership strived to limit these public debates (cf. [12], pp.1–16). Xi made it publicly clear that the China Dream is primarily collective and national rather than individual and the most problematic newspaper articles were rewritten while new publications following the official line were encouraged and supported by the regime [10, 38].

## Conclusion

Slogans have been an important symbolic component of Chinese politics for a long time. In the paper, I attempted to demonstrate their macro-structural significance in the context of the post-Dengian political system. Proposing a new taxonomy of slogans that differentiates slogans' thematic scope (a range of topics they cover) and political scope (a range of actors and audiences they are relevant for) allowed me to better demarcate my research focused. I concentrated on those slogans that are the most comprehensive ones and that I labelled as leadership (grand) slogans, which makes them likely to accumulate different kinds of political functions on the overall (national) level of the political system. I argued that leadership slogans need to be understood as integral and important parts of Chinese politics. Leadership slogans can be characterized as semi-formalized institutions. While official documents mention and work with leadership or some other slogans, there are also a few important reasons that point to a much less formalized character of them. There is no formal requirement to formulate them and their *raison d'être* is not officially sanctioned. Slogans as a specific political category are not formally defined, and (semi-)formalization of specific slogans may be partly different. Moreover, the formalization is relatively general and unspecific, and roles (functions) of slogans are demarcated rather informally and organically. Related to that, sanctions for their violation are not formalized or are formalized very loosely and *ex post*. Moreover, the slogans' content is typically very abstract and vague.

I also argued and shown that leadership slogans mainly play a complementing role *vis-à-vis* various institutions or elements of the Chinese political environment with which they interact. In other words, they tend to underpin the main rationales and principles of the post-Dengian political system as such, and the presented analysis also uncovered a high level of their institutional enmeshment that stems from linkages to various other constitutive institutions and principles of the post-Dengian politics (from supporting the party-state's coordination under the condition of fragmented

<sup>5</sup> Stopping leftist dissent is a theme which Jiang partly adopted and re-used following previous top-political struggles.

authoritarianism to working with and being accommodated to the principle of collective leadership). In this way, slogans replicate a centuries-long Chinese tradition of officially orchestrated language to support a ruling regime and its operating mechanisms (cf. [15, 91, 96, 98]). The main specific functions which slogans fulfil are the following ones: 1) contributing to propaganda, 2) enhancing ideological innovations, 3) formulating policy and strategic program (direction), 4) structuring politics and political debates, and 5) expressing continuity in Chinese communist politics (among different leadership generations) and hence upholding a sense of unity in the Communist Party of China (CCP). In these functions, slogans are supported by sanctioning which has a form of precluding violation of slogans (e.g. by party circulars or organizing study sessions which make sure that cadres know how to understand and abide by leadership slogans) and actual sanctions (most visibly, mass rectification campaigns or sanctioning a dissenting discourse).

**Acknowledgement** I acknowledge support of the Metropolitan University Prague research project no. 68–04 ‘Centre for Security Studies’, which was conducted in 2019 under a grant from the Institutional Fund for the Long-Term Strategic Development of Research Organisations.

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# Normative Overlaps between China and the Liberal International Society: China's Developmentalist Human Rights

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## Abstract

When different entities (actors) accept a certain norm or a particular agreement about normative principles, they are likely to have an overlapping but not necessarily fully shared understanding of the given norm. This article theorises and assesses the strength of such normative overlaps in international politics. It conceptualises normative overlaps as normative congruences across and within political orders. It follows a norm's connection to constitutional layers of political orders (congruences within orders) and the way these constitutional layers of political orders, among which the norm is shared, overlap (congruences across orders). To do so, it builds upon and interconnects the literature on norms, especially norm diffusion, and the English School and constructivist literature on the composition of international order. The theoretical framework is utilised to analyse how China fits into the liberal international society, especially when it comes to human rights (HR) and humanitarian protection. The effect of the normative overlaps in this realm is China's active engagement with the liberal HR regime, however, without deeper convergence or socialisation. The limits of convergence are underpinned by significant differences between the Chinese developmentalist and liberal conceptions of the moral purpose of politics.

## Introduction

In this paper, I examine a pressing and persisting question of how entities with more or less diverging normative backgrounds coexist and mitigate their differences. In other words, how is it possible to find normative congruence in international society when its members' normative stances vary and their visions of “moral purposes”,<sup>1</sup> “just worlds”,<sup>2</sup> or “standards of civilization”<sup>3</sup> diverge? To address these issues, I theorise and assess normative overlaps and their strength. I use my theoretical framework to analyse how China fits into the liberal international society, or more precisely the liberal core of the current global international society, when it comes to human rights (HR) and humanitarian protection.

<sup>1</sup> Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Chih-Yu Shih, *China's Just World: The Morality of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of Civilization in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

I will show that normative overlaps in this domain may function as bridges that enable China and the liberal international society to engage in a two-way normative exchange that goes beyond the one-way localisation of norms. The dynamic exchange is noticeable, for example, in the debates concerning the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). However, there simultaneously are critical obstacles to China's potential deep-seated socialisation to the liberal international society, which stem from the divergences in the fundamental constitutional structures of China and the liberal international society.<sup>4</sup>

The existing works on norms have mainly focused on two broad questions. First, they discussed through which processes norms are diffused and how they "travel" from the international level to the domestic environment or *vice versa*.<sup>5</sup> Second, the literature has tried to unpack the composition of norms or norms clusters<sup>6</sup> and, connected to that, understand how resilient, robust, or strong<sup>7</sup> norms can be and how they can "survive" contestation and preserve their relevance. My research interest in the character of normative overlaps is situated between these two perspectives and has typically been addressed only tangentially. When a norm is disseminated and when it proves to be resilient in the process of contestation, it is accepted by different actors. While different entities may often perceive the given norm differently as shown by the literature on (vertical) dissemination of norms, there is likely to be an overlap in how these entities understand the particular norm. I aim to analyse the nature of these overlaps and establish how strong individual overlaps are. When addressing these questions, I argue that it is necessary to examine a norm's connection to more fundamental layers of political orders between which a given norm is shared. In this respect, I am inspired by some of the latest works and their focus on how exactly norms are embedded in underlying ideational structures.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, I theorise norm overlaps as part of normative congruences across as well as within political orders. I offer a three-layer conceptualisation of political orders that is applicable to international, sub-global, or national orders and that interconnects fundamental constitutional structures, principled ideas, and norms. My investigation of normative overlaps starts with the focus on particular norms or specific normative arrangements (agreements) that are (partly or fully) shared between different political orders; that is, at the most specific level where overlaps are identifiable. However, I conceptualise the strength of normative overlaps as hinging upon how a given norm is linked to sedimented

<sup>4</sup> See Feng Zhang and Barry Buzan, "The Relevance of Deep Pluralism for China's Foreign Policy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2022), pp. 246–71.

<sup>5</sup> Amitav Acharya, "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism," *International Organization*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2004), pp. 239–75; Amitav Acharya, "Norm Subsidiarity and Regional Orders: Sovereignty, Regionalism, and Rule-Making in the Third World," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (2011), pp. 95–123; Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (1998), pp. 887–917; Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink, "The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices: Introduction," in Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1–38.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey S. Lantis and Carmen Wunderlich, "Resiliency Dynamics of Norm Clusters: Norm Contestation and International Cooperation," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2018), pp. 570–93; Holger Niemann and Henrik Schillinger, "Contestation 'All the Way Down'? The Grammar of Contestation in Norm Research," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2017), pp. 29–49; Carla Winston, "Norm Structure, Diffusion, and Evolution: A Conceptual Approach," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2018), pp. 638–61.

<sup>7</sup> Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch and Jennifer M. Dixon, "Conceptualizing and Assessing Norm Strength in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2021), pp. 521–47; Nicole Deitelhoff and Lisbeth Zimmermann, "Norms under Challenge: Unpacking the Dynamics of Norm Robustness," *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2019), pp. 2–17; "Things We Lost in the Fire: How Different Types of Contestation Affect the Robustness of International Norms," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2020), pp. 51–76; Lantis and Wunderlich, "Resiliency Dynamics of Norm Clusters".

<sup>8</sup> Tobias Berger, "Human Rights beyond the Liberal Script: A Morphological Approach," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (2023), p. sqad042.

and fundamental layers of the political orders among which it is shared (i.e. to what extent the norm is compatible with and supported by more fundamental layers of the individual political orders) and overlaps between the concerned orders' fundamental layers (i.e. synergies of these orders at the fundamental institutional-normative levels). To develop my perspective, I build upon and interconnect the literature on norms with the English School and constructivist literature on the composition of international order (international society).<sup>9</sup>

My theoretical contribution is fourfold. First, while research on norms has not completely ignored the role of structural elements,<sup>10</sup> it typically treats structures as simply observable or underexposes how norms are interconnected with more fundamental, general, and sedimented layers of political order. My theoretical framework works towards systematically interconnecting norms and these fundamental layers. As such, it may have implications for different debates on norms. For example, on the basis of my three-layer conceptualisation of political orders, I challenge Antje Wiener's prominent argument that normative contestation is a productive process, "generates legitimacy",<sup>11</sup> and can eventually overcome normative gaps between different actors.<sup>12</sup> I argue that Wiener underestimates the possibility of deeply embedded differences at the level of fundamental constitutional structures. Even if actors exchange mutually acceptable and meaningful arguments, it may be next to impossible to overcome the deeper differences. This situation is illustrated with the help of analysing China's relationship with the liberal international society as far as HR and the R2P doctrine are concerned. More specifically, I point to diverging moral purposes of politics that stand behind China's conception of HR, on the one hand, and the liberal script of HR, on the other.

Second, I argue that the literature investigating vertical norm diffusion (norm localisation and subsidiarity) can benefit from recognising the complexity of political orders.<sup>13</sup> Then, it can start to discern not only whether and how a norm travels from one (e.g. global) political order to another (e.g. national order) but also how exactly the norm is incorporated into institutional structures of these orders. The theoretical framework in this paper introduces how to conceptualise China's—and potentially any other country's—domestic political order by differentiating its key normative-institutional layers. As such, the paper presents a new and systematic way of accounting for the domestic normative-organisational structure of Chinese politics. Moreover, I also highlight the importance of developmentalism as a specific political orientation in Chinese politics. Developmentalism has been fundamental for modern Chinese politics, which is acknowledged by several existing works. However, paradoxically, it has hardly been conceptualised and analysed explicitly.<sup>14</sup> My paper makes a step in this direction.

<sup>9</sup> In this paper, I use the notions of international society and international order interchangeably to a large extent.

<sup>10</sup> Acharya, "Norm Subsidiarity and Regional Orders"; Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, "Norms under Challenge"; Lantis and Wunderlich, "Resiliency Dynamics of Norm Clusters"; Antje Wiener, *A Theory of Contestation* (Berlin Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2014); Antje Wiener, *Contestation and Constitution of Norms in Global International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Wiener, *A Theory of Contestation*, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid; Wiener, *Contestation and Constitution of Norms in Global International Relations*.

<sup>13</sup> Acharya, "How Ideas Spread"; Amitav Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter?: Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Acharya, "Norm Subsidiarity and Regional Orders"; Alexandra Gheciu, "Commodifying Security in the Balkans: Between Liberal Norms and Illiberal Practices," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2015), pp. 288–310; Chloë M. Gilgan, "Exploring the Limits of Localisation through the UK's Contestation of R2P's Peaceful Measures in Syria," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (2023), pp. 551–77.

<sup>14</sup> For example, see Ronald C. Keith, *China From the Inside Out: Fitting the People's Republic into the World* (London, New York: Pluto Press, 2009); Hyeyoon Park, "Global Norm-Maker as China's New Brand? An Analysis of the Responsible Cobalt Initiative," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2023), pp. 129–56; Yongjin

Third, my theorisation and analysis contribute to the study of contextual and culture-specific interpretations of institutions and norms<sup>15</sup> or their polysemy.<sup>16</sup> Actors may use the same terms, such as “sovereignty” or “human rights”, but their interpretations of them are different; hence, these terms are polysemic. I account for that by analysing which (possibly diverging) principled ideas are connected with a norm shared across different political orders and how these principled ideas can link to diverging fundamental constitutional structures of different political orders. Fourth and most broadly, my framework also contributes to the comparative investigation of international orders, which is a relatively neglected subfield of International Relations (IR),<sup>17</sup> most notably developed by scholars tied with the English School of IR.<sup>18</sup> By interconnecting this research agenda with a more widespread discussion on norms, this paper shows that comparing (international) political orders can be done not only for the sake of a big-picture analysis but may have very specific implications, in this case for normative contestation and norm strength.<sup>19</sup>

The effect of HR-related overlaps between China and the liberal international society is China’s active engagement with the HR regime, including, for example, its acceptance of and constructive contribution to R2P, however, without deeper convergence with and socialisation to<sup>20</sup> the liberal script of HR adopted by the liberal international society. This is a result of an overlap of the principled ideas of Chinese developmentalist and liberal HR. The overlap between these principled ideas is noticeable and relatively sound but only in a narrow intersection. These principled ideas are strongly interlinked with foundational constitutional structures of the respective orders that diverge quite significantly, which implies that normative gaps between China and the liberal international society can be bridged but not filled or closed.

Being a communist, nationalist, and non-Western country with a unique civilisational tradition that does not follow the model of Western liberal democracy, China is a least-likely case to exhibit genuine concurrence with liberal principles, especially in the realm of HR. Hence, this case is chosen to see if any normative convergence can be detected in mutual adjustments between the two entities. However, it needs to be noted that this paper does not investigate the state of HR in China as such. It focuses on the meaning and strength of the concerned normative overlaps. Moreover, in this paper, I am not interested in determining whether China’s acceptance of norms or specific normative agreements was a decision based on tactical concerns or genuine aspirations to improve human conditions. I simply try to see to which normative visions China officially subscribes and how these normative visions are embedded in international interactions.

Zhang, *China in International Society Since 1949: Alienation and Beyond* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); Yongnian Zheng, *Globalization and State Transformation in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, “Embeddedness and Informal Norms: Institutionalisms and Anthropology,” *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2013), pp. 280–99.

<sup>16</sup> Filippo Costa Buranelli, “‘Do You Know What I Mean?’ ‘Not Exactly’: English School, Global International Society and the Polysemy of Institutions,” *Global Discourse*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2015), pp. 499–514.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on that, see Erik Ringmar, “Performing International Systems: Two East-Asian Alternatives to the Westphalian Order,” *International Organization*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (2012), pp. 1–25.

<sup>18</sup> For example, see Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds., *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); see also Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*; Ringmar, “Performing International Systems”.

<sup>19</sup> For a similar perspective, see Thomas Linsenmaier, “The Interplay between Regional International Societies,” *Global Discourse*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2015), pp. 452–66.

<sup>20</sup> For example, see Alastair Iain Johnston, “China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing’s International Relations,” *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2019), pp. 9–60; Yongjin Zhang and Barry Buzan, “China and the Global Reach of Human Rights,” *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 241 (2020), pp. 169–90; see also Enze Han and Daniel Marwecki, “Racialised International Order? Traces of ‘Yellow Peril’ Trope in Germany’s Public Discourse toward China,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2023), pp. 391–409.

However, the paper's focus on normative views and their institutionalisation can help account for HR infringements in China. I show that ideas about HR are embedded in China's fundamental constitutional structure composed of "rule by law" as a conception of procedural justice and ultimately positioned within the framework of patrimonial/party-state sovereignty, which prioritises state (regime) security, stability, and development. Hence, in this framework, violating HR may be framed as legitimate if it contributes to more fundamental goals, such as party-state stability. One final clarification is in order. Throughout this paper, I focus on the dominant perspective of those who are in power, precisely because they are in power. When I talk about "China" or "Beijing", I use it as a shorthand for the Chinese party-state regime, its state structures, its official views, and the regime's leading representatives. Similarly, when discussing the liberal international society, I do not cover all the possible liberal arguments, but its normative core.

This article proceeds as follows. The first and second parts introduce the paper's theoretical framework. The first one theorises normative overlaps while the second one conceptualises my understanding of political orders and their layers. The third and fourth parts outline key tenets of China's and the liberal international society's political order, respectively. They also introduce the principled ideas of developmentalist and liberal HR. As such, they set a stage for the fifth part that analyses normative overlaps and their connections to the fundamental layers of the respective political orders.

## Theorising and Assessing Normative Overlaps

I define normative overlaps as partial or full agreements on particular norms or specific normative arrangements pertaining to particular norms that appear between two, or possibly more, political orders. To understand their strength and their character, I theorise them as embedded in relationships between particular norms, principled ideas behind these norms, and fundamental constitutional structures of political orders. Following and distinguishing how shared norms are linked to principled ideas and fundamental constitutional structures is important for assessing the strength of normative overlaps. Moreover, it helps acknowledge differences or similarities between concerned political orders. By doing so, I aim to discern to which extent a particular normative overlap signifies haphazard, bounded, or wider and more deep-seated normative consensus between different political orders.

My approach builds on constructivism, the English School, the literature on norms, and, to a lesser extent, new institutionalism. According to many works within these research traditions, (international) political order can be understood as structured into layers that represent different degrees of sedimentation and generality of institutional and normative elements.<sup>21</sup> I talk about fundamental constitutional structures as the most sedimented and general layer defining the main contours of a given political order, principled ideas as the middle constitutional layer, and norms or normative agreement (arrangements) as the most specific layer.

To assess the strength of normative overlaps, I analyse "within" and "across" normative congruence. I wish to talk about links that represent vertical congruence between different layers (fundamental constitutional structure, principled ideas, and norms) within the same political order and overlaps as congruence going across different political orders as far as one particular layer is concerned (e.g. overlaps between principled ideas of political order A and principled ideas of political order B). While, for example, holistic constructivism would

<sup>21</sup> For example, see Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977); James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (1984), pp. 734–49; Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*; Laust Schouenborg, "A New Institutionalism? The English School as International Sociological Theory," *International Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2011), pp. 26–44.

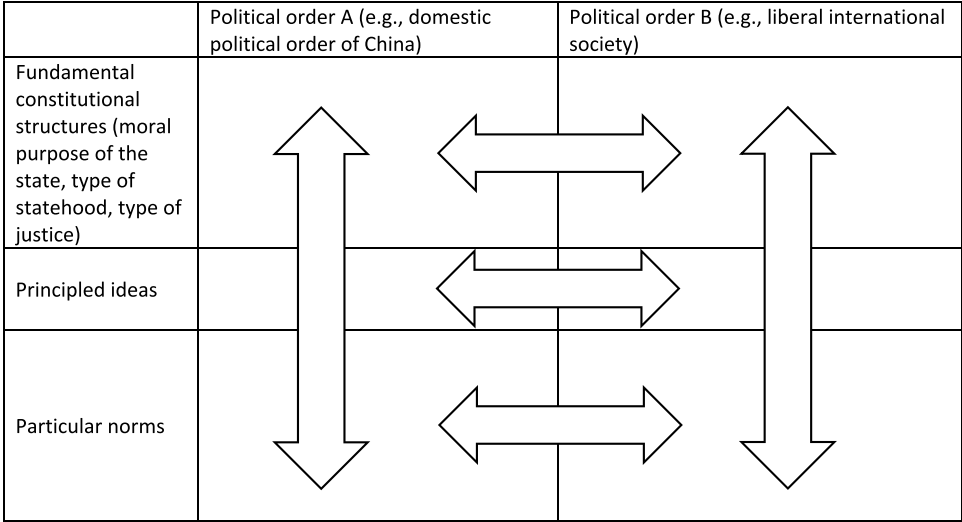
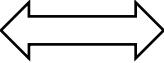


Fig. 1. Theoretical Framework of Normative Overlaps

Notes:

**Overlaps**—convergence (synergies) between the same layers of different political/normative orders.

**Links**—convergence (interconnectedness) between different layers of one political/normative order. Both links and overlaps define the character and strength of normative congruences. They are operationalised through: (1) discursive (ideational) concordance and (2) institutionalisation (institutional concordance and sedimentation).

presuppose top-down ordering when fundamental structures determine the character of other layers of the given political order,<sup>22</sup> the concept of decoupling emphasised by other works<sup>23</sup> leads me to argue that individual layers may be interconnected to a different extent and in different ways. The overall theoretical framework is summarised in Figure 1.

My decision to incorporate principled ideas significantly affects the character of my theoretical framework and, hence, should be explained. It is inspired by similar approaches claiming that there are broader ideas behind particular norms and that these ideas influence the role of norms in political orders. For example, Acharya famously pointed to cognitive priors (cultural-ideational perceptions) as the factor behind how a norm is localised in different orders;<sup>24</sup> Iver Neumann focused on how dominant historical memories influence the process of entering an international society;<sup>25</sup> and others developed similar perspectives.<sup>26</sup> I have two specific motivations to use the concept of principled ideas.

<sup>22</sup> See especially Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*.

<sup>23</sup> For example, see John W. Meyer, “World Society, Institutional Theories, and the Actor,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2010), pp. 1–20.

<sup>24</sup> Acharya, “How Ideas Spread”.

<sup>25</sup> Iver B. Neumann, “Entry into International Society Reconceptualised: The Case of Russia,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2011), pp. 463–84.

<sup>26</sup> Ben-Josef Hirsch and Dixon, “Conceptualizing and Assessing Norm Strength in International Relations”; Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan’s Encounter with European International Society* (London, New York: Routledge, 2009).

First, with their help, it is easier to express the complexness of political order and links within it. However, unlike the concept of cognitive priors, principled ideas do not embody a sweeping range of ideational characteristics while they, as a conceptual tool, are relatively universally applicable. As such, they remain tied to specific issues and can complement fundamental constitutional structures that are rather complex political and normative configurations. Simultaneously, they represent rationalisations and ideational elaborations that may justify particular norms. Thus, principled ideas are intermediaries in the institutional-normative environment of political orders. Moreover, congruence (or the lack of it) within political orders can be more easily recognisable if we follow how norms link to principled ideas and subsequently how principled ideas link to fundamental constitutional structures. With the help of principled ideas, we can also take into account polysemy of norms or institutions,<sup>27</sup> in other words, situations in which we use one notion (e.g. “sovereignty”), but other actors may understand it differently because they associate different ideas with it.

Second, the incorporation of norms and principled ideas helps detect and acknowledge a broader range of changes and dynamics in political orders. Revolutions (large-scale changes) in which hegemonic conceptions of fundamental constitutional structures get altered represent one possible pathway of political orders’ change but not necessarily a frequent one. The emergence of new principled ideas or changes in the existing principled ideas are more common and may lead to more subtle shifts in political orders. As principled ideas mediate between very general features (fundamental constitutional structures) and particular norms, they are likely to embody and mirror potential changes or tensions in a given political order’s structure. These ideas may be adjusted to sustain coherence, find new normative consensus, or re-interpret existing norms.

Normative congruence shall be assessed in relation to the three-layer structure of political orders. As indicated above, there might be weak links between a particular norm, a principled idea, and a fundamental constitutional structure that may lead to inconsistencies or ruptures in the given political order. The more significant and frequent such inconsistencies are, the more unstable a given political order is. In other words, the three layers do not have to be neatly synchronised. Situations of this kind create impetuses for changes in the given order. While fundamental constitutional structures are the most sedimented layer and hence changes at the other levels are more likely, accumulated inconsistencies may lead to adjustments of fundamental constitutional structures as well.

The strength of normative overlaps depends on a degree of overlap as regards a concerned norm but also on how a given norm that is being shared is linked to other layers within given orders and whether and to what extent these layers are overlapping (congruent) as well. A simplified (ideal-typical) summary of different possibilities is provided in [Figure 2](#). For example, if two political orders share norms but also have significant overlaps when it comes to other constitutional layers, they are highly synergic, and the strength of these overlaps is high. However, if there are only minor overlaps across the other layers, shared norms (normative overlaps at the level of norms) start to play the role of normative bridges or joints and may enable normative integration to take place alongside them. The extent of normative integration in such a case depends on how they are linked to fundamental layers within given orders and how fundamental layers of these orders overlap. In this way, this perspective helps understand and analyse integration (socialisation, entry) into international society and co-existence of different orders.

<sup>27</sup> Costa Buranelli, “‘Do You Know What I Mean?’ ‘Not Exactly’”.

|                                              | Concerned norm – not linked to fundamental layers of order                                                                                                                                                                            | Concerned norm – clearly linked to fundamental layers of order but no or limited overlaps of more fundamental layers across orders                                                                                                                                                                     | Concerned norm – clearly linked to more fundamental layers of order and significant overlaps of fundamental layers across orders     |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Degree of a norm’s overlap – norm not shared | No intersection between orders. Moreover, if no overlaps across more fundamental layers, then complete divergence of orders.                                                                                                          | Divergence of political orders                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Potential to start sharing norm(s) or creating common norm(s)                                                                        |
| Degree of a norm’s overlap – norm shared     | Acceptance of the norm but very limited significance of normative overlap. The norm potentially not stable in a given political order. Very limited bridging of orders through the norm.<br><i>Strength of normative overlap: low</i> | Normative bridging between orders through the norm. The norm that has some importance for political order. But not complete normative convergence.<br><i>Strength of normative overlap: medium-low (if no overlaps across fundamental layers); medium (if some overlaps across fundamental layers)</i> | Synergic protection of the norm by both orders. No significant normative gaps present.<br><i>Strength of normative overlap: high</i> |

Fig. 2. Strength of Normative Overlaps

Conceptualising Political Orders and Their Constitutional Layers

I start from and develop Christian Reus-Smit’s elaboration of the composition of international order that is situated at the intersection of constructivism and the English School.<sup>28</sup> His account is particularly useful because it sees institutional and normative aspects of order as mutually interwoven. Moreover, besides investigating historical variations of international societies, Reus-Smit also analyses the current liberal international society. As such, his work can be used as a theoretical source but can also help delineate the liberal international society empirically in the next part of the paper. Moreover, unlike the English School framework of primary and secondary institutions of international societies by which he is partly inspired, Reus-Smit’s conceptualisation of key institutional layers may be applicable to domestic political orders as well. I build on this presumption, which allows me to investigate commonalities and interactions between domestic and international orders.

Reus-Smit introduces a tripartite composition of fundamental constitutional structures of political orders consisting of hegemonic meta-values about the moral purpose of politics and the state, the organising principle of sovereignty (a conception of rightful statehood), and a systemic norm of justice (a conception of justice). The three components are supposed to allow one to unravel different dimensions of the dominant institutional-normative setting in a given order. Reus-Smit also interconnects this fundamental constitutional layer with other general institutions (such as multilateralism) and specific organisations (such

<sup>28</sup> Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*.

as the United Nations). However, I do not incorporate more specific institutional layers as described by Reus-Smit because they are tailored to analyse the character of specific international organisations, which is not my goal.

Hegemonic meta-values about the moral purpose of politics and the state are represented by dominant ideational and discursive conceptions of reasons or convictions that agents hold for organising their polities. They are expressed by belief(s) about what a given polity should achieve.<sup>29</sup> When discussing the organising principle of sovereignty, Reus-Smit's key motivation is to uncover the dominant conception of statehood in terms of ideology and institutional principles of a given polity. In the case of domestic (national) political orders, I claim that the institutional principles can be derived from investigating written and unwritten constitutional rules, their philosophical framing, and dominant ideologies that have defined a given polity. The notion of procedural justice comprises the correct procedures that should be adopted to ensure rightful political settings. To slightly reframe and broaden Reus-Smit's argument, I wish to focus on a dominant conception of justice when it comes to utilising the law for managing social relations within a given order.

Principled ideas are traditionally defined as "normative ideas that specify criteria for distinguishing right and wrong".<sup>30</sup> In their traditional delineation, principled ideas invoke rather straightforward normative assessments, such as "slavery is wrong", but it is also possible to understand them as more complex ideas that involve reasoning about proper social conduct and a preferred way of addressing social issues.<sup>31</sup> When it comes to norms, I build on their definition as "collective expectations for proper behavior of actors with a given identity".<sup>32</sup> However, in order to better distinguish principled ideas from norms, I focus on those norms (collective expectations) that are explicitly and intentionally articulated as a coherent prescript and are formalized, at least to a certain degree. In short, my intention is to distinguish the dominant institutional-normative structures, ideas that can be relatively complex as they include reasoning, justification, and contextualisation, and already articulated norms that are most specific out of the three components.

I operationalise congruence and the three layers with the help of ideational content as a primary analytical dimension and their institutionalisation as an auxiliary analytical dimension. I get inspired by conceptualisation of norm strength as the extent of coherence between norms and principled ideas behind them, which was developed by Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch and Jennifer Dixon,<sup>33</sup> and propose that normative overlaps and their strength should be assessed in a similar way. If we see norms as collective *expectations*, it is crucial to examine their meaning, the way actors construct meaning and the way meaning is institutionalised. Hence, I do not use behaviour as a measure of these layers. It is important to realise that no norm can ever evince full behavioural compliance. Moreover, as the existing literature shows, if there is contestation over norms, it is necessarily underpinned by contestation over their *meaning*.<sup>34</sup> Thus, I primarily see the three layers, and as a consequence, congruence between them, as descriptions of *meaning* (ideational content and its institutionalisation) rather than *behaviour*.

To methodologically develop my focus on ideas and meanings, I draw on the so-called serial contextualism. This approach was originally developed in the fields of political philosophy and history of ideas.<sup>35</sup> By paying attention to the main building blocks of concepts or

<sup>29</sup> Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*, pp. 31–2.

<sup>30</sup> Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, "Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework," in Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds., *Ideas & Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> See Ben-Josef Hirsch and Dixon, "Conceptualizing and Assessing Norm Strength in International Relations".

<sup>32</sup> Peter J. Katzenstein, "Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security," in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ben-Josef Hirsch and Dixon, "Conceptualizing and Assessing Norm Strength in International Relations".

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Also see Berger, "Human Rights beyond the Liberal Script"; Wiener, *A Theory of Contestation*.

<sup>35</sup> David Armitage, "What's the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée," *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2012), pp. 493–507.

ideas, serial contextualism analyses how meaning is sustained or changed over time or a set of cases. Unlike genealogy of ideas, it is interested in defining the main features of meaning but does not necessarily try to capture all the possible nuances. Practically speaking, it may be supported by thematic analysis of documents or statements (analysis of main themes and arguments) and their interpretation. For the purposes of this paper, I also pay attention to how ideas and meaning are institutionalised, regularised, or formalised. This focus is particularly important when I conceptualise and analyse fundamental constitutional structures. When doing so, I consider the dominant political ideas and their connection to formal and informal institutions in relation to the moral purpose of the state, conception of rightful statehood, and conception of justice. As regards examining normative congruence between different layers, I analyse concordance in their discursive presentation and concordance in how they are institutionalised (formalised or sedimented).

It also needs to be noted that when assessing the liberal international society, I largely build on the existing secondary literature, which is rather rich. This analytical bracketing of actual data collection and analysis allows me to focus more on China. While this step could be problematic, for example, when conducting discourse analysis, I believe it is permissible in the context of this paper and its reliance on serial contextualism. In relation to China's approach to HR in general and the examined cases of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and R2P, I analyse China's white papers on HR, China's national HR action plans, international fora on HR organised by China, and important statements of Chinese politicians and diplomats, including those at the United Nations (UN). I also draw on the existing literature on China's approach to HR. For textual (discourse and content) analysis in a strict sense, it would be necessary to carefully design the selection of the documents and make sure that none of the documents is missing. However, this is not that crucial in the case of serial contextualism. The combination of different types of documents helps me triangulate my findings and make sure that I cover all the central features and meanings connected to China's discourse without reading all the potentially relevant documents.

## Liberal International Society and the Idea of Liberal HR

According to the English School, a state exists in a particular international society if it shares its primary institutions like sovereignty, diplomacy, international law, and others with other states.<sup>36</sup> To recognise that international society has its own internal variations, I utilise the notion of the hegemonic core of international society outlined by post-colonial contributions to the English School.<sup>37</sup> The hegemonic core hinges upon a set of civilisational (hegemonic or quasi-hegemonic) values and institutions, in fact specific standards of civilisation.<sup>38</sup> In accordance with the English School,<sup>39</sup> constructivism,<sup>40</sup> liberal institutionalism,<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Bull, *The Anarchical Society*.

<sup>37</sup> Mohammed Ayoob, "From Regional System to Regional Society: Exploring Key Variables in the Construction of Regional Order," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (1999), pp. 247–60; Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Lauro Borges and Regina Lucena, "Polarity in the Context of U.S.-China Competition: Reassessing Analytical Criteria," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2023), pp. 4–32; Vinícius G. Rodrigues Vieira, Krishna Chaitanya Vadlamannati and Yuanxin Li, "Dispositional Balancing and Hegemonic Order: US Response to China's Financial Statecraft," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2023), pp. 1–30.

<sup>38</sup> Gong, *The Standard of Civilization in International Society*.

<sup>39</sup> Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society*; Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*.

<sup>41</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

and other critically oriented analyses of international order,<sup>42</sup> I understand the hegemonic core of the current international society to be centred around Western liberalism. In this part, I delineate the fundamental constitutional structure of the liberal hegemonic core of the current global international society (first analytical layer) and, then, the principled idea of HR in the liberal international society (second analytical layer).

For discussing the fundamental constitutional structure of the liberal international society, I follow Reus-Smit's work.<sup>43</sup> According to him, the moral purpose of the state and politics lies in augmenting the individual's potential and her/his own purposes as articulated in the American and French revolutions. This view is interconnected with the liberal understanding of subjects (citizens) and assessing such individuals as kernels of possibility. It is based on liberal ideas about political and economic individualism. Other components of the fundamental constitutional structure are derived from that. They include liberal sovereignty and procedural legislative justice defined by the principle of the rule of law.

Liberal sovereignty, or more precisely the liberal conception of the statehood, is conditioned by the recognition of people as *the* source of political power and legitimacy. The conception of liberal statehood cherishes the assumption that human beings are endowed with the faculty of reason and that *free* utilisation of reason contributes to the development of individuals as reservoirs of possibility but also of the state. As such, liberal states should be limited in their interference in people's lives and allow for free political participation. These views inform the liberal state's approach to legislative justice and the rule of law. They rest on two precepts: "first, that only those subject to the rules have the right to define them and, second, that the rules of society must apply equally to all citizens, in all like cases."<sup>44</sup> Moreover, these precepts have been underpinned by the conception of an independent judiciary branch of government that shall have the capability to restrict executive power.

The principled idea of liberal HR is closely linked with the fundamental constitutional structure of the liberal international society. Although liberal HR includes a wide range of specific positions and arguments, the core liberal HR has been well described in the existing literature.<sup>45</sup> The literature also identifies some relatively stable foundational arguments connected with liberal HR. The core argument rests on a universalist assumption that individuals are moral beings with certain capacities and qualities and should equally share some basic rights so that their dignity can be protected. These rights need to be safeguarded by political institutions, and they pertain to the entitlement that individuals should be allowed to engage in politics and governance.<sup>46</sup>

It is important to underline that the liberal idea of HR has a developmental element that create overlaps with the Chinese principled idea of developmentalist HR. The modern liberal view on the augmentation of human potentials has evolved into the focus on broadening

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Diez, "Progressive and Regressive Securitisation: Covid, Russian Aggression and the Ethics of Security," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2023), pp. 22–43; Beate Jahn, *Liberal Internationalism: Theory, History, Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Aleš Karmazin and Nik Hynek, "Russian, U.S. and Chinese Revisionism: Bridging Domestic and Great Power Politics," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 72, No. 6 (2020), pp. 955–75.

<sup>43</sup> Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>45</sup> Micheline R. Ishay, *The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010); Christian Reus-Smit, *Individual Rights and the Making of the International System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> Jack Donnelly, "The Relative Universality of Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2007), pp. 281–306; Sarka Matejkova, "Establishing the Norm of Humanitarian Intervention in International Relations," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2008), pp. 76–91; Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*; Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*.

actors' own purposes in the political community (as, e.g. Kant might put it) through cultivating favourable social conditions for doing so (as, e.g. John Stuart Mill might argue).<sup>47</sup> Derived from this understanding, conceptions of the welfare state or social and economic rights have developed.<sup>48</sup> Although these views lead to the support of human development at the individual level as well as the level of nations, the idea of liberal HR ultimately prefers individuals. It is because "individuals are morally and practically prior to the state; their rights constitute the baseline, the state is but a human artifact instituted to protect their liberties. In fulfilling this role, the state provides the institutional climate necessary for human flowering".<sup>49</sup>

## China's Political Order and the Idea of Developmentalist HR

In this section, I introduce the fundamental constitutional structure of the Chinese political order and the closely linked idea of developmentalist HR. I argue that since the late 1970s when the Dengian reforms were commenced, the hegemonic belief about the moral purpose of the state and politics has been connected with what can be called developmentalism. The Chinese conception of developmentalism embodies a drive for increasing capacities, adherence to socio-economic modernisation, and strengthening as solutions to political problems. It embeds the notion of techno-scientific progress.<sup>50</sup> While progressivism and socio-economic modernisation are values closely linked with Western liberalism as well, Chinese developmentalism differs from the liberal take in a few important respects that make the moral purposes of China and the liberal international society diverge and clash rather than overlap. Unlike the moral purpose of politics according to liberalism, Chinese developmentalism is based on collectivism, statism, and the preference for cultural particularism (seeing normative principles as embedded in and defined by specific context and culture), among others.

The Chinese conception of developmentalism derives from its encounter with the Western international society and its imperialist and colonial efforts in the 19th century. The key lesson for China was and continues to be that the international environment gives preference to the strongest or the fittest, which leads to the emphasis on development as the key moral purpose of politics.<sup>51</sup> However, it would be deeply mistaken to understand the Chinese view as purely materialist. Chinese developmentalism has been imbricated with profound identitarian adjustment, learning of a new standard of civilisation,<sup>52</sup> and cultural reorientation, which included the birth of new popular culture and modern Chinese literature.<sup>53</sup>

This reading of China's history had some significance during the times of Mao Zedong, but developmentalism came to prominence under the rule of Deng Xiaoping and the following leaders. Deng readily abandoned the notion of class struggle as the central organising principle of Chinese politics and replaced it with development. As Deng stated and continuously reaffirmed, "development is of overriding importance".<sup>54</sup> Alongside that, the perception of the international environment changed from understanding it as the clash between communism, revisionary communism, and capitalist imperialism to perceiving it as defined by different stages of development. In this sense, the world was divided into

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community: Ethical Foundations of the Post-Westphalian Era* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> G. John Ikenberry, "Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2009), pp. 71–87; Johnston, "China in a World of Orders".

<sup>49</sup> Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*, p. 128.

<sup>50</sup> Zheng, *Globalization and State Transformation in China*.

<sup>51</sup> Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire*.

<sup>52</sup> Dimitrios Stroiikos, "China, India, and the Social Construction of Technology in International Society: The English School Meets Science and Technology Studies," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (2020), pp. 713–31.

<sup>53</sup> Henrietta Harrison, *China: Inventing the Nation* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001).

<sup>54</sup> Keith, *China From the Inside Out*, p. 105.

developed, developing, and least developed (underdeveloped) countries.<sup>55</sup> As many authors underscore, development continues to be a very critical concern even in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Chinese politics in terms of how policies are framed, how the population is mobilised, and how the state's fortunes are defined.<sup>56</sup>

All the key and recent political slogans, which organise thought and action in China and can be understood as one of the critical political institutions of the Chinese political system, closely derive from Deng's reformist programme and his central discourse of "peace and development".<sup>57</sup> Jiang Zemin's slogan of three represents called for incorporating the most advanced cultural and economic (capitalist) forces into the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chinese politics, Hu Jintao's set of slogans (socialist and scientific development, peaceful development, and harmonious society/world) closely imitated Deng's ideas and Xi Jinping's China Dream focuses on national improvement and modernisation. Correspondingly, key political documents of the CCP continue to be organised around the themes related to these slogans and developmentalist considerations.<sup>58</sup>

Chinese developmentalism as the hegemonic conception of the moral purpose of politics finds expression in the dominant conceptions of sovereignty and justice. It corresponds with the long-term arch goal of consolidating the party-state regime under the control of the CCP. It is also intertwined with political collectivism and what is known as "patrimonial statehood"<sup>59</sup> organised around the CCP's leadership. Patrimonial/party-state sovereignty combines elements of the CCP's leadership, nationalist popular mobilisation, and selected incorporation of free-market mechanisms.<sup>60</sup> The leading role of the CCP and its domination over governmental and parliamentary structures is institutionalised in China's constitutional framework<sup>61</sup> and developed through a complex (post-)socialist network of formal and informal mechanisms. The party-state's stability is the ultimate value that is to be protected.<sup>62</sup>

The "rule-by-law" notion is often used to describe China's legal system.<sup>63</sup> While the Dengian reformist project required bolstering a legal procedural framework detached from revolutionary communism, the role of law did not become completely independent of political power due to the prevalence of patrimonial statehood. Hence, rather than speaking of the rule of law in the liberal-democratic sense, the law has been a tool for the party-state to increase the efficiency of governmental processes but also, ultimately, guarantee the party-state's leadership.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Zhang, *China in International Society Since 1949*, pp. 97–8.

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth C. Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Keith, *China From the Inside Out*; Zheng, *Globalization and State Transformation in China*.

<sup>57</sup> Aleš Karmazin, "Slogans as an Organizational Feature of Chinese Politics," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2020), pp. 411–29; Jianlin Song and James Paul Gee, "Slogans with Chinese Characteristics: The Political Functions of a Discourse Form," *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2020), pp. 201–17.

<sup>58</sup> Chang Hoon Cha, "China's Search for Ideological Values in World Politics: Chinese Adaptation to Liberal Order Drawn from Political Reports of the Chinese Communist Party Congress since 1977," *Pacific Focus*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2017), pp. 416–44.

<sup>59</sup> Pitman B. Potter, "Legal Reform in China: Institutions, Culture, and Selective Adaptation," *Law & Social Inquiry*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2004), pp. 465–95; Pitman B. Potter, "Selective Adaptation and Institutional Capacity: Perspectives on Human Rights in China," *International Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (2006), pp. 389–407.

<sup>60</sup> Keith, *China From the Inside Out*; Steve Tsang, "Consultative Leninism: China's New Political Framework," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 18, No. 62 (2009), pp. 865–80.

<sup>61</sup> Shigong Jiang, "Written and Unwritten Constitutions: A New Approach to the Study of Constitutional Government in China," *Modern China*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2010), pp. 12–46.

<sup>62</sup> Tsang, *Consultative Leninism*; Yongnian Zheng, *The Chinese Communist Party as Organizational Emperor: Culture, Reproduction, and Transformation* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>63</sup> Tom Ginsburg and Tamir Moustaafa, eds., *Rule by Law: The Politics of Courts in Authoritarian Regimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Potter, "Legal Reform in China"; Potter, "Selective Adaptation and Institutional Capacity"; Zheng, *The Chinese Communist Party as Organizational Emperor*.

<sup>64</sup> Ingrid Hooghe and Eduard B. Vermeer, eds., *China's Legal Reforms and Their Political Limits* (London: Routledge, 2001).

The fundamental constitutional structure of the Chinese political order is closely linked with the Chinese party-state's main principled idea concerning HR, which I wish to call developmentalist HR. Although some HR norms were recognised during Mao's rule, the notion of HR was either refused as bourgeois and excluded from political debate or subsumed under the topic of class struggle.<sup>65</sup> Hence, if there was any principled idea related to HR in the Chinese political order during the Maoist period, it was centred around revolutionary and class struggle themes. On the contrary, the emergence of the principled idea of developmentalist HR in (post-)Dengian China was tied to the introduction of HR as a legitimate political concern.<sup>66</sup>

China's constitution has explicitly recognised HR protection since 2004,<sup>67</sup> and a variety of Chinese documents have rationalised and elaborated on that. They express a strong preference for treating HR as collectivist, interconnected with the state and conditioned by specific developmental, cultural, and political conditions.<sup>68</sup> Alongside that, China's official discourse on its HR policy embeds HR in China's socialist political system and other social values. While it sometimes speaks of "socialist human rights with Chinese characteristics", the party-state does not portray socialism as the only possible ideological framework with whose help HR can be framed.<sup>69</sup>

The official documents imply that there is a hierarchy of rights. The most significant and central ones are connected to developmental and material conditions and, more broadly, sovereignty and non-interference, while other rights are seen dependent on those central ones.<sup>70</sup> The official documents state that "the Chinese government have remained committed to a development concept that puts people's rights to subsistence and to development first",<sup>71</sup> while it seems the main emphasis gradually shifted from subsistence to development over time.<sup>72</sup> They also make clear that "the development of the nation" is a significant factor tied to the development of HR.<sup>73</sup> However, rather than being framed as a precondition for China's modernisation, HR are portrayed as being determined by China's national developmental conditions or "boosted with development".<sup>74</sup> In a similar sense, the key values accentuated by the principled idea of developmentalist HR are social stability and collective responsibility (i.e. collective rights rather than individual rights).

<sup>65</sup> Robert Weatherley, "Human Rights in China: Between Marx and Confucius," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2000), pp. 101–25.

<sup>66</sup> Rosemary Foot, *China, the United Nations, and Human Protection: Beliefs, Power, Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 205; Katrin Kinzelbach, "Will China's Rise Lead to a New Normative Order? An Analysis of China's Statements on Human Rights at the United Nations (2000–2010)," *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2012), pp. 299–332; Yuchao Zhu, "China and International 'Human Rights Diplomacy,'" *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2011), pp. 217–45.

<sup>67</sup> Zhang and Buzan, "China and the Global Reach of Human Rights".

<sup>68</sup> *Development and Progress of Tibet* (Beijing: State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2013); *Progress in China's Human Rights in 2014* (Beijing: State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015); *China's Progress in Poverty Reduction and Human Rights* (Beijing: State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016); *Progress in Human Rights over the 40 Years of Reform and Opening Up in China* (Beijing: State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2018); *Moderate Prosperity in All Respects: Another Milestone Achieved in China's Human Rights* (Beijing: State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

<sup>69</sup> *Progress in Human Rights over the 40 Years of Reform and Opening Up in China*.

<sup>70</sup> For a document that summarises that succinctly, see "Full text of Beijing Declaration adopted by the First South-South Human Rights Forum," *China Daily*, 8 December 2017, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201712/08/WS5a2aa68a310eefc3e99ef85.html>.

<sup>71</sup> *China's Progress in Poverty Reduction and Human Rights*.

<sup>72</sup> See *Human Rights in China* (Beijing: State Council of the People's Republic of China, 1991); *China's Progress in Poverty Reduction and Human Rights*; *Progress in Human Rights over the 40 Years of Reform and Opening Up in China*.

<sup>73</sup> *Development of China's Public Health as an Essential Element of Human Rights* (Beijing: State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017).

<sup>74</sup> *Moderate Prosperity in All Respects: Another Milestone Achieved in China's Human Rights*; similarly *Progress in China's Human Rights in 2014*.

To generalise China's international discourse, "China stresses the right of subsistence and the right to development; it emphasises state sovereignty and rejects human rights interventionism; it values collective interest over individual rights; [...] and it claims economic and social rights are as [if not more] important as civil and political rights".<sup>75</sup> Likewise, China's other descriptions of its approach claim that "China develops human rights based on national conditions, with the right to subsistence and the right to development as the primary basic human rights".<sup>76</sup> Chinese representatives argue that while each country has the obligation to defend HR, "it [also has] the right to determine how it follow[s] its path of development, in accordance with its own specific conditions".<sup>77</sup> Similarly, they claim that we "must not neglect the fundamental concept of man's responsibilities towards society"<sup>78</sup> and, in fact, that sovereignty is a precondition for HR. Hence, "China's emphasis on economic, social and cultural rights is closely linked to the advocacy for the right to development".<sup>79</sup> In other words, China's approach to HR at the primary international platforms (especially, UN) has continued to be guided what Rosemary Foot called a three-pillar model of development, strong state, and social stability<sup>80</sup> that is backed up by the principled idea of developmentalist HR.

Hence, as a result of the discourse that delineates the idea of developmentalist HR, HR have become seen as a relevant political value. However, developmentalist HR have been conditioned by the overall state of development as well as responsibilities of individuals to the collective or, in other words, the primacy of patrimonial/party-state sovereignty and the rule-by-law system. Moreover, a discourse of "benign constitutional violations" was developed in China and connected with China's "rule-by-law" conception of justice. According to it, violating constitutional or legal provisions might be legitimate "if those acts promote the development of productive forces or were conducted to further basic interests of the State and the nation".<sup>81</sup> The CCP, in fact, officially expressed a very similar idea when it repeatedly claimed that "Party leadership and socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics were identical".<sup>82</sup>

The preceding discussion on China's developmentalist HR indicates some similarities with but also differences from the principled idea of liberal HR and the way liberal HR are embedded in fundamental layers of the liberal international society, especially the moral purposes of augmenting individuals' potential. While China sees development as a precondition for HR, Western liberal states tend to understand HR as one of the general conditions of development. Moreover, China's aforementioned position refutes the liberal-democratic emphasis on political and civil rights.<sup>83</sup> Although China has recognised the importance of the latter category, it argues that is secondary to developmental conditions. In this fashion, it stresses that colonialism, imperialism, or hegemonism belong among the crucial HR violations because they prevent nations from developing.<sup>84</sup> In short, liberal and developmentalist

<sup>75</sup> Zhu, "China and International 'Human Rights Diplomacy,'" pp. 220–1.

<sup>76</sup> "Full text of Beijing Declaration adopted by the First South-South Human Rights Forum," *China Daily*, 8 December 2017, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201712/08/WS5a2aaa68a310eefe3e99ef85.html>.

<sup>77</sup> Kinzelbach, "Will China's Rise Lead to a New Normative Order? An Analysis of China's Statements on Human Rights at the United Nations (2000–2010)," p. 309.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>80</sup> Foot, *China, the United Nations, and Human Protection*.

<sup>81</sup> Björn Ahl, "Exploring Ways of Implementing International Human Rights Treaties in China," *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2010), p. 382.

<sup>82</sup> For a closer analysis, see Randall Peerenboom, "Fly High the Banner of Socialist Rule of Law with Chinese Characteristics," *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2015), pp. 49–74.

<sup>83</sup> Potter, "Selective Adaptation and Institutional Capacity".

<sup>84</sup> Zhang and Buzan, "China and the Global Reach of Human Rights".

HR can relatively easily agree on the relevance of some particular rights (e.g. right to subsistence) or some normative viewpoints (e.g. subjugation of people is bad), but their principal perspectives differ.

HR Overlaps

Although HR are among the most contentious and dividing questions in the relationship between China and the liberal international society, there have been noticeable normative overlaps between the two entities (for a summary, see Figure 3). In this part, I analyse such overlaps. I specifically focus on what arguably were the most politically important overlaps

| Layers of political order                                   | Chinese political order                                                                                                      |                                                             | Overlaps     | Liberal international society                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Moral purpose of the state / politics                       | Chinese developmentalism (nation state-focused strengthening; modernisation as the purpose of the pragmatic socialist state) |                                                             | No overlaps* | Augmenting individual possibilities (individuals as reservoirs of possibility)                                                                                                                                 |
| Type of statehood                                           | Patrimonial/party-state sovereignty                                                                                          |                                                             |              | Liberal sovereignty                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Type of justice                                             | Rule by law (law as a tool for the party-state's goals)                                                                      |                                                             |              | Rule of law (independence of the judicial branch; individuals to be protected by procedural law)                                                                                                               |
| Links                                                       | Strong links (HR framed as collectivist and tied with developmental conditions; the party-state not to be limited by HR)     |                                                             |              | Strong links (HR help augment potentials of individuals; fit the framework of liberal statehood and rule of law)                                                                                               |
| Principled ideas                                            |                                                                                                                              |                                                             |              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Links                                                       | ICESCR and updated R2P relatively strongly linked to developmentalist HR                                                     | ICCPR and original R2P weakly linked to developmentalist HR |              | R2P (especially original but updated as well) strongly linked to liberal HR; ICCPR and ICESCR relatively well linked to liberal HR too despite some challenges of these links in liberal international society |
| Norms                                                       |                                                                                                                              |                                                             |              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| * No or limited overlaps, significant divergence            |                                                                                                                              |                                                             |              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| ** Relatively strong overlap but in a limited (narrow) area |                                                                                                                              |                                                             |              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

Fig. 3. Human Rights Overlaps between China and Liberal International Society

in the last two decades: first, the ICESCR and the ICCPR and particular rights they cover and, second, R2P.

I argue that the agreement on the shared norms is underpinned by the overlap at the level of the principled ideas of developmentalist and liberal HR. With the exception of the ICCPR, the other shared norms were relatively strongly linked to the respective HR principled ideas of China and the liberal international society. Although the ICCPR was tentatively recognised by China, its recognition created instability in its institutional-normative structures of its political order. While this normative dissonance created some potential for a change in the Chinese political order, the fundamental layers of the order, which are not fully compatible with the ICCPR, fully prevailed without any significant adaptation and the ICCPR was practically refuted by the Chinese regime. However, as indicated in the preceding parts, the overlap between the two concerned principled ideas is relatively strong but only in a very limited area. In this sense, China could accept the ICESCR (and tentatively also the ICCPR), and both China and the liberal international society were able to find a compromise concerning R2P. However, these two principled ideas are strongly linked to diverging fundamental constitutional structures of the two orders, which means that the normative outlook of both orders can hardly be reconciled or harmonised without more fundamental changes.

### ICCPR and ICESCR

The ICCPR and the ICESCR represent some of the most important agreements that advance and embody the global HR regime. While the ICCPR and the ICESCR are not norms in a strict sense because their main purpose is to define a relatively long catalogue of particular rights in the respective areas, they are relevant for my investigation of normative overlaps. They inform us about expectations for proper behaviour (upholding particular rights), specify what protected values are, indicate why they are important, and create an obligation to follow them. Hence, they have similar functions as international norms. By the late 2000s, China joined about 20 international HR conventions and, as such, took part in “mutual legitimisation” *vis-à-vis* the global international society.<sup>85</sup> China’s ratification of the ICESCR and tentative acceptance of the ICCPR contribute to these dynamics. However, it is critical to note that the ICCPR and the ICESCR are not products of the liberal hegemonic core of the current international society, but rather the post-WWII global international society as a whole. There are more than 170 parties to the ICCPR as well as the ICESCR. Both China and the liberal international society recognised the ICCPR and the ICESCR, at least to some basic extent. As such, the cases of the ICCPR and the ICESCR represent an opportunity to examine the character and strength of normative overlaps between China and the liberal international society, and these overlaps can help us understand how close or far China’s and the liberal international society’s positions are. To do that, I introduce the approaches of both entities to the ICCPR and the ICESCR and pay attention to similarities as well as differences in how they respond to the ICCPR and the ICESCR. To illustrate the approach of the liberal international society, I show the US and European positions on both covenants.

Although the ICCPR is not very explicit about its philosophical and ideological foundations, it is usually recognised that this covenant’s core largely reflects Western and liberal conceptions of the rule of law and “Enlightenment rights” as they originated in the West.<sup>86</sup> When the USA ratified the ICCPR, it did so with a number of reservations,

<sup>85</sup> Zhang, *China in International Society Since 1949*.

<sup>86</sup> Ishay, *The History of Human Rights*, pp. 5–9; Beth A. Simmons, *Mobilizing for Human Rights: International Law in Domestic Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 48, 162.

mainly concerning the application of the ICCPR in the US federal system.<sup>87</sup> However, the US approach to this covenant has been positive in principle, and US representatives tended to highlight the American contribution to the international development of the global HR regime, its position as a beacon of freedom and liberal principles, and the legacy of the American Bill of Rights in relation to the ICCPR.<sup>88</sup> Hence, while the wording of the ICCPR does not explicitly frame this covenant with the help of any political ideology, the USA and, also, (Western-)European states<sup>89</sup> in their interpretations of the covenants drew strong connections to liberalism, individualism, or laissez-faire, which shows that the ICCPR can be easily linked to the principled idea of liberal HR.

The case of the ICESCR is somewhat different, arguably because specific rights connected to social justice, workers' rights, and minimum material standards of living are socialist in their origin.<sup>90</sup> Although the USA signed the ICESCR, it has not ratified it. One of the themes that dominated the US domestic debates was connected with concerns of various legislators that the ICESCR would work against the American values of individual freedom and could pose a threat to rights, such as private property.<sup>91</sup> These concerns eventually contributed to the American non-ratification. On the contrary, Western-European countries signed and ratified the covenant and have often belonged among active supporters of the ICESCR. Unlike the USA, they have been more inclined to support socially oriented or socialist-inspired arguments that economic inequity could make liberty a hollow concept. Hence, they have often combined liberal, social-democratic, or socialist ideas to justify the importance of the ICESCR.<sup>92</sup> This shows that the ICESCR can be made compatible with different normative outlooks of international order, including the liberal one. Hence, the liberal international society's acceptance of the ICESCR as an international normative framework and the connection with the principled idea of liberal HR is possible but not automatic.

China's understanding of both covenants diverged from the liberal reading of them, though not entirely. China indicated that the ICCPR and the ICESCR establish principles according to which individuals have duties towards other individuals and their community, and, hence, there is a synergy between the covenants and the Chinese view on HR.<sup>93</sup> While the principled idea of liberal HR might agree that HR involve duties or responsibilities, it would not arguably agree with the top-down statist framing that is typical for China's official interpretations of the covenants and HR in general. When China defends its attitude towards HR, the covenants, and particular rights they cover at the international scene, Chinese documents and representatives highlight that China's approach rests on "combining the universal principles of HR and the concrete realities of China".<sup>94</sup> By doing so, they imply some relevance of the universalist ideological sources on which the ICCPR and the ICESCR draw, including liberalism, socialism, and their intersections, while they simultaneously indicate that China's HR policy is eventually derived from specific Chinese conditions and Chinese ideas.

<sup>87</sup> Willem Van Genugten, "The United States' Reservations to the ICCPR: International Law Versus God's Own Constitution," in Monique Castermans-Holleman, Fried van Hoof, and Jacqueline Smith, eds., *The Role of the Nation-State in the 21st Century* (Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1998), pp. 35–46.

<sup>88</sup> David P. Forsythe, *Human Rights in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 160–72; Van Genugten, "The United States' Reservations to the ICCPR".

<sup>89</sup> Simmons, *Mobilizing for Human Rights*, pp. 49–55.

<sup>90</sup> Ishay, *The History of Human Rights*, p. 9.

<sup>91</sup> Emmanuel Hamidi, "Institutional Challenges and Political Costs in the US Failure to Ratify the ICESCR," *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2020), pp. 1–14.

<sup>92</sup> See Philip Alston and Ryan Goodman, *International Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 157–61; Forsythe, *Human Rights in International Relations*, pp. 122–33.

<sup>93</sup> Zhu, "China and International 'Human Rights Diplomacy'," pp. 223–4.

<sup>94</sup> See *National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2009–2010)* (Beijing: State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2009); similarly, *National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2012–2015)* (Beijing: State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2013); *National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2016–2020)* (Beijing: State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016).

China approached the ICCPR differently from the ICESCR. While China signed both of them in the late 1990s, it has not ratified the ICCPR. It ratified the ICESCR in 2001, as one might put it, “as an indication of its foremost commitment to this class of rights ahead of civil and political rights”.<sup>95</sup> Although some of the content of the ICCPR has been embodied in the current Chinese Constitution, the ICCPR’s emphasis on civil and political rights does not easily link to the fundamental layers of the Chinese political order. Chinese representatives promised to seriously consider the possibility of the ICCPR’s ratification. However, Chinese official statements repeatedly argued that the ICCPR could be ratified only once conditions were ripe<sup>96</sup> and implied that the full incorporation of civil and political rights as specified by the ICCPR depended on the specific context and developmental conditions in China. In a somewhat similar way, China “adopts a double standard in assessing the human rights of developed and developing state” in its interaction with the Universal Period Review at the UN when civil, political, and other rights are discussed,<sup>97</sup> while it argues that protection of these rights depends on specific conditions.<sup>98</sup>

A significant legal reform that could lead to the promulgation of a dedicated HR law and might help ratify the ICCPR started to be discussed and drafted in China in the mid-2000s.<sup>99</sup> However, a careful discussion of individuals’ (citizens’) entitlements and how they could be harmonised with the Chinese legal system only accentuated specifics of China’s position on HR and China’s rule-by-law system and their differences from the ICCPR.<sup>100</sup> Also, Chinese official reports recognised at around the same time that China was unable to meet all the requirements posed by the ICESCR, which Chinese representatives and experts considered to be much closer to Chinese views than the ICCPR.<sup>101</sup> This only highlighted that ratification of the ICCPR would be problematic. Subsequently, the Chinese leadership announced that it could not ratify the ICCPR at that moment and has continued to postpone the ratification of the ICCPR ever since. The Chinese documents discussing this question do not provide more specific reasons for the non-ratification and keep highlighting that “[t]he Chinese government will continue to give priority to the protection of the people’s rights to subsistence and development”.<sup>102</sup>

Generally speaking, the Chinese regime portrays itself as a promoter of socio-economic rights and a supporter of the ICESCR.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, subsistence, poverty reduction, and development are key for defining China’s principled idea of developmentalist HR, but they also play a essential role in the Chinese regime’s (self-)legitimisation. The Chinese official position typically highlights that the right to subsistence and development are the

<sup>95</sup> Katie Lee, “China and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Prospects and Challenges,” *Chinese Journal of International Law*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2007), p. 449.

<sup>96</sup> See *National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2009–2010)*; *National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2012–2015)*; *National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2016–2020)*.

<sup>97</sup> Ann Kent, “China and the International Multilateral Human Rights System,” in Sarah Biddulph and Joshua Rosenzweig, eds., *Handbook on Human Rights in China* (Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2019), p. 75.

<sup>98</sup> See *National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2009–2010)*; *National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2012–2015)*; *National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2016–2020)*.

<sup>99</sup> Ahl, “Exploring Ways of Implementing International Human Rights Treaties in China”.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. Also see Lee, “China and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights”.

<sup>101</sup> Lee, “China and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,” p. 450.

<sup>102</sup> Kinzelbach, “Will China’s Rise Lead to a New Normative Order? An Analysis of China’s Statements on Human Rights at the United Nations (2000–2010),” p. 324; see also *Progress in China’s Human Rights in 2014*; *Progress in Human Rights over the 40 Years of Reform and Opening Up in China*.

<sup>103</sup> Wim Muller, “Subsistence, Poverty Alleviation and Right to Development: Between Discourse and Practice,” in Sarah Biddulph and Joshua Rosenzweig, eds., *Handbook on Human Rights in China* (Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2019), pp. 120–42.

cornerstones of its approach.<sup>104</sup> Although these two rights are related, for example, to what the ICESCR specifies as the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to be free from hunger, there are important caveats to mention. Right to development is not mentioned by the ICESCR and has been controversially debated at the UN.<sup>105</sup> The proponents of this right frame it as a collective right, and rather than drawing on liberal or social liberal ideas, they build on more radical perspectives and visions of a structural transformation of international economic order. The majority of Western states have not accepted the viability of this right.<sup>106</sup> On the contrary, China recognises that rights to subsistence and development have both individual and collective dimensions,<sup>107</sup> positions itself as a key contributor to the idea of the right to development,<sup>108</sup> and typically uses the right to development to frame its approach to socio-economic rights.<sup>109</sup> This shows that although China and the majority of Western liberal states have accepted the ICESCR and may share some beliefs about the importance of socio-economic rights, further interpretations may differ and may be built on different preconceptions.

Convergence and compatibility of China's idea of developmentalist HR with the principled idea of liberal HR is further problematised when China tries to fend off criticism of its HR record. China is repeatedly accused of HR violations in several areas of HR, including those covered by the ICESCR and, especially, the ICCPR. When reacting to the criticisms, China typically followed a twofold argumentation based on challenging the universality of some HR (typically, political rights and their liberal framing) and stressing the crucial importance of national developmental conditions that influence the state's abilities in relation to HR.<sup>110</sup> Briefly stated, China used developmentalist HR-related arguments to delegitimise critical evaluations of its HR that are typically raised by Western liberal countries.<sup>111</sup> Hence, there is some room for the existence of a normative overlap between China and the liberal international society in relation to the ICCPR and, especially, the ICESCR, which is created by some affinities between the principled ideas of developmentalist and liberal HR. However, the normative overlap is diminished by the fact that China and the liberal international society construct links between their principled ideas and these covenants in different ways. This is particularly noticeable as regards the ICCPR.

## R2P

R2P and the issue of humanitarian interventions are often understood to constitute a liberal expression of HR and its application in the security realm.<sup>112</sup> R2P is not based on one single HR norm but includes different more specific normative obligations. However, it has developed into a coherent normative principle, which aspires to prescribe a normative behaviour. This is why the existing literature typically understands it as a norm that shapes the global HR regime.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>104</sup> See *National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2009–2010)*; *National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2012–2015)*; *China's Progress in Poverty Reduction and Human Rights*; *Progress in Human Rights over the 40 Years of Reform and Opening Up in China*.

<sup>105</sup> Bonny Ibhawoh, "The Right to Development: The Politics and Polemics of Power and Resistance," *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2011), pp. 76–104.

<sup>106</sup> Ibhawoh, "The Right to Development".

<sup>107</sup> *China's Progress in Poverty Reduction and Human Rights*.

<sup>108</sup> Ibhawoh, "The Right to Development"; Muller, "Subsistence, Poverty Alleviation and Right to Development".

<sup>109</sup> For example, see *China's Progress in Poverty Reduction and Human Rights*.

<sup>110</sup> Johnston, "China in a World of Orders," pp. 33–4; Zhang and Buzan, "China and the Global Reach of Human Rights," p. 176.

<sup>111</sup> Ted Piccone, "China's Long Game on Human Rights at the United Nations," 2018, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FP\\_20181009\\_china\\_human\\_rights.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FP_20181009_china_human_rights.pdf).

<sup>112</sup> Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*.

<sup>113</sup> Alex Bellamy and Tim Dunne, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Responsibility to Protect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Šárka Kolmašová and Ricardo Reboledo, eds., *Norm Diffusion Beyond the West: Agents and Sources*

The idea of R2P first appeared in 2001 when the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), a body set-up by the Canadian government, issued a report on how to respond to large-scale humanitarian crises.<sup>114</sup> The report's original conception included three kinds of responsibility of international actors. These were the responsibility to prevent a population from suffering serious harm, the responsibility to react if such harm occurs, and the responsibility to rebuild after an intervention.<sup>115</sup> The report also suggested that besides the UN Security Council as the primary international actor, the UN General Assembly and regional organisations may also become actors who might authorise the international community's reactions to large-scale humanitarian crises.<sup>116</sup>

However, because of considerable resistance against it, the original proposal had to be adapted. A remodelled conception of R2P was endorsed by the UN member countries in 2005.<sup>117</sup> Since then, the official outline of R2P has remained relatively stabilised.<sup>118</sup> It has been built upon three pillars. First, states should have the responsibility to protect their populations from four kinds of mass atrocity crimes, namely genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. Second, states should help each other to fulfil this duty, and their (mutual) assistance can have different forms, including preventive and structural measures. Crucially, the international assistance should not be enforced against a host state's will. The third pillar highlights the importance of peaceful enforcement measures but also a commitment to "collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council, in accordance with the Charter, including Chapter VII, on a case-by-case basis".<sup>119</sup>

As a result of the 2005 re-interpretation, China was willing to support R2P. China has never disputed the need to ensure humanitarian protection in the moments of crises *per se*, but it was afraid that the initial 2001 version of R2P was defined too broadly and R2P interventions could be justified by a wide variety of HR-related reasons. Four changes to the original idea are typically understood to convince China to support the updated conception of R2P.<sup>120</sup> First, the UN Security Council was defined as the only actor that can authorise military interventions. Second, the newer conception of R2P does not include a list of pre-specified criteria according to which an intervention is decided to be appropriate. As such, determining the appropriateness of each R2P intervention is relatively open to political and diplomatic dialogue. Third, the scope of R2P was limited to four predefined types of mass atrocity crimes, while China agreed in principle that they constitute critical threats to sustaining political order. In other words, in the Chinese official view, the new version of R2P includes a link between HR and the protection of individuals, on the one hand, and political stability as a value that co-defines China's principled idea of developmentalist HR, on the other hand. This interpretation made it possible for China to understand the updated conception of R2P as legitimate. Fourth, while the 2001 report assumed that the international community should act according to R2P when a host (target) state was "unwilling or

of Leverage (Cham: Springer, 2023); Matejkova, "Establishing the Norm of Humanitarian Intervention in International Relations".

<sup>114</sup> Bellamy and Dunne, *The Oxford Handbook of the Responsibility to Protect*; ICISS, "The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty," (2001).

<sup>115</sup> ICISS, "The Responsibility to Protect".

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Andrew Garwood-Gowers, "China and the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P)," in Sarah Biddulph and Joshua Rosenzweig, eds., *Handbook on Human Rights in China* (Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2019), p. 105.

<sup>118</sup> Bellamy and Dunne, *The Oxford Handbook of the Responsibility to Protect*; Andrew Garwood-Gowers, "China and the 'Responsibility to Protect': The Implications of the Libyan Intervention," *Asian Journal of International Law*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2012), pp. 375–93; Garwood-Gowers, "China and the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P)".

<sup>119</sup> Garwood-Gowers, "China and the 'Responsibility to Protect'" p. 105.

<sup>120</sup> See Garwood-Gowers, "China and the 'Responsibility to Protect'"; "China and the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P)".

unable” to stop violence, the 2005 version made clear that a host state must be “manifestly failing”. Hence, it has become more difficult to start any military intervention on the basis of R2P against the will of a host state.

The developments of R2P in the 2000s led to the international consensus on a specific conception of it but also demonstrated divergences between the official Chinese and liberal-oriented interpretations of R2P. These are connected to the topics of sovereignty, conditionality of R2P, and the approach to host states. They also pertain to the different principled ideas of HR and different conceptions of the moral purpose of the state.

From the perspective of the liberal international society and its core actors, R2P has always had a strong liberal ethos. R2P has been backed up by liberal values and has been compatible with liberal sovereignty and the moral purpose of augmenting individual potentials.<sup>121</sup> Some scholars even label it as a “key doctrine of liberal world order”<sup>122</sup> and one of the embodiments of “a new moral liberalism which emphasized global humanitarianism”<sup>123</sup> or they argue that “the adoption of the Responsibility to Protect is widely taken to indicate an integration of core liberal values into international law”.<sup>124</sup> R2P aimed to recraft the norm of non-intervention and the so-called Westphalian understanding of sovereignty. In the liberal view that underpinned the original R2P proposal, sovereignty should no longer be seen “as an absolute term of authority but as a kind of responsibility”.<sup>125</sup> According to the liberal proponents, R2P’s aim is connected with protecting the human individual as the ultimate locus of politics. Due to this view, sovereignty can be made conditional while international society should follow an imperative to protect individuals in certain situations.<sup>126</sup> While some politicians in the USA appreciated the 2005 version as more restricted and welcomed that the US forces will not be easily dragged into new conflicts, liberal proponents of R2P in the USA and elsewhere criticised the 2005 conception as “R2P-lite” in terms of fulfilling moral obligations.<sup>127</sup>

China has had a cautious approach toward the liberal-democratic framing of R2P<sup>128</sup> and made repeatedly clear that it is uncomfortable with the possibility of regime changes in the name of protecting HR.<sup>129</sup> “There must be no attempt at regime change [...] under the guise of protecting civilians”.<sup>130</sup> In other words, Chinese representatives repeatedly highlighted individual rights cannot be prioritised at the expense of state sovereignty.<sup>131</sup> Alongside that, “Beijing framed R2P primarily in terms of its preventive and state assistance elements”<sup>132</sup> and has remained relatively sceptical about R2P’s third pillar.<sup>133</sup> The Chinese stance has highlighted that it is vital to always look for peaceful means of dealing with

<sup>121</sup> Alex J. Bellamy, “Humanitarian Responsibilities and Interventionist Claims in International Society,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2003), pp. 321–40.

<sup>122</sup> Liselotte Odgaard, “Responsibility to Protect Goes to China: An Interpretivist Analysis of How China’s Coexistence Policy Made It a Responsibility to Protect Insider,” *Journal of International Political Theory*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2020), p. 233.

<sup>123</sup> Ramesh Thakur, *The United Nations, Peace and Security: From Collective Security to the Responsibility to Protect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 210.

<sup>124</sup> Jahn, *Liberal Internationalism*, p. 149.

<sup>125</sup> Thakur, *The United Nations, Peace and Security*, p. 251.

<sup>126</sup> See Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*.

<sup>127</sup> Thomas G. Weiss, “R2P after 9/11 and the World Summit,” *Wisconsin International Law Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2006), pp. 741–60.

<sup>128</sup> Garwood-Gowers, “China and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’”; “China and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P)”.

<sup>129</sup> Zheng Chen, “China and the Responsibility to Protect,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 25, No. 101 (2016), pp. 693–4.

<sup>130</sup> S/PV.6531 (UN Security Council, 2011), p. 20.

<sup>131</sup> Chen, “China and the Responsibility to Protect”.

<sup>132</sup> Garwood-Gowers, “China and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’,” p. 108.

<sup>133</sup> Chen, “China and the Responsibility to Protect”; Garwood-Gowers, “China and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P)”.

crises.<sup>134</sup> Hence, the use of force should be always carefully considered. “[H]umanitarian intervention should be highly conditional. It should be conducted under UN auspices [...]. It should be done with the assent of all state actors involved [...]. The process of post-conflict peacebuilding should stress reconstructing social stability and economic development rather than necessarily pushing for democratic institutions and processes”.<sup>135</sup>

China consistently emphasised that it sees capacity building as the most important pillar of R2P and the best way to protect individuals and their HR.<sup>136</sup> Chinese diplomats repeatedly stressed that “the issue of development should be highlighted to the greatest extent possible” because development is “the basis for the maintenance of collective security”.<sup>137</sup> It reflects a broader Chinese view that “the best way to relieve and reduce the incidence of large-scale human rights violations is to change the relationship between the state and society, through economic development and through building the capacity of the government in power”.<sup>138</sup> Hence, China actually endorsed R2P as a norm that includes an element of conditionality and context-dependence. It also highlights development as a key tool for improving HR.

In the second half of the 2000s, China resisted “attempts to implement R2P’s coercive, non-consensual elements in the UN Security Council”, especially in relation to crises in Darfur, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe.<sup>139</sup> However, it did not reject R2P as such, which was rather consistent with its ideological position. In 2011, it even supported R2P in the critical moment of the Libyan crisis.<sup>140</sup> However, China also aspired to refine the norm during the 2010s. Arguments similar to those summarised in the previous paragraph led China to propose reinterpretations of R2P or support other states’ rearticulations of R2P. More specifically, China supported Brazil’s concept of “responsible while protecting” as well as the concept of “responsible protection” proposed in 2012 by scholars at the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), a think-tank affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>141</sup> Both these concepts tried to limit the scope of R2P’s third pillar and highlighted consensual means of dealing with international crises. In the late 2010s, China continued to accentuate collective sovereign rights of nations rather than individual rights and stressed cultural and economic context and developmental assistance as the very centrepieces of R2P, while many Western actors opposed the Chinese view by arguing that sometimes the basic HR need to be protected immediately and at all costs because they are the very foundation of the individual’s development.<sup>142</sup> In its effort to reframe R2P, China was successful only to a limited extent, and the idea of responsible protection has never become widely acknowledged in the global international society.<sup>143</sup> However, Beijing has rather successfully tried to deter any efforts to broaden R2P. “No party can unilaterally expand or interpret this concept or impose a regime change or get involved in a civil war under the excuse of R2P.”<sup>144</sup>

<sup>134</sup> S/PV.6498 (UN Security Council, 2011), p. 10.

<sup>135</sup> Johnston, “China in a World of Orders,” p. 33.

<sup>136</sup> Chen, “China and the Responsibility to Protect”; Odgaard, “Responsibility to Protect Goes to China”.

<sup>137</sup> Foot, *China, the United Nations, and Human Protection*, p. 141.

<sup>138</sup> Rosemary Foot, “The State, Development and Humanitarianism: China’s Shaping for the Trajectory of R2P,” in Alex Bellamy and Tim Dunne, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Responsibility to Protect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 940; see also Garwood-Gowers, “China and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P),” p. 110.

<sup>139</sup> Garwood-Gowers, “China and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’,” p. 108.

<sup>140</sup> Foot, *China, the United Nations, and Human Protection*, pp. 145–53.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p. 149; Garwood-Gowers, “China and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P),” pp. 111–2.

<sup>142</sup> Garwood-Gowers, “China and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P),” pp. 112–4; Odgaard, “Responsibility to Protect Goes to China”.

<sup>143</sup> Foot, *China, the United Nations, and Human Protection*, p. 150.

<sup>144</sup> Garwood-Gowers, “China and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (R2P),” pp. 109–10.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I introduced a theoretical framework for analysing normative overlaps between different political orders. It conceptualises political orders through three constitutional layers: fundamental constitutional structures (composed of moral purposes of politics, types of statehood, and conceptions of procedural justice), principled ideas, and norms. To understand the strength and implications of normative overlaps, I focused on congruence within and across political orders. With the help of the theoretical framework, I analysed normative overlaps between China and the liberal international society in the realm of HR. I specifically discussed the cases of the ICESCR and the ICCPR and R2P.

The strength of normative overlaps between China and the liberal international society in the cases of the ICESCR, the 2005 updated version of R2P but also a general discursive understanding of HR as a relevant normative value can be assessed as medium or medium-low. The overlaps stem from relatively sound consonance of the principled ideas of developmentalist and liberal HR although the consonance is limited to a rather narrow area of issues and topics. These two respective principled ideas are strongly linked with the discussed norms and normative agreements (the ICESCR and the updated R2P) but also the fundamental constitutional structures of China's political order and the liberal international society. Hence, through the given principled ideas, the concerned norms got positioned in accordance with China's as well as the liberal international society's moral purposes of politics, types (notions) of rightful statehood, and conceptions of procedural justice. On the basis of the strong interlinkages within their respective orders, both China and the liberal international society could actively participate in shaping, discussing, and developing the concerned norms. In the case of R2P, China tried to advance its own views of how to improve R2P by suggesting the idea of "responsible protection" or supporting the "responsible while protecting" concept. Hence, these normative overlaps bridge the two orders and enable them to engage in a two-way normative exchange that goes beyond the one-way localisation of norms from one order to another.

When it comes to the ICCPR and the original formulation of R2P, the liberal international society supported them, and there are apparent links to the principled idea of liberal HR. However, they were not completely linked to the Chinese idea of developmentalist HR, and China has not fully endorsed them. The ICCPR was signed by China, and it was made tentatively compatible with developmentalist HR in Chinese political debates, but China never completely accepted the ICCPR. Because China did not fully refuse them but never fully agreed to accept them, the strength of normative overlap in these cases can be assessed as minimal to low.

However, these overlaps even in the case of the ICESCR and the newer version of R2P have also their noticeable limits. First of all, the overlaps in these cases stem from an intersection between the principled ideas of developmentalist and liberal HR, which is, however, relatively constricted. The principled ideas agree on the vision of HR as an instrument for the advancement of living (material) conditions and betterment of actors' positions and the overall political environment, which translates into a shared emphasis on socio-economic underpinnings of HR or the recognition of poverty reduction or the right to subsistence as important issues. However, this developmentalist concurrence is by no means complete, and its practical implications are confined. While China sees development as a precondition for HR, Western liberal states tend to understand HR as a value that enables development. Moreover, China's aforementioned position refutes the liberal-democratic emphasis on political and civil rights.<sup>145</sup> China argues that they are secondary to and dependent on developmental conditions. In other words, the Chinese idea of developmentalist HR situates HR as more collectivist and conditional upon developmental and cultural context.

<sup>145</sup> Potter, "Selective Adaptation and Institutional Capacity".

The two principled ideas of HR follow from the respective moral purposes of politics that are dominant in the two orders and that both build on the vision of enhancement of conditions and possibilities. However, while both principled ideas arrive at the bounded consensus based on that vision, the moral purposes are actually mutually opposed rather than limitedly converging. China's nationalist and party-state developmentalism contradicts the belief in the individual and her/his freedom as *the* centrepiece of politics. Moreover, the diverging conceptions of statehood and justice of these two orders corroborate the mutual incompatibility between the concerned fundamental constitutional structures.

As developmentalist HR are firmly linked to China's developmentalist moral purpose of politics, patrimonial/party-state sovereignty, and conception of "rule-by-law" justice, HR are positioned as secondary to developmental conditions of the Chinese nation and the party-state's central goal of achieving stability and strong state. Due to the divergence between the fundamental constitutional structures of China and the liberal international society and the limited convergence of the principled ideas of developmentalist and liberal HR, I argue that an HR normative gap between China and the liberal international society can be, at best, bridged but not closed or completely filled.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the colleagues who commented on the previous versions of the paper. I particularly want to thank the Journal's reviewers and editors.

*Conflict of interest statement.* None declared.

## Funding

This paper is the result of Metropolitan University Prague research project no. 100-4 "Center for Security Studies" (2023) based on a grant from the Institutional Fund for the Long-term Strategic Development of Research Organizations.



# China's search for the future to answer the past: Liu Cixin, (science-)fiction and Chinese developmentalism

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**Abstract** *This paper analyses Remembrance of Earth's Past, also known as The Three-Body Trilogy, by Liu Cixin and its connections to Chinese politics and Historical IR. I examine how the Trilogy as a contemporary pop-cultural artefact and a fictional narrative sustains, recrafts and critically deals with the historical, conceived here as constructions of history, historical trajectories and the key historic challenges. I respond to the call of this special issue to consider new dimensions of how storytelling and Historical IR can be disruptive. On the theoretical level, I distinguish the notions of external and internal disruptions (critiques) with the help of pragmatism and post-colonialism. On the empirical level, I argue that the Trilogy offers an internal critique of China's long-term obsession with developmentalist modernisation by expressing ironies and uncertainties of it. It reveals limits ('selvedges') of development(alism) by showing that it is ultimately unachievable, unnecessary and uncontrollable. In other words, the internal disruption stems from exposing the final frontiers of the given tradition where its internal logic starts to crumble.*

## Introduction

This paper is structured around the most famous works of Liu Cixin (刘慈欣) who has become a literary star in China and a science-fiction prodigy worldwide. These are the novel titled *The Three-Body Problem* (三体) (Liu 2016a) and its two sequels, *The Dark Forest* (黑暗森林) (Liu 2016b) and *Death's End* (死神永生) (Liu 2017). They constitute a trilogy known as *Remembrance of Earth's Past* (地球往事) or sometimes referred to as *The Three-Body Trilogy* (三体三部曲). The Trilogy has received prestigious awards and glowing reviews in China and abroad. In 2023, it was remade into a TV series by Tencent, a Chinese technology and entertainment conglomerate, while Netflix has also been preparing its adaptation. The Trilogy resembles a chronicle portraying an alternative future of humanity. Its plot starts in Maoist China when the first contact between humankind and the extraterrestrial civilisation called Trisolaris takes place. It is revealed that Trisolaris are highly advanced and about to attack Earth. The major part of the story takes place within 400 years following the first contact.

The Trilogy is a colossal space saga invoking the best of Western science-fiction classics. However, it is often assessed as providing a fresh impetus for

I would like to thank Niyousha Bastani and Italo Brandimarte, contributors to this special issue, three anonymous reviewers and the Journal's editors for their constructive comments.

science-fiction worldwide (Pai 2019). Space colonisation is portrayed differently from the majority of the Western science-fiction literary classics. It is not humankind that colonises other planets but is colonised by a more advanced civilisation. Moreover, the aliens do not simply aim to destroy Earth as in many pulp blockbusters but rather inhabit it and take advantage of its favourable living conditions. This ‘reversed colonisation’ theme is sometimes recognised as the reason for the Trilogy’s popularity (Desai 2020). Moreover, the colonisation does not happen immediately but materialises gradually, and never fully, through complicated political, strategic and cultural interactions. As such, the Trilogy mirrors China’s experience with its informal colonisation in the first half of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this way, the Trilogy (re-)imagines colonisation as a period of ‘cultural uncertainty’ in which old ethical and epistemological frames are made invalid (Bhabha 2003).

In this paper, I aim to consider how the Trilogy as a contemporary pop-cultural artefact and a fictional narrative sustains, recrafts and critically deals with the historical, conceived here as constructions of history, historical trajectories and the key historic challenges. The key historic(al) issue that is addressed in the Trilogy is the colonisation and modernisation as a response to it. I argue that the significance of the Trilogy is three-fold. First, it *conveys and reinstates* some of the dominant narratives about modernisation that informed China’s actual historical development and response to its informal colonisation. It does so by using same tropes and building on similar ideas. Second, as such, it helps to *highlight* key intellectual and ideological building blocks of China’s modernisation tradition, including those that we nowadays do not often pay attention to, namely evolutionary thinking and (social) Darwinism. Third and most importantly, I argue that while Liu Cixin builds on a Chinese mainstream modernisation tradition, his works simultaneously *disrupt* it. The International Relations (IR) scholarship often reads popular culture as a proxy for political or ideological structures (cf. Bell 2020, chapter 5; Caso and Hamilton 2015; Novak 2021; Weber 2014; Weldes 2003a), but the Trilogy articulates an *internal* and *immanent* critique of China’s long-term obsession with developmentalist modernisation by expressing its ironies and uncertainties. In particular, it reveals limits (‘selvedges’) of development(alism) by showing that it is ultimately unachievable, unnecessary and uncontrollable. This shows that popular culture permeates with ‘high’ politics but may also offer a unique critical voice. In the next part of this paper, I conceptualise external and internal disruptions (critiques) and argue that critical Historical IR should pay attention to the latter as well.

Although I argue that the deeper message of his works exhibits the potential to challenge the standard developmentalist truths often invoked by the Chinese party-state, Liu Cixin is typically seen as a loyalist of the Chinese regime. It is due to his public nationalist statements and his uncritical stance on the Chinese state’s oppression of ethnic minorities (Fan 2019). This public profile of Liu Cixin made US senators appeal to Netflix to cancel the forthcoming adaptation of the Trilogy (Flood 2020). Liu also advocates a stronger role of China in the contemporary world (Fan 2019; Han 2013). Hence, the critical potential of the Trilogy does not seem to be widely and explicitly acknowledged in China or elsewhere. The Chinese fanbase and the Chinese regime

typically appreciate Liu Cixin's emphasis on technocratic expertise and the pivotal role of technology in deciding the fortunes of civilisations (cf. Wang 2016). These themes are easily recognisable in the Trilogy and positively correlate with the party-state's official ideology. As such, the Chinese regime has had a positive view of Liu and actively supported the translation of the Trilogy into other languages (Wu 2020). In this paper, I do not aim to decide whether the Trilogy's critique of developmentalism is conscious or unintentional although I believe the latter is the case. My main point is to show that an internal disruption of a certain discourse may be provided by pop-cultural artefacts if they fully utilise opportunities which popular culture offers—to develop intellectually honest and thorough examinations distanced from immediate political pressures.

I read the Trilogy against the backdrop of the broader Chinese literary and science-fiction tradition. This methodological choice is substantiated by Liu's close interaction with the tradition. Although Liu Cixin explicitly acknowledges non-Chinese influences on his work from Leo Tolstoy to Isaac Asimov (Liu, Plotz, and Wang 2019), Liu positions himself as primarily embedded in the Chinese science-fiction tradition (Liu, Nahm, and Ascher 2013). Additionally, he is seen by other Chinese science-fiction writers (Han 2013), Chinese scholars (for example Jia, Du, and Fashimpaur 2018; M. Song 2013; Wang 2016) and Western scholars (Gaffric and Peyton 2019; Thieret 2015) as being one of the most important contemporary authors that personify and create the Chinese science-fiction tradition that started a couple of decades ago.

Hence, I read and understand Liu as epitomising and rearticulating the tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Chinese writers, intellectuals and modernisers 'worrying about China' (Davies 2007) with the goal of resurrecting the nation. More specifically, they reacted to China's informal colonisation and political chaos. New literary genres and styles of writing, including science-fiction, emerged to deal with the roots of these problems and envision prospects for change. Hence, (science-)fiction was understood as a powerful tool for rethinking China's modernisation. The then Chinese writers and intellectuals aspired to find answers that were *true* to China's problems, though situated in *fictional* settings. While their stories and narratives were never real, they believed they mirrored or embodied genuine responses. When the long-lasting Chinese empire based on the traditional Confucian-inspired social and political worldview was collapsing and mundane politics was not up to formulating reasonable solutions, their fictional stories enabled them to imagine new political and social settings and think their potential consequences through (Isaacson 2017).

This paper builds on the notion of time hybridity, which has been utilised by post-colonial works (cf. esp. Bhabha 1997; Drichel 2008). The notion draws our attention to the fact that cultural and identitarian uncertainties of the colonised (Bhabha 1984; Bhabha 2003) are tied to temporal uncertainties. Visions of the future constantly go back to what once *was*, but what *still* needs to be overcome. In the case of China, this is famously described as China being a 'pessoptimist' nation (Callahan 2010). Chinese nationalism is built around an intimate connection between negative and positive feelings, a conflicted understanding of the West and oscillations between mourning previous tragedies and dreaming about China's future rise (see also Callahan 2017). These

connections are mutually constitutive as one side of the coin—positivity/negativity—cannot exist without the other. Hence, I can only underline a plea raised by Historical IR that the past cannot be understood as separated from the present and vice versa (for some of the early articulations of that, cf. Hobden and Hobson 2002). In the theoretical section, I develop this perspective with the help of post-colonialism and pragmatism. The perspective implies that Historical IR should focus not only on investigations of things that happened some time ago, but also consider how the past is reproduced, how it informs thinking about the future and if the present may destabilise the past.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first part is a theoretical one and aims to clarify how I approach connections between Historical IR and popular culture. To this end, I utilise insights from post-colonialism and pragmatism, based on which I also conceptually distinguish the notions of internal and external disruptions in Historical IR and historical narratives. I define internal disruption on the basis of Richard Rorty's concept of irony and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of 'selves'. Then, I focus on three functions of the Trilogy. Sociology of literature often highlights that fiction may have different functions and dimensions (for example Griswold 1987; Váňa 2020). Three of the most frequently considered ones are those of, first, being embedded in a certain tradition, second, revealing something about the world by accentuating certain issues and, third, criticising. The second, third and fourth parts address the Trilogy's contextual, revealing and critical dimensions, respectively. The second and third parts are utilised to build up the discussion so that the fourth part can elaborate on the Trilogy's critical and disruptive role. In the concluding section, I offer a wider interpretation of the Trilogy's critical dimension.

### History, culture and politics: theoretical background

The theoretical investigation of this paper is inspired by a recent collective forum on Historical IR published in the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (Lemke et al. 2023). I specifically follow Jessica Auchter's call for more critical Historical IR in this forum. She 'seek[s] to redeem the language of storytelling that is often used to critique Historical IR, encourage approaches that depart from [and go beyond] history-as-data, [and] examine the usefulness of post-colonial and narrative approaches to historical IR' (Lemke et al. 2023, 9). This should enable us to 'open up narratives about past injustices' and consider whether and in which ways Historical IR can be disruptive (Lemke et al. 2023, 9).

I wish to develop this problematique with the help of complementary and mutually reinforcing insights from pragmatism and post-colonialism. When doing so, I have relatively modest ambitions. I do not aspire to offer a comprehensive and universally applicable theoretical framework or defend pragmatism or post-colonialism as *the* most useful perspectives for approaching Historical IR. I aim to show how pragmatism and post-colonialism can help us to move beyond 'history-as-data' and the 'correct-false' distinction by outlining dialectic ties and continuities between the past and the present, popular culture and politics and the world and the subject.

For pragmatism, truth is made rather than found (Kangas 2009; Kratochwil 2007). As such, pragmatists also argue for understanding popular culture and

politics 'as dialectically related moments of semeiosis' (Kangas 2009, 319). In a similar fashion, even other critically oriented authors recognise that there is a 'popular culture-world politics continuum' in which 'significant political battles are fought' (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 157). From the perspective of pragmatism, this argument is based on the assumption that making sense of our experience happens in relation to other signs or, more broadly, narratives (Thayer 1973). Pragmatism also presupposes close connections between the previous and the current. For example, 'Peirce insisted that all thought takes the form of a dialogue and that *new* knowledge necessarily emerges on the basis of *previous* knowledge and experience' (Kangas 2009, 320, emphasis added). In a similar way, post-colonialism highlights constant and dialectic oscillations between past events centred around colonialism, current identities and imaginations of the future (Bhabha 1984).

Further dimensions of the meaning-making process open up if we examine the popular culture-world politics continuum. Each pop-cultural artefact is embedded in a specific genre. Genres depend on intertextuality and their conventions and need to be assessed as such (Kiersey and Neumann 2015, 76; Weldes 2003b, 13). It is so because genres have their own histories and historical motivations that may be transported to, (re-)used and (re-)articulated in different contexts. As argued in the literature on the relationship between science-fiction and IR, science-fiction works are highly intertextual. They 'pose fictional worlds that, while cognitively coherent on their own unique terms, nevertheless inevitably maintain a link with the experiences we share in our own world' (Kiersey and Neumann 2015, 80).

As argued by some, one of the defining characteristics of science-fiction as a genre is that it focuses on encounters with the alien, strange and unfamiliar (Weldes 2003a; Caso and Hamilton 2015). However, the character of the encounter may differ and, hence, tell us a lot about the political dimension of science-fiction. One of the critical aspirations of early Chinese science-fiction works was to deal with the colonial encounter and react to China's experience of being colonised by 'Western barbarians'. Hence, the genre intertextuality supports the post-colonial entanglement of the past, the present and the future. Hence, I will aim to show that the Chinese (science-)fiction writers' worrying about the fate of the nation in our 'first-hand world' is responding to the past and its persisting effects while it imagines the future in a 'second-order' world.

Pragmatism also allows us to differentiate two types of disruption in the process of meaning-making. The first one is external and has a form of arguments between different actors about different conceptions of the world. This is what Auchter implies in her contribution when she talks about understanding narratives and memories of non-dominant groups (Lemke et al. 2023, 9). Their memories and narratives can bring traumas or critical moments of historical developments that are largely ignored to light (Lemke et al. 2023, 10–11). This overlaps with the preoccupation of post-colonial authors with the question of whether sub-altern voices 'can speak' (Spivak 1988).

However, in the second—internal—type, critique comes from within a (dominant) narrative in the form of what Richard Rorty calls irony. It represents a critique of itself or its tradition. The Rortian irony emerges from the contrast between public confidence about the permanency and validity of one's words, deeds and ideas, on the one hand, and private—internal—doubts

about them, on the other (Rorty 1989, 73–74). To illustrate that, Rorty distinguishes between an ‘ironist’ who is aware of contingency or non-finality of her/his words and a ‘metaphysician’ or a defender of ‘common sense’ who believe that their claims have deep and stable grounds. An ‘ironist’ is aware of the fact that the terms s/he uses are subject to change (Rorty 1989, 74). Interestingly, Rorty readily concedes that ‘irony is of little public use’ because an ironist’s theory contains contradictions (Rorty 1989, 120).

To follow Rorty’s argument, we might say that external disruptions happen when different ‘common senses’ are confronted about how to organise society. Internal disruptions are unfolded when a protagonist of a certain (for example, liberal) position is able to reveal doubts about finality and apodicticity of and *within* her/his own story (for example, liberalism). Rorty arguably assumes that an ironist’s identity is defined as an intentional activity of doubting or challenging her/his assumptions. At the same time, his comments about irony as a private endeavour indicate that an ironist may not necessarily want to be explicit about her/his doubts. In other words, I believe that irony as a critical intellectual process may be intentional but also may have more subtle forms. In any case, Rorty implies that truth is made through stories, but this truth can also be reimagined in an ironic way once we start to notice that these stories indicate unexpected possibilities or their own limits.

By working with the categories of external and internal critique, I aim to show that there might be a different way for ‘open[ing] up narratives about past injustices’ (Lemke et al. 2023, 9) than suggested by Auchter. It stems from *within* a given narrative tradition rather than from outside. While this internal critique may not be as radical as the external one, it involves ‘uncomfortable recognitions’ and ‘the responsibility of constantly making ourselves [and a given narrative tradition] vulnerable’ as the presence of what would be otherwise unacknowledged is revealed (Noxolo, Raghuram, and Madge 2012, 424). This is seen by some as a necessary step in anti-colonial or perhaps even decolonial thinking (Noxolo, Raghuram, and Madge 2012). This is also where ‘selvedges’ manifest limits and inconsistencies of a given discourse or potential ways out of it (Spivak 1992, 178). Hence, selvedges can be understood as the ‘final frontiers’ of the given discourse, ideology or narrative where its fundamental logic and meaning start to crumble or transform into something different.

### **Worrying about China: (science-)fiction and the Problem of Chinese history**

In China, science-fiction emerged when China was experiencing decline after its defeat in the Opium Wars and other clashes with Western powers and Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century. The long-lasting cultural and political underpinnings of the Chinese empire were shattered, China became an informal colony of these powers and was forced to integrate more closely with the Western-led international society (Harrison 2001). In the context of these turbulences, politicians, intellectuals and writers started to rethink Chinese worldviews. In this context, (science-)fiction was called upon to imagine a new world in which China needs to deal with its (informal) colonisation (Han 2013).

The origins of science-fiction in China are connected with a number of writers, but two intellectual heavyweights stand out—Liang Qichao and Lu Xun. Both of them refused earlier attempts to reconcile the traditional, mainly Confucian, Chinese politics and culture, on the one hand, and Western political, institutional, scientific and technological outlook, on the other. Liang and Lu were radical modernisers who feared that halfway reforms would not be sufficient to save the nation. Liang was one of the most (arguably, the single most) important intellectuals of the last decades before the collapse of the Chinese empire in 1911. He dedicated his life to transporting Western philosophy and knowledge to China. He also called for developing a genre of 'philosophical-scientific fiction' which should use 'the form of fiction to elucidate philosophy and science' (Thieret 2015, 34). Lu Xun is widely regarded to be the founding father of modern Chinese literature and was among the leading figures of the very influential May Fourth Movement in the early republican era. Liang and Lu cherished science-fiction because it represented, in their words, 'a utopian genre that could provide both reflection on reality and hope for change', could 'renovate the people's minds' (Thieret 2015, 34) and be a necessary part of a broader project of 'reforming thought and aiding civilisation' (Jones 2011, 48).

As mentioned above, Liu Cixin defines himself as embedded in the Chinese sci-fi tradition and its roots going back to Liang and Lu (Liu, Nahm, and Ascher 2013). Hence, what interests me in this paper is the way Liu builds upon the early Chinese science-fiction and China's overall consideration of its modernisation. There are at least three types of tropes, thematic settings and ideas that are critical to that tradition as well as Liu's contemporary writings. Because of sharing these tropes and concerns, Liu can be understood to perpetuate the earlier Chinese science-fiction tradition.

First, as already noted, the key task of early Chinese science-fiction was to imagine a new world in the context when China was losing its ground—its soil, its territory—in a literal and metaphorical sense. The possession of its land was challenged by the colonising powers while China simultaneously lost its firm ground as regards making sense of the world. (Science-)fiction was to provide answers—yet in fictional settings—that could not be found elsewhere. While never real, these answers were seen by the then-Chinese intellectuals as genuine, complex and true to China's historic(al) problems. On the contrary, these intellectuals suggested that mundane politics may not be enough to deal with dilemmas of modernity (Han 2013; Isaacson 2017; Jones 2011). The *Trilogy* has a similar aspiration. It imagines a new history of humankind after it faces colonisation from Trisolaris. Liu thinks about the development of human civilisation thoroughly, but his bird eye's perspective underplays mundane politics. It is also noticeable that the *Trilogy's* main characters are largely disengaged from ordinary political activities although these characters prove to be the only ones capable of influencing the story in a significant way. In other words, this orientation of Liu and his predecessors permeates with high politics but simultaneously urges us to formulate a different and more complex perspective. This can be read as a precondition for ironies and internal disruptions of China's modernisation project that I discuss in the fourth part and the conclusion.

Second, one of the most famous themes of Lu Xun's works is the one of an iron house in which its inhabitants slowly suffocate while being happy and content with their lives. The theme is usually interpreted as a parable of the self-enclosed and dying Chinese empire (Jones 2011). Lu uses a number of other similar tropes, including that of cannibalism. More specifically, Lu talks about a civilisation that declines so much that its members eat themselves in the last attempts to save their lives (Lu 2003; Lu 1990). Lu's Darwinist inclinations make him look for an external source of change (a 'whip' of nature). The Trilogy's plot is similar. Earth faces colonisation from Trisolaris after one of the main characters (Ye Wenjie) reveals Earth's location in space. As Ye explains to Trisolaris, 'our civilisation is no longer capable of solving its own problems. We need your force to intervene' (Liu 2016a, 300). She does so after realising that the Maoist cultural revolution and an ecological crisis pose fundamental problems, but humankind is not able to deal with them. What's more, other people barely realise these problems. It is made clear that 'to achieve [not only moral] awakening required a force outside the human race. This thought determined the entire direction of Ye's life' (Liu 2016a, 24). In an interview with US-based scholars, Liu repeated a similar concern. 'An inward-looking civilisation is the civilisation of happiness [but] in a long term, there is no future or prospect for an inward-looking civilisation' (Liu, Plotz, and Wang 2019). The Trilogy also suggests that one of the most critical problems of inward-looking civilisations is a knowledge barrier these civilisations impose on themselves. Simultaneously, the Trilogy sometimes explicitly refers to the late Chinese empire as an example of such a situation (Liu 2016b, 329).

Third, Liu adopts an orientalist interpretation of China's pre-colonial history that sees the Chinese empire as stagnant and irrational. For example, the Trilogy mocks traditional Chinese philosophies for their inability to contribute to scientific knowledge and development (for example Liu 2016a, 99–118). According to Shih Chih-yu, there have been two main Chinese political traditions working with this interpretation (Shih 2003, chapter 2). The first one accepts the orientalist image of China while closely adhering to the Western model of modernisation to solve China's problems. In other words, the proponents of this tradition also accept an orientalist prescription and find positives about West-inflicted changes. According to Shih, the May Fourth Movement and Lu Xun are the main exponents of this tradition. The second tradition also accepts the orientalist image of China but does not agree on the orientalist prescription. This stream criticises the Western imperialism, wants to preserve China's uniqueness but, at the same time, also adheres to modernisation of science, technology, economy and other areas while also being inspired by Western examples. The Chinese communist elites and leaders, especially Deng Xiaoping and the subsequent leaders, are identified by Shih as the key representatives of this tradition. Liu Cixin's writings exhibit signs of both these traditions. However, what Shih also indicates is that despite their differences, both these streams adopt a developmentalist logic (cf. also Jin 2020, 47). In other words, I want to point out that Liu Cixin is embedded in broader discussions about modernisation and, especially, that developmentalism has become a mainstream discourse and rationality in Chinese politics. In the following part, I show how Liu makes sense of developmentalism.

## **Modernity and the developmentalist solution**

This part aims to use Liu and his Trilogy to reveal two fundamental and still relevant sources of China's modernisation. These are developmentalism and (social) Darwinism. The desire for development is so deeply entrenched in the Trilogy that it should not be taken simply as a coincidental feature. Moreover, the Trilogy suggests that developmentalism should be taken as a fully-fledged discourse and ideology. Developmentalism has been crucial to the inception of the modern Chinese state and intellectual debates surrounding it (Zheng 2004) but also modern Chinese literature (Jones 2011). It underwrote the transformation from the Chinese empire to republican China and from Maoism to a capitalist market economy (Jones 2011, 4; Zheng 2004, for example 51–52). Developmentalism has been institutionalised in politics of communist China through leadership slogans that play an organisational and ideological role, and they are largely centred around developmentalist ideas and tropes (Karmazin 2020; J. Song and Gee 2020).

Authoritative Chinese dictionaries define development as a move from the simple to the complex, from the elementary to the advanced or from the unsophisticated to the elaborated (Jones 2011, 16). Developmentalism can be understood in a broader way as the advancement of living conditions, actors' capabilities and actors' positions within environments. It embodies adherence to socio-economic modernisation and strengthening as solutions to political problems (cf. Zheng 2004). However, it simultaneously is 'a way of knowing, narrating, and attempting to manage processes of radical historical change' (Jones 2011, 3). In the Trilogy, the nature of developmentalism is rather complex. It comprises an overall stage of advancement that includes military strength, economy, art and culture and, above all, scientific knowledge (cf. for example Liu 2016b, 185). Simultaneously, it is an overarching logic of how Earth attempts to deal with the Trisolaris challenge. Moreover, it is presented as a fundamental characteristic of each civilisation that determines its structural and hierarchical position in space as shown by Stephen Benedict Dyson (2019) in his comparison of Liu Cixin's Trilogy and Kenneth N. Waltz's neo-realism ideas.

For Chinese modernisers, development(alism) was tied to (social) Darwinism and related versions of evolutionary thinking from the very early stages when these two intellectual traditions started to appear in China in the late nineteenth century. Darwinism substantially influenced Chinese modernisers and intellectuals, including Liang Qichao who was one of the early and most significant promoters of the evolutionary thinking and Lu Xun (Jin 2022; Xiao 1995; Xu 2012). It may even be argued that China's modern identity was born out of the clash with the West and China's Darwinist interpretation of it, but scholars discuss Darwinianism's contemporary relevance only exceptionally (for example Hughes 2011). Although (social) Darwinism was especially important in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, Liu Cixin's works show the continuing influence of Darwinism and evolutionary thinking in China.

At this point, it is useful to highlight that evolutionary thinking and Darwinism in China were largely derived from Yan Fu's translations of TH Huxley (Jin 2022, 47; Pusey 1983). 'It is ironic that Yan sought to disseminate

social Darwinism in China by translating Huxley's most famous anti-social Darwinist lecture' (Jin 2020, 51). However, the prominence of Yan Fu's interpretations led to the situation that the ideas of 'struggle for existence' and 'natural selection' were largely interpreted in the social-Darwinist way. As such, Liang Qichao's and Lu Xun's thinking was closer to social Darwinism, rather than original Darwin's ideas (Jin 2022; Jin 2020; Schwartz 1964).

In a similar fashion, Liu Cixin's writings lean on the side of social Darwinism. Several analysts of Liu Cixin emphasise Liu's meticulous elaboration of 'the universe's cruelty' (Jia, Du, and Fashimpaur 2018, 59) growing from the relentlessness of natural laws which impact *social and political* relations. The Trilogy introduces 'a universe in which the only purpose of life can be its own furtherance' (Dande 2021, 193). This viewpoint is shared with Lu Xun and Liang Qichao. For example, Liang hoped to make the Chinese nation understand evolutionary principles as *the* fundamental basis of natural and, especially, social change (Jia, Du, and Fashimpaur 2018, 60).

Evolutionary and (social) Darwinist explanations appear at almost all critical junctures of the Trilogy. Let us consider two specific examples. First, when Trisolaris establish their rule over Earth, the main representative of Trisolaris explains the situation clearly.

Mere existence is already the result of incredible luck. Such was the case on Earth in the past, and such has always been the case in this cruel universe. But at some point, humanity began to develop the illusion that they're *entitled* to life [emphasis original], that life can be taken for granted. This is the fundamental reason for your defeat. The *flag of evolution will be raised once again* on this world [emphasis added], and you will now fight for your survival. (Liu 2017, 251)

She also clarifies that the population of Earth needs to be reduced and it is to happen through natural selection. 'I hope that you will eat food [i.e., other people], and not be eaten by food [i.e., other people]' (Liu 2017, 251). Although the representative of Trisolaris talks about natural laws, the broader context of the situation clearly indicates that the logic of natural laws applies to society. In other words, social and political relations are subject to the logic of natural selection and struggle for existence.

It seems that the Trilogy incorporates the principles of survival of the fittest as well as survival of the strongest. The Trilogy's narrative oscillates between both of them. The previous example's logic involves the principle of survival of the strongest. As it is made clear by the Trisolaris representative, the weak will not survive. However, the main characters of the Trilogy are often able to influence the course of human history not because they are necessarily the strongest, but rather because they can accommodate according to the context of the overall situation. Moreover, humankind launches a number of special projects and initiatives to respond to the Trisolaris challenge. However, whether they prove to be reasonable and effective or not depends on evolving circumstances. In other words, their success is not fully predictable and depends on how 'fit' these projects eventually prove to be.

Second, the Trilogy introduces the cosmos as densely populated despite the expectations shared among humans. The nature of co-existence of cosmic civilisations is further explained by the dark forest theory. It rests on two axioms.

'First: Survival is the primary need of civilisation. Second: Civilisation continuously grows and expands, but the total matter in the universe remains constant' (Liu 2016b, 6). Although the theory shares a lot with IR realism (Dyson 2019), it is also profoundly Darwinian. Survival is not just about mere strength, power or security, but also the ability to foster life, environmental (ecological) conditions or a given civilisation's overall state of development which includes science, technology and culture.

### **Ironic and unintended consequences: disrupting Chinese developmentalism**

Developmentalism, often in combination with evolutionary thinking, has been presented as a way of reclaiming and reviving a civilisation's agency. According to Liu Cixin, his literary predecessors like Liang Qichao, Lu Xun, and politicians like Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping, this has been developmentalism's central promise. Although developmentalism and Darwinism are preached and worshipped by Liu, the Trilogy still retains the potential for disruption and irony. I argue the Trilogy renders development unachievable, unnecessary and uncontrollable at certain moments or in certain ways. However, this is not to say that development(alism) is completely refuted by Liu—far from that. Rather, these three disruptions emerge, perhaps unintentionally, as limits or dilemmas connected to the developmentalist discourse and Liu's engagement with it.

First, development is, in the end, defined as elusive and unachievable. Over the course of 19 million years which is the ultimate timespan of the Trilogy, humankind never secures a truly sufficient level of development to rest in peace. For Liang Qichao, Lu Xun and Liu Cixin, development is a constant run forward without any final conclusion. It might be argued that a similar perspective is shared by Deng Xiaoping (Keith 2009) and perhaps even Xi Jinping (Economy 2018). For Liu, development seems to be defined in a transitive sense and, hence, must be distinguished from intransitive modernity. This distinction and tension apparently has its roots in the writings of Lu Xun (Jones 2011, 15). However, while the promise of developmentalism is to bring about modernity and civilisation, the process of developing them can never be truly finished and, hence, the promise cannot be kept (at least not in a strict sense). In the Trilogy, the developmentalist temporality is underpinned by Darwinism as it is made clear that evolution does not wait, and one needs to adjust constantly.

However, the problem of unachievability goes even deeper. In the developmentalist framework, one's rise is possible because of development, but one finds out that the developmental logic makes it almost impossible to secure it. As stated above, development is always in the making and, moreover, is unable to remedy previous wrongs. In the Trilogy, developmentalism and also survivalist attitudes must be (re-)learned by the human civilisation that lives its indolent, easy and comfortable life (esp. Liu 2016b, 197–324). Humankind even starts partly mimicking Trisolaris where the need for survival is taken to extremes. It leads to a totalitarian political regime and the notion of development is almost fetishised. In Liu Cixin's short stories *Taking Care of God* and *Taking Care of Humans*, the question is taken even further. There are two irreconcilable propositions 'that we contain an evolutionary imperative to survival,

and that all efforts at survival are ultimately doomed' (Thieret 2015, 37–38). As suggested in the short stories as well as the Trilogy, one can hardly control the overall evolutionary and, hence, developmental process.

China's real-world experience is very similar. When the Chinese accepted an orientalist image of themselves, 'they at the same time denied a long history of cultural superiority that Chinese leaders had for generations aspired to. This lost sense of superiority frustrated Chinese of all strata and classes in their quest for collective rebirth.' Moreover, 'the more Chinese hope for a future, strong Chinese state, the more they remind themselves of its backwardness' (Shih 2003, 42). And, the more they recognise their backwardness, the more they aspire for triumphalist development (Callahan 2010; Shih 2003, 42–43). This is what defines the (post-)colonial game in which developmentalism sustains hopes that, however, cannot be fully materialised. In this way, China Dream as a flagship slogan and discourse of Xi Jinping can be challenged as well. While it aspires to achieve the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' as a response to China's previous humiliation caused by colonial and imperial powers (Callahan 2017), it is unreachable in the same sense as just described.

Second, by problematising the relationship between developmentalism and Darwinism, the Trilogy points out that developmentalism may not be necessary or unavoidable. In the *Death's End* (the last part of the Trilogy), new survival strategies against attacks from outer space are deliberated. One of them rests on purposeful and ostentatious degradation of developmental capacities by slowing the speed of light. This would be visible from outside our galaxy and, hence, discourage other civilisations from understanding Earth as a potential threat. Hence, this plan embodies a survival strategy of 'the weakest' or 'the least capable' (Frean and Abraham 2001). The leading characters in the book refuse this strategy because they believe it is non-inspiring and inward-looking. However, the very end of the Trilogy suggests that this strategy may not be avoided, nevertheless. It is because there will always be someone stronger than our civilisation (for example Liu 2016b, 515–524).

Moreover, *Death's End* also proposes a survival strategy based on affection and care. Cheng Xin, one of the most feminine characters of the Trilogy, survives because of others loved her thanks to her caring mentality. 'Wade lifted his head and looked at Cheng Xin with rarely seen helplessness and pleading. [...] "If we lose our human nature, we lose much, but if we lose our bestial nature, we lose everything." "I choose human nature," Cheng Xin said, looking around at everyone. "I believe you all will, as well." (Liu 2017, 546)' To be sure, Cheng is an exceptional character in the Trilogy and is portrayed as smart but naïve. Nonetheless, she becomes one of the longest surviving humans in space while even a robotic ambassador of Trisolaris ends up helping her. Liu Cixin may mean it as an ironic end to the Trilogy, but it is also ironic in the Rortian sense. It indicates that relations and motives can be transformed and that developmentalism may not be the only way of survival.

Third, one of the messages of the Trilogy is, quite surprisingly, that development comes at a price, may be damaging and has unintended consequences. In short, it is uncontrollable. This conclusion partly stems from development's elusive and evolutionary nature. For example, the ultimate technological aspiration of humankind in the Trilogy is the creation of the speed-of-light engine. It proves to be possible at the very end of the Trilogy after many previous

twists and turns, but it is ultimately revealed that the new propulsion drive inflicts irreversible damage to the cosmos and changes its physical characteristics in the areas where used. Moreover, technologies also change society, but not in a pre-designed way. 'A new technology can transform society, but when the technology is in its infancy, very few people can see its full potential. [...] But as soon as it became real, if one examined it through the lens of sociology, one could see that it would completely change the face of human civilisation' (Liu 2017, 76). The argument that technologies affect societies political and culturally evokes the failure of the *ti yong* (essence vs. function) conception, which emerged during self-strengthening campaigns of the Chinese empire in the late nineteenth century. It aspired but ultimately failed to preserve Chinese culture (essence) while adopting Western technology (function) as new technologies remade the then Chinese society and propelled incorporation of Western ideologies (Harrison 2001).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed how the Remembrance of Earth's Past trilogy by Liu Cixin is embedded in the tradition of Chinese debates about modernisation *qua* responses to colonisation, how it sustains and advances this tradition, but also how it can disrupt the tradition. I distinguished two types of disruption, namely external and internal critique. I focused on the latter, which is characterised by ironies (doubts about its worldview) and by bringing 'selvedges' to light. Selvedges are the final frontiers of the given discourse where its internal logic starts to crumble. I read the Trilogy as embedded in the hybrid (post-colonial) time where the past, the present and the future are intermingled. By following Auchter's call to understand history as 'a multi-layered set of narratives' (Lemke et al. 2023, 10), I argued and showed that the Trilogy's narrative provides an internal and immanent critique of Chinese development(alism). The narrative has been present in China since the beginning of the twentieth century and, among other things, tries to respond to a historic(al) problem of China's colonisation and humiliation.

In the preceding part of the paper, I described three ironies. To be sure, similar views have been expressed by different authors and in different contexts, but here they originate from the same discursive tradition they criticise. Liu Cixin's destabilisation of developmentalism is probably not intentional. However, I contend that the disruptions and ironies we can find in his work follow from his ambition to craft a new world in which the issue of developmentalism is considered carefully, deeply and with all the imaginable consequences. This ambition is typical for Liu Cixin as well as other Chinese science-fiction authors and derives from their understanding of a colonial encounter as a moment creating cultural uncertainty and shattering old frameworks of knowing and acting.

These three ironies show that, in a certain sense, development is unachievable, unnecessary and uncontrollable. First, Liu Cixin practically portrays development in a transitive sense. Development's purpose is to move us to modernisation and overcome the colonial burden, but it is a constant process without a final conclusion. This situation resembles the process of identity formation described by post-colonial scholars. In this process, the colonised

attempts to become like the coloniser but is never able to achieve so. Rather, the colonised's mimicking efforts only accentuate contingencies and limits of the identities in play (Bhabha 1984). Second, even if we accept the (social) Darwinian logic as a key driver of politics as the Trilogy does, Liu suggests that development is not necessarily the only survival strategy. Third, development is uncontrollable in the sense that it cannot be fully pre-planned, has unintended consequences and comes at the expense of something else.

Through these ironies, the foundations of developmentalism are challenged and its selvedges manifested. There are potentially many of them, but I wish to discuss three selvedges in particular: progress (tied to unachievability), affection and life (tied to unnecessary) and grace with its twofold meaning of beauty and compassion (tied to uncontrollability). While these selvedges are raised in the Trilogy, they are nowhere to be seen in the most prominent articulations of the official developmentalist discourse of China. For example, the Chinese leadership slogans, which are official expressions of the Chinese state ideology, are dominated by developmentalist themes but barely consider any of these selvedges (Karmazin 2020; J. Song and Gee 2020). This is blatantly obvious to students of Chinese politics. However, the fact that these selvedges are articulated in the Trilogy only accentuates its added value.

What do these ironies and selvedges mean, and what are their implications? The implication of the first pair (unachievability as irony, progress as a selvedge) relates to what we can, or rather cannot, gain from history. If we frame history as a set of narratives as Auster did, it is not meaningful to expect to learn 'objective' historical lessons or master how to avoid negative historical outcomes ('Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it.'). Yet, Auchter still hints that it might be reasonable to hope for untying ourselves from repressive histories or unleashing new (subaltern, more plural ways of constructing) ones. However, developmentalism does not allow one (China) to emancipate from one's (China's) history. As argued above, the developmentalist response propels constant returning to the colonial moment and, in fact, playing the colonialism-derived game. If we stay within the developmentalist discourse, the more Chinese hope for a bright future, the more they remind themselves of their (previous/imagined) backwardness. And, the more they recognise their backwardness, the more they aspire for triumphalist development.

Second, development may be unnecessary because it is not the only way of unfolding or changing history. The Trilogy briefly introduces affection and care for life as creative and productive ways of historical evolution. If laws of nature and history are connected with demands, struggles and environmental pressures, then fostering, supporting and caring may be feasible responses (cf. Latour 2018). Moreover, development's unnecessary is underlined by the point that I mentioned in the previous paragraph and that concerns progress as a selvedge. Although development is progressive, at least in part, because it represents a move from the elementary to the advanced, I argued above that it does not completely fulfil its progressive promise of emancipating ourselves from our history.

Third, Liu Cixin's Trilogy but also developmentalism as such present the world and history as restless. The irony of this developmentalist restlessness lies in paying a cost for development in the form of unintended (unwanted)

consequences and negative externalities. Obvious examples are connected with environmental degradation. However, Liu's writings unveil a deeper tragedy of modernity. Development is a never-ending endeavour that is successful only temporarily and while striving for development, more beautiful worlds or modernities might have been abandoned. Liu's idea is, as discussed previously, that beautiful inward-looking worlds are untenable. He illustrates that in the Trilogy. One of the main characters (Luo Ji) tries to live in his isolated farm situated in beautiful surroundings, suffused with a peaceful and cosy atmosphere and disconnected from the world where humankind prepares for the invasion of Trisolaris. However, this private paradise did not and cannot last long. Liu presents this as a historical necessity and does not offer any solution. Nonetheless, this issue reveals grace in the sense of beauty but perhaps also compassion (reconciliation, inner piece) as selvedges of developmentalism. If we recognise that there are different historical trajectories and different ways of constructing modernity, we may consider their value not only on the basis of development, but also other considerations such as beauty, compassion and the like.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Funding

This paper results from Metropolitan University Prague research project no. 100-4 'Center for Security Studies' (2023) based on a grant from the Institutional Fund for the Long-term Strategic Development of Research Organizations.

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# Russian, US and Chinese Revisionism: Bridging Domestic and Great Power Politics

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## *Abstract*

The essay investigates the revisionism of great powers, namely Russia, the United States and China. We study intermestic configurations, linking domestic populism, the presidential power of national leaders as expressed by their strategic narratives, and each state's international revisionist posture. In each case, we identify a different style of revisionism: Russia's 'guerrilla' great power revisionism, the Trumpian anti-doctrine revisionism, and China's revisionist quest for power and status. We argue that the different revisionist trajectories of these great powers contribute to the multifaceted and uneven unmaking of global liberal internationalism and liberal norms rather than to a coherent revisionist challenge.

THE UNITED STATES, CHINA AND RUSSIA ARE THE MOST significant players defining revisionism in the current global liberal order. Vladimir Putin's strong revisionist instincts have been on display since Russia's involvement in South Ossetia, and they have fully unfolded in and around the annexation of Crimea and the related crisis in eastern Ukraine. Reacting to these and other challenges, the United States under Donald Trump and China under Xi Jinping have reoriented their internal as well as external political courses. What has ensued is a partial, and rather erratic, retreat by the United States from its *status quo*, liberal, internationalist positions: we call it Trump's anti-doctrine. US advancement has been paralleled in China by Xi's efforts to tighten political control and his more confident and active foreign policy.

These dynamics bring up the timely question of how these three forms of revisionisms differ and whether they will bring about new, specific modes of political order. It is important to reflect on the possible extent to which any of these countries might be able to establish and normalise revisionist practices in international politics, given their current prominence. Indeed, the leaders of lesser powers have always observed and often imitated contemporaneous great powers. By analysing these issues in the cases of the United States, China and Russia, we argue that while the challenges of revisionism are significant and similar in some respects, they diverge in others, with a lack of an overall revisionist

The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Czech Science Foundation (*Grantová Agentura České Republiky*) under Standard Research grant number GA20-07805S, administered by Metropolitan University Prague.

pattern. We show in this sense that each state is making its own revisionist blueprint, contributing in different revisionist ways to the multifaceted and uneven unmaking of global liberal internationalism. Our argument carries a caveat: we think that liberal internationalism was never as strong as the literature and its promoters wanted us to believe.

In the essay, we argue that there is a close relationship between, on the one hand, the ways in which increasingly strong forms of populism are embedded in the domestic political environment and, on the other hand, a given state's revisionism in the international arena. Simultaneously, we acknowledge a possibly looser relationship between the two as populism may not be the fundamental reason for revision. We point specifically to strategic narratives as factors that connect domestic populism and its positioning in the internal political environment with the politics of the elite leadership and its international revisionist aspirations. We therefore identify the following revisionist styles and routes. Russia's revisionism is that of a 'guerrilla great power', relying on the consolidation of its influence domestically and regionally in the so-called 'Russian world' and its 'near abroad'. In the absence of a powerful ideology as its bedrock, the character of Russian revisionism is chiefly derived from Vladimir Putin's personal charisma and cult as well as his efforts to limit democratic processes in exchange for allegedly improving economic standards. As Russia is internationally lagging in terms of comprehensive national power and overall development, this revisionism relies on almost complete domestic control, local socio-political support in key territories and a strategy based on actions below the threshold of an open confrontation.

Under President Trump, US revisionism has no doctrine; rather, it is based on a simple strategic narrative: Make America Great Again. Through this nation-first narrative, Trump mobilised a disenchanted portion of the electorate to support his erratic pushes for anti-globalisation aimed at restoring the 'old days' of economic prosperity. Current US revisionist practices include Trump's novel use of Twitter as his quasi-official presidential channel, his unconventional bypassing of the traditional political edifice of the US government, his revelling in the high-profile scrapping of deals and conventions without replacing them, and the blending of his personal and national interests. Although the United States has many enemies on the international scene, Trump has focused on China; Russia, the other obvious rival, has been under sanctions since the annexation of Crimea.

Finally, China is a revisionist power that aims to achieve status and power in the global international system. As expressed by a leading Chinese international relations scholar, China drifts away from its traditional 'keeping a low profile strategy' so that it can 'strive for achievement' (Yan 2014). This long-term and incremental revisionism distinguishes it from truly revolutionary states aiming to dismantle the system in full as well as those revisionist states simply aiming to change the constitutive rules and/or balance of power. China's revisionism is mixed and complex, arising from domestic anxiety about political disorder and fragmentation, and encompassing large-scale aspirations to change the balance of power and fully exploit (rather than entirely alter, at least for the foreseeable future) international rules. This type of revisionism is co-defined by a desire to continue in its own development through its attachment to global economy despite the existence of conflicts and disagreements with some Western or Asian countries. The extent of these ambitions has been revealed in recent years in the context of President Xi Jinping's personal consolidation of power, facilitated by his quasi-populist mobilisation of popular sentiments.

These revisionist approaches are conditioned by the diverging economic and political positions of the discussed countries. While Russia tries to capitalise on its historical heritage of being a great power and dominating a large part of Eurasia, its political, economic, social and other resources are undoubtedly much less significant than those of the United States or China. Russia's 'guerrilla' great power revisionism is a proportionate strategic reaction to this structural condition, which is coupled with a strategic metanarrative highlighting desired yet endangered Russian greatness. Although history books may remember Trump's presidency as an outlier episode, his political approach represents an attempt to navigate the United States in the post-'unipolar moment' world. Compared to both Russia and the United States, China is a rising power that aspires to achieve status on the world stage commensurate with its economic power and size as expressed in Xi Jinping's central narrative of the 'China Dream' (Xi 2014). While somewhat ambiguous, the China Dream highlights Chinese ambitions to rise on the world stage which was not typical under Xi's predecessors.

However different in their components and objectives, these three cases of revisionism share a central theme that can be summarised by the title of Byman and Pollack's key 2001 article, 'Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In'. Our contribution to the topic of (great power) revisionism should be understood even more broadly and in relation to the two most theoretically sophisticated works on revisionism thus far: Goddard (2018) and Cooley *et al.* (2019). Both theorise and classify revisionist countries according to the characteristics inherent in their international position or orientation. However, they do not scrutinise specific domestic conditions, without which these orientations would be hardly tenable. Alexander Cooley and his colleagues differentiate between various revisionisms is based on what countries aspire to achieve *vis-à-vis* the principles of the international order, while Goddard's focus is on a revisionist orientation according to a given state's position in international networks. Both approaches require or, at the very least, benefit from the formation (and the preservation) of a specific worldview in domestic politics. A fundamental reason that magnifies the importance of domestic dynamics is connected to the changing character of governance. Due to increasing technological density and internet penetration, authoritarian regimes nowadays are somewhat less autocratic than a couple of decades ago, as they tend to be more dependent on their domestic populations and/or are more accountable to them (Svolik 2009; Soest & Grauvogel 2017).

The essay proceeds as follows: the first section introduces our analytical framework; the three following sections are devoted to Russia, the United States and China respectively; finally, we return to the connections between domestic politics and the international revisionist orientation in the conclusion.

### *Analysing the domestic and international facets of revisionism*

In our essay, we inquire into the mutual interplay of the domestic politics and international actions of the selected great powers with the goal of differentiating which kinds of (great power) revisionists these countries are. More specifically, we focus on whether and how domestic populism and international revisionism align and mutually underpin each other. To do so, we analyse the orientation of each state towards the current liberal order by

examining the strategic narrative employed by the national leadership, the focus of our study. This choice is reinforced, and in some sense vindicated, by the fact that we are dealing with political systems wherein executive leaders play a very strong role.

Strategic narratives are defined as stories ‘by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors’ (Miskimmon *et al.* 2017, p. 6).<sup>1</sup> We strengthen the analytical leverage of this concept by incorporating other components and move beyond a narrowly defined focus on utterances and ways of narrating to examine the meaning, calculations and practices linked to strategic narratives. For us, strategic narratives are used to legitimise and justify grand strategic plans and their application. We concur with Silove (2018) that a grand strategy can be understood as a combination of a narrative and a practice. However, in contrast to a grand strategic perspective that simplistically views the domestic environment as static, the perspective of strategic narratives allows a higher degree of sensitivity to domestic social dynamics (Coticchia 2015). This allows us to identify whether—and to what extent—strategic narratives incorporate or co-opt populist programmes and their relationship to achieving domestic control. It should also be noted that specific narratives, plots and messages are often multiple and mixed, being produced for different target audiences with different intentions. Our goal is neither to list all of them nor to disentangle them completely. Rather, we work with those that most crucially define the revisionist tendencies of the concerned countries, paving the way for further studies refining this approach.

When dealing with the domestic context, populism is the central term for us. It is inherently full of ambiguities and may be best understood by highlighting these ambiguities (Canovan 1999; Laclau 2005). Populism exaggerates affection for people rather than the elites but tends to be represented by a charismatic leader, namely an elite of some kind. It criticises (or avoids partially or altogether) representative democracy for its insufficient or incorrect mode of representation. However, it tends to elevate the charismatic leader above the people as well as the political institutions used by populism, despite seemingly distancing itself from them. By arguing that the leaders’ political actions epitomise the general will, the populist rhetoric and action opposes social pluralism and, hence, the interests of many in society (Mudde 2004). Hence, populism is expressed through a sustained discourse that involves a strategic dimension. The populist interplay between demagogy and demophilia goes well beyond mere utterances (Meny & Surel 2002, p. 3). The populist action often impacts on domestic institutional settings but it also puts forward particular interests and agendas and may help build strategic coalitions (Laclau 2005; Lisi & Borghetto 2018). In turn, it co-defines the state’s strategic orientation and, hence, overlaps with the concept of strategic narratives.

Jessop’s (1982, 1990) and Poulantzas’ (1978) view of the state as an arena of strategic relations between a variety of actors, social segments and interest groups creates a suitable framework for understanding the state–society relationship. The key aspect of (state) politics is connected to how a dominant position of the elites emerges out of their strategies, visions and relations with other segments of society or even international actors.

<sup>1</sup>For the original articulation, see Freedman (2006).

Gramsci's (1971, 2000) ideas about the integral state (*Lo Stato Integrato*), which is understood as a hegemonic equilibrium encompassing coercive power and consent, and the relationship between the state and civil society help us unfold the *problematique*. Similarly to Jessop and Poulantzas, the relationship between 'political society' (the elites) and civil society is defined by strategic actions between different segments of society but also their discourses. The key point is therefore to look at how strategic narratives and actions of the populist elites position domestic society for specific purposes desired by the leaders.

While a consideration of political institutions is fundamental to understanding the operation of populism, the abovementioned notion of domestic social and political dynamics does not correspond well with ideal types of political regimes, as typically used in the analysis of the domestic institutional environment. Hence, we focus on the hybridisation of political regimes because they better capture the dynamic changes and nuances of power in state–society relations. We avoid subsuming all three countries under one classificatory scheme. Instead, we focus on the populist upturn through polyarchy in the United States, the intensification of post-Maoist consultative Leninism in China and Russia's illiberal electoral democracy. Moreover, as a few authors, including Václav Havel have indicated, new non-democratic regimes can be characterised by the increasing sophistication of their governmental strategies and tactics and their penetration of the cyberspace of other newly enlarged political spheres (Havel 1990, p. 12; 2008). Perhaps ironically, this goes well with the neo-Marxists' attention to how political power tends to establish its dominance in new areas including cyberspace and the technologisation of politics (Thomas 2009).

Domestic strategic constellations and group interests influence or are directly exported to foreign strategies (van Apeldoorn & de Graaff 2014; Chacko & Jayasuriya 2018). Such export leads us to ponder how populist manoeuvring is inscribed into the concerned countries' policies in international affairs, leading us to identify what kinds of great powers *qua* revisionists these countries are. We ascertain these configurations inductively and with sensitivity to the specific contexts rather than on the basis of pre-established categories (Cronin 1999; Clark 2011; Goddard 2018; Cooley *et al.* 2019). In accordance with our main theoretical/conceptual essay,<sup>2</sup> we understand revisionism as steps taken against a set of generally accepted and established principles related both to procedures and actual power distribution within the current global liberal order. Among these, we would like to flag constitutive and regulative institutions, norms and rules as well as existing and sedimented security, politico-economic and diplomatic practices. Related to this understanding, we will pay attention to the propensity for conflict, namely to investigate what kind of stakes the countries invest into their revisionist policies, how they frame and justify their endeavours, and how these issues are embedded in their geostrategic orientation.

### *Russian 'directed populism' and calculated revisionism*

As discussed above, strategic narratives are usually multiple. In this context, we will discuss the strategic metanarrative of oppressed greatness in the case of Russia, which builds upon

<sup>2</sup>See Hynek and Karmazin in this collection.

historical imaginations of Russia's civilisational/cultural greatness, its traditional status as a great power and the existence of the 'Russian world' (White & Feklyunina 2014). These components effectively combine and translate into the concept of the 'near abroad' and Russia's desired influence within this geographical sphere (Toal 2017), coupled with narratives highlighting the West's disregard for Russia's great power position and its rights. Specific strategic narratives point to the desired multipolar world that is seen, however, as opposed by the US hegemony, supported by the Western alliance (Chatterje-Doody 2014) that, in the form of NATO, does not recognise Russia's traditional zone of influence.

The anti-Western trend intensified around Putin's re-election in 2012 (Szostek 2017). Based on its narrative of external threat (Russophobia), the regime has strengthened the country's military while shoring up its own power by preserving the socio-domestic consensus, exploiting nostalgia for Soviet-era Russian greatness but also the Orthodox religion. Putin famously referred to the downfall of the USSR as a catastrophe,<sup>3</sup> arguing that loosening domestic control might lead to the disintegration of the Russian geopolitical pole and social order. He aligned, in this sense, the survival of his own regime with Russia's international status as a great power.

Corresponding to the narrative aspects discussed above and the actual political developments examined below, we characterise Russia as a 'guerrilla great power revisionist'. The strength of guerrilla fighters depends on their unity and domestic support, one of their key strategic assets when facing stronger opponents. Similarly, Putin's Russia focuses on consolidating the domestic support and the influence in the Near Abroad, often backed up by the Russian diaspora. These are elements of Russia's strength that the West and global liberalism cannot effectively, or at least not completely, rival and alter. Moreover, the consolidation of the domestic and near abroad support makes up for Russia's disadvantages in terms of its overall development and national power.

Russia takes the opposite approach to countries outside its area of influence, targeting domestic dynamics and social cohesion in liberal democracies to undermine their cooperation and reduce their ability to act. In doing so, Russia operates below the threshold of an open (great power) war and largely uses non-military means, bar the unacknowledged but well known strategy of targeted killings. Moreover, there is one additional point made by Russian strategic narratives and that defines the Russian guerrilla approach. The Putin–Medvedev tandem did not fully define Russia's identity in opposition to Europeanness. They argued that Russia developed from and contributed to European civilisation, yet they made it clear that traditional European civilisational values<sup>4</sup> had been abandoned by contemporary liberal democracies. Hence, Western countries are portrayed as the true revisionists (White & Feklyunina 2014, p. 109). Regardless of whether the Russian leadership genuinely believes this, it creates further confusion, as good guerrilla

<sup>3</sup>'Putin Deplores Collapse of USSR', *BBC News*, 25 April 2005, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4480745.stm>, accessed 1 August 2019.

<sup>4</sup>Putin's and Medvedev's arguments about true European or civilisational values may vary as well as they may be rather unclear and general. They may refer to 'high culture' of great novels, the Christian religion or social cohesion. For a deeper discussion of this issues see, for example, White and Feklyunina (2014) and Tsygankov (2016).

tactics do. The argumentation is repeated in many specific situations when the West is blamed for revising the international order.<sup>5</sup>

While the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games might have been seen as a landmark for the rise of China, not only as a country but also as a vibrant society, the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games can be understood as a simulacrum thereof (Arnold & Foxall 2014). Bolstering Russian nationalism was arguably the only real effect of this charade. This example indicates a fundamental trait of state–society relations in Russia. Arguing that liberalism and, in fact, social pluralism, have become obsolete (Barber & Foy 2019), Putin has largely focused on hollowing out state–societal dynamics in his nationalist politics. Although he repeatedly distanced himself from populism (Van Herpen 2018), Putin exhibited various characteristics of a successful populist. He is a charismatic leader standing above institutions, presenting a vision of a unified Russian people. Precluding the unfolding of populism, Putin’s specific version of populism is controlled and directed, which may be seen as a parallel to the ‘strong’ or ‘directed’ democracy that is also favoured by Putin. Since becoming Russian president, Putin has focused on managing dynamics at the intersection of civil and political society and removed actors whose aspirations were incompatible with his own (White 2008). While it would be too simplistic to assess Russia’s civil society as completely passive and/or loyal, its reach, dynamics and influence are relatively limited (Evans *et al.* 2005; Hemment 2015). Nationalism is the key obstacle to stronger societal backlash in this respect. Rather than being primarily focused on stimulating Russian civil society and its activities, Putin’s nationalism has relied on symbolic gestures such as the re-establishment of the national Unity Day holiday in 2005 and repeated (yet unfulfilled) promises that Russia would become the fifth largest economy in the world.<sup>6</sup> These and other similar steps underpinned Putin’s steady popularity and his conservative, moralistic and overtly anti-Western worldview (Tsygankov 2016; Snyder 2018; Walker 2018).

In a similar fashion, Putin has reorganised the Russian political system with the overarching aim of creating a strong, unified, less federalist and more authoritarian country with ‘directed or sovereign democracy’ (Krastev 2006), or rather, ‘plebiscitarian patrimonialism’ (Hanson 2011). Sovereign democracy fits into the overall strategic narrative in that it serves to ‘justify Russia’s right to build a democracy free from external interference and by following its own traditions rather than simply borrowing Western practices’ (White & Feklyunina 2014, p. 106). As a result, the country’s politico-economic trajectory has gone from de-liberalisation through *re-étatatisation* (re-nationalisation) to the rise of an oligarchic economic patrimonialism that has effectively diminished the role of an already weak civil society (Becker & Vasileva 2017). These processes are coupled with the gradual personification of Russia’s directed democracy. The stability and legitimacy of the Russian political regime largely rely on the personality of Vladimir Putin. Moreover, political power seems to be more and more monopolised, and it is estimated that Putin

<sup>5</sup>See Allison in this special issue.

<sup>6</sup>See, ‘When Will Russia Become the World’s Fifth Biggest Economy? Don’t Ask Vladimir Putin’, *Meduza*, 8 May 2018, available at: <https://meduza.io/en/short/2018/05/08/when-will-russia-become-the-world-s-fifth-biggest-economy-don-t-ask-vladimir-putin>, accessed 11 May 2020.

rules with the help of 20–30 of his most trusted advisers, with the real political power in the hands of less than ten people (Kendall-Taylor *et al.* 2017, p. 7).

While election manipulation has also been a noticeable component of the political regime and state–society relations, it is estimated that the 2018 presidential elections were relatively free from fraud (Roth 2018). Public approval rates of Vladimir Putin and the general direction of Russia were declining from 2009 to 2014 (Sills *et al.* 2018); this trend appears to have reversed in 2014. Russia's engagement in the Ukrainian crisis and its annexation of Crimea, the stark Western reaction against Russia or even the abovementioned 2014 Olympic Games helped increase the nationalist spirit (Chernenko 2018) and consolidate Putin's position to the point that a report published by *Bloomberg* estimated that he could easily lead Russia until 2030 (Sills *et al.* 2018). In the context of its geopolitical losses after 1991, Russia gradually abandoned its systemic aspirations to redefine the global political structure and shifted to a more subtle, sub-systemic and subversive approach. We specifically approach contemporary Russia as a resurgent, risk-taking, limited-aims revisionist great power featuring a type of revisionism blurring the definition of whom should be regarded as a revisionist. According to Russian strategic narratives, Russia is defending its traditional great power status and values and true European civilisation. This revisionism-in-denial is, however, accompanied by a distinctive strategic guerrilla-like approach that eschews war as a decisive means of confrontation and has mastered what has been identified as a method of 'unpeace' (Kello 2017, ch. 8). Expanding its own strategic tradition, which has included the assassination of foreign officials, military invasions and information warfare, this strategic approach favours actions below the threshold of an open war with other great powers. The domestically directed populism and suppressed civil society, which together bring about domestic support and obedience, create the key asset for this approach.

Russia's strategic approach unfolds at two levels. First, Russia's approach has been driven by the partially successful intention to exercise control over Russia's near abroad in order to extend and deepen the geopolitical basis for Russia's overall operation. Despite its many drawbacks, all created by uneven or unintended local dynamics in areas Russia seeks to control (Cooley 2012), consolidating influence in Eurasia has been understood as fundamental to the vision of Russia's greatness and to retaining its position as a great power in international politics (Laruelle 2008; Toal 2017). Second, Russia's global foreign policy is focused on undermining the power or willingness of its opponents. It involves Russian efforts to upset social and political consensus or cohesion in both Europe and the United States, to influence regional conflicts—especially those flaring across the Middle East—and to increase disunity among international allies, and the European Union more in particular.

These tactics have resulted in the enmeshing of the United States into power-exhausting and attention-splitting foreign endeavours and interventions (see Allison in this special issue) and have incrementally decreased the US public's support for war-like engagements in the post-George W. Bush era. Tactically, the approach includes the mobilisation of Russia's cyberspace capabilities, which do not seem world-class but are often used in technologically simple yet politically clever ways. The three telling examples have been the cases of the 'Shadow Brokers' (the Russian government appropriated and used computer exploits previously developed by the United States); the leaking of Clinton

campaign emails by Russia to Wikileaks to influence the 2016 US presidential elections; and the phenomenon of the Kremlin's internet trolls (Shane *et al.* 2017; Golovchenko *et al.* 2018). Two broad requirements ensure the feasibility of Russia's approach: its actions are intended to stay below the threshold of an overt (global) great power confrontation with Western powers; moreover, significant disputes with China are avoided, despite the two countries' many diverging preferences (Lo 2008; Radchenko 2014).

*The US anti-doctrine: bifurcated revisionism*

As we explain below, the case of the United States represents an example of anti-doctrine, bifurcated and anti-establishment revisionist power. At the centre stands the nation-first, strategic narrative 'Make America Great Again' with its ostensible aim of reducing dependencies on not only structural rivals such as Russia and China but also its EU and NATO allies (Boucher & Thies 2019). This strategic narrative has been further particularised and accompanied by the anti-establishment, highly populist narrative of 'Draining the (DC) Swamp' for domestic political consumption. Through these central narrative themes, Donald Trump has attempted to exploit the anger and intrinsic 'political incorrectness' of a disenchanted portion of the electorate to gain support for his anti-globalisation pushes and discursive efforts to restore the halcyon days of US prosperity. Compared to the carefully planned and executed revisionist strategies of Russia and China, which have been underpinned by efficiently working state apparatuses, US revisionism has been marked by its single-person, erratic and bifurcated character, which we label Trump's 'anti-doctrine'. His actions stand in sharp contrast to the country's rich culture of formulating a coherent strategic culture and foreign/political doctrine. First, rather than capitalising on the country's political and bureaucratic expertise, Trump has bypassed this structure, preferring amateurish showmanship and high-profile walking away from deals and conventions. Second, Trump has paradoxically tried to maintain the US international position by practices that are inherently revisionist, especially an overt insistence on putting US interests first, even when this damages the interests of friends and allies and goes against the tenet of liberal institutionalism/complex interdependence in international relations.

For both supporters and opponents, the discursive hegemony of the Washington consensus and its material effects have usually been linked to processes of globalisation and the regulatory power of relevant IGOs. Here, Gramsci's 'integral state' usefully illustrates the importance of domestic politics to a state's international relations and helps explain the emergence of Trumpism as an extreme form of US revisionism. It is difficult to say who benefits from such practices. While the president's own personal and business interests have been incorporated into the presidency,<sup>7</sup> the US economy has become hollowed out as a result of Trump's economic policies (Gibson 2018; Mayeda 2018). From a strategic-narrative perspective, the greatest irony has been the support of the disenchanted part of the US mass electorate, which can be attributed to the long-standing and deep polarisation of

<sup>7</sup>On monetisation and the expansion of the dynastic family brand, see, 'How Donald Trump is Monetising His Presidency', *The Economist*, 20 July 2017, available at: <https://www.economist.com/business/2017/07/20/how-donald-trump-is-monetising-his-presidency>, accessed 1 November 2018.

the country and the support of the ‘losers of globalisation’ and extremists on the right. This support has been the product of uneven—and by many indicators, worsening (Kopczuk *et al.* 2007; Leonhardt 2016)—social conditions in the United States, emerging from a combination of the economic, social and educational deprivation of the (white) population who believe (erroneously) in Trump as an embodiment of the American Dream based on his individual entrepreneurial success.<sup>8</sup> The deprived and radicalised electorate has therefore enabled the further spread of the president’s private empire and supported him in his fight against the dense and well-established institutional settings of the US state.

Trump’s ascent to power is a perfect example of so-called ‘anti-politics’. The notion of anti-politics captures the public’s ‘increasing detachment from, and hostility to, political parties and the political system’ (Humphrys 2018, p. 30; cf. Mair 2013; Tietze & Humphrys 2015). Indeed, the rise of new forms of social media, with their zero threshold for entering the political debate, echo-chambering and filter bubbles—through which one becomes encircled only by the people thinking the same way—as well as the easy manipulation of public opinion, has been an enabling and even catalytic environment (Groshek & Koc-Michalska 2017). While not new in the US integral state (two previous examples being the Tea Party movement and the 1994 Gingrich Revolution), Trump’s personal mix of populism, hate speech and revisionist zeal has been unprecedented at the presidential level in the modern history of the United States. Gramsci’s analysis shows how a dialectic unity between the state (political society and the state apparatus) and civil society can be achieved (Humphrys 2018, p. 36). The primary process, visible through Trump’s anti-politics, has been the envelopment (*involucro*) of civil society by the political leadership (Thomas 2009, p. 189).

Robert Dahl (1977, 1991) famously argued that the real state of democracy in the United States (and elsewhere) should be understood as polyarchy. While Trump’s presidential victory is often portrayed as unique and unprecedented, we argue that it represents a moment of extreme polyarchisation. The extent of its extremism, however, works against polyarchy in the end, by weakening the connections between polyarchy and the ideal of democracy (Pettit 2016). In fact, Trump’s presidential victory was enabled by access to ‘alternative’, and purposely manipulative, sources of information—one of the defining features of polyarchy—and a significant amount of the US public’s attention was directed to ‘alternative facts’, or more often factoids corresponding very little to the political reality. Along with this, Trump’s presidency shows how easily the US polyarchy features and integrates both populist and ‘timocratic’ (possession of property is required in order to hold political office) tendencies. While the rise of populism can be seen as a recent trend worldwide, ‘timocracy’ has arguably been a structural feature of US politics for a long time, reflecting a high level of social inequality and a system of powerful political parties and family dynasties blending political and economic power (Dal Bó *et al.* 2009; Gilens 2012). This blend was fully manifested during Trump’s 2016 presidential election victory. However, at the same time, the US political system has been under noticeable stress and on the edge of a revision of its own foundations. Trump’s own, fully weaponised Twitter account has been the best example of this transmutation. Moreover, in the context of

<sup>8</sup>‘Donald Trump and the Self-Made Sham’, *New York Times* editorial, 2 October 2018; also cf. Geist (1984).

Trump's attitude and the relatively proven Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election under the direct supervision of Russian President Putin (Barnes *et al.* 2019), it is not difficult to make connections between the '(mis)information' and 'elections' aspects of polyarchy. While elections may remain free and largely fair in the traditional sense, their democratic function may still deteriorate.

However, a strong institutional resilience—another feature of US polyarchy—mitigates Trump's revisionist tendencies, including his efforts to recraft the regime. As a recent news story has shown (see below), the dividing line for US revisionism is neither between the US administration and the international community nor is it the domestic Republican–Democratic party divide. Rather, it can be found between the US president (a revisionist) and his own administration (*status quo* keepers). In an unprecedented move, the first of its kind since Kennan's anonymous 'Mr. X' article (X 1947), in 2018 the *New York Times* published an anonymous op-ed written by a senior member of the Trump administration. Official X stated that:

The dilemma—which he [Trump] does not fully grasp—is that many of the senior officials in his own administration are working diligently from within to frustrate parts of his agenda and his worst inclinations. I would know. I am one of them.... Although he was elected as a Republican, the president shows little affinity for ideals long espoused by conservatives: free minds, free markets and free people. At best, he has invoked these ideals in scripted settings. At worst, he has attacked them outright.... The result is a two-track presidency. Take foreign policy: In public and in private, President Trump shows a preference for autocrats and dictators, such as President Vladimir Putin of Russia and North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, and displays little genuine appreciation for the ties that bind us to allied, like-minded nations. (Official X 2018)

The outcome of the envelopment for US foreign and security policy and great power politics has been the complete bypassing of established procedures and institutions, a disdain for tradition, expertise and competence and their replacement by radical, revisionist and incendiary, direct anti-diplomacy *via* Trump's personal Twitter account and the utilisation of extra-political and extra-judicial channels.

The contemporary international system has passed its liberal unipolar moment. A possibly more intriguing question than the most obvious one—will it ever return?—is whether it was ever liberal, civilising and unipolar at all (Mayall 2000; Chandler 2017)? With particular attention to the United States, it is appropriate to distinguish between the category of 'superpower' and 'great powers'. Our baseline understanding is that the United States still manifests the systemic features of a superpower, however imperfect; at this point, the United States is characterised by the current president's extreme and erratic revisionism operating alongside the *status quo*. The case of US 'superpowerhood' is more complex than a simple categorisation of a 'true revisionist power' (Schweller 2015). This was as true for the United States under the presidency of George W. Bush and his offensive-realist doctrine as it has been for Trump's attempts to undermine the basis of the Bretton Woods system (and human rights standards), attempting to replace them with national economic protectionism. Simply put, regardless of United States' 'declinism' (Hachigian

2011), which has a long tradition in US academic and political mindsets (Keohane 1984), it is not easy to remove an ideological and cultural hegemonic from the global regulative institutional and normal system it originally created (Deudney & Ikenberry 2018). Apart from military and technological superiority, the gradual spread and global rooting or sedimentation of one's ideology is the key to superpowerhood, as expressed in the Washington Consensus (Gore 2000; Williamson 2009).<sup>9</sup> There has never been any real aspiration by the Putin regime to establish a Moscow Consensus, and even expert discussions (see below) on a Beijing Consensus show at best a piecemeal, political (rather than intellectual) alternative to the Washington version, as ongoing debate on the post-Washington Consensus demonstrates (Stiglitz 1998; Huang 2010; Birdsall & Fukuyama 2011).

*China: incorporated populism and striving for achievement*

In China, central political and strategic narratives are chosen to organise official language, thought and action (Karmazin 2020). Shortly after becoming the new leader of the Communist Party of China (CCP) in 2012, Xi Jinping announced his own slogan and narrative, the 'China Dream'. Building on a well-established discourse of national humiliation that points to China's subjugation and semi-colonisation during the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, the China Dream envisions 'China's century' and calls for the rejuvenation of the whole nation and the re-establishing of China's status in the world, to be achieved through encompassing socio-economic modernisation (Callahan 2010, 2017). As implied by the China Dream narrative, the internal and external sides of its ambitions are profoundly intertwined. China's international rise is an answer to domestic uncertainties, including the prospect of political fragmentation (Fravel 2008). Conversely, internal development is a precondition of its global status. China cannot have one without the other. The aspiration is as comprehensive as it is long-term. The years 2021 and 2047, which correspond with the centenaries of the founding of the CCP and the People's Republic of China respectively, were chosen as two milestones by which phases of China's modernisation should be achieved (Xi 2014, pp. 69–70). Two elements of the China Dream can be distinguished. The first tries to change the mindset of the Chinese people and how the world sees China, insisting that China be seen on its own terms and not judged by 'international' standards originating from the West. The second is to undertake large-scale projects that boost China's international standing and linkages in a practical sense, most obviously, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Following the China Dream that has provided a new and strong impetus for Chinese ambitions to rise as an important international player, China's revisionism can be characterised as systemic and complex. However, China's aspirational revisionism is neither as erratic and rhetorically radical as Trumpian revisionism, nor as aggressive as Russia's guerrilla revisionism. Further clarifications are however in order. First, despite

<sup>9</sup>For a critique, see Klein (2008).

China's meteoric rise in the last decade, the process of becoming a world power is still underway; second, it is highly interconnected with the current global order, which means that a more comprehensive rebuilding of international politics is not desirable, given that the *status quo* largely allows China to financially exploit and benefit from the current global economic system (Hardy 2017). Thus, in the course of its global rise, China oscillates between making use of the current order, trying to change some of its rules, shifting the global balance of power and pushing through its influence in specific thematic and regional areas (for example, influence in international institutions or the South China Sea, as discussed below).

Chinese society has been developing dynamically in the post-Deng Xiaoping era. Some observers characterised it as 'strong' (Reilly 2011) due to its ability to raise political demands through, for example, local protests or internet activism and, subsequently, influence Chinese foreign policy.<sup>10</sup> While the Chinese party-state encouraged and benefited from many societal developments, especially those connected with economic entrepreneurship, it has also been crucial to find a way to respond to and 'modulate' such a dynamic society. This need is even more pressing because, since his accession to the leadership, Xi has faced problems stemming from negative externalities directly or indirectly produced by the peculiar combination of the socialist party-state and neo-liberal capitalism, including internal economic fragility (debt-driven growth, an uneven distribution of wealth), environmental issues and social unrest (Chen 2015; Breslin 2018). Nationalism was and continues to be a key ideological tool, especially as it can combine with other modes of legitimisation, including those based on traditional (Confucian) rhetoric or economic performance (Holbig & Gilley 2010; Karmazin 2017, pp. 431–34). However, Xi has added an element of a limited populism voiced from within the party-state structures. The combination was supposed to provide a more complex and persuasive framework for managing state–society relations as well as meeting Xi's personal ambitions to become an unassailable leader (Brown 2016).

Xi has relied much more on charismatic authority compared to his two predecessors, with their technocratic style and more dispersed, collective bureaucratic authority. Many subtle steps have been made to liken Xi to Mao Zedong (Gan 2017). However, unlike Mao, Xi has put forward a relatively dynamic ideological mixture combining nationalism, socialism, Chinese traditional values and, to a lesser extent, (economic) liberalism, with the sole objective of increasing the party-state's ideological persuasiveness both domestically and internationally (Brown 2016; Karmazin 2017; Economy 2018). As is typical of populists, the ideological constellation is eclectic (Brown & Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018). Moreover, these elements of limited populism are arguably intended to provide an answer to the genuine domestic populism represented by Bo Xilai, a local communist leader, and the New Left that argues for a (partial) return to the Maoist socialism and emphasises the importance of social and economic collectivism (Tang 2016).

Alongside Xi's limited populism, the most important tactical innovations aimed to modulate the population were arguably the regime's incorporation of highly modern

<sup>10</sup>See also Hameiri and Jones (2016, 2018).

technologies allowing a significantly increased level of control, such as CCTV facial recognition systems and tightened internet control (Mozur 2017, 2018). A potentially more complex and nuanced effort to shape social conduct has been implemented through the social credit system that partially uses the latest digital technologies and aims to evaluate conduct of citizens but also companies based on a variety of economic and social criteria (State Council of PRC 2014). Although still not fully launched nation-wide at the time of writing of this essay (spring 2020), this system allows for the comprehensive mapping, reward and punishment of citizen activities; in effect, a genuine ‘modulation’. Moreover, the coronavirus pandemic has further strengthened the regime’s aspirations to closely track and monitor Chinese citizens (Yang *et al.* 2020).

As a result, China has updated the party-state’s repertoire of governmental tools. China’s post-Maoist political regime has been most aptly described by the concept of ‘consultative Leninism’, defined by Tsang as the Communist Party’s:

obsessive focus upon staying in power, continuous governance reform designed to pre-empt public demands for democratisation; sustained efforts to enhance the Party’s capacity to elicit, respond to and direct changing public opinion; pragmatism in economic and financial management; and the promotion of nationalism in place of Communism. (Tsang 2009, p. 865)

While it is primarily intended to describe domestic politics, it also links both the domestic and international sides of the party-state’s general strategy. The underlying imperative is to achieve domestic stability and sustain the rapid economic development upon which China’s economic rise depends. While Xi Jinping’s strategies revolve around the pursuit of political control, they are also intended to preserve an environment favourable to economic prosperity and innovation, which in turn contribute to maintaining his control. Similarly, Xi’s joint use of limited populism and consultative Leninism has been fundamental to their effectiveness and in avoiding domestic political disruptions. On the one hand, Xi’s limited populism is marked by a streamlining of the institutional setting and the concentration of power in his hands. Unlike Bo Xilai, however, Xi has stayed within the framework of consultative Leninism. This system limits populist tendencies in Chinese politics by allowing the party-state to absorb weak populism into its framework (as in the case of Xi), by punishing open populists (like Bo) and by being flexible enough to allow for the mobilisation of domestic sources, interests and popular opinion in order to back up, for example, policy projects.

BRI has been a key step in the international arena. It is a programme of infrastructure projects designed to substantiate Xi’s vision of China as a global power that has been unprecedented in its ambitions in the history of Chinese foreign policy (Ferdinand 2016; Karmazin 2019). While it can be understood as another attempt to strengthen Chinese influence regionally, globally and especially *vis-à-vis* the US, the BRI is directly or contextually connected with other Chinese measures that show the actual complexity of China’s revisionism. In other words, the BRI should be understood as a project for adapting China’s foreign policy to new ambitions and also as a massive rebranding exercise that helps mobilise China’s aspirations domestically as well as internationally.

The BRI discursively cherishes international cooperation (Hameiri & Jones 2018)<sup>11</sup> and values such as openness, inclusiveness and diplomatic equality.<sup>12</sup> In his 2017 World Economic Forum speech, Xi defended the global, liberal, capitalist economic system and China's readiness to lead it (Barkin & Piper 2017), despite the country's mercantilist practices (Schröder 2017). In some cases, China was willing to adjust its intentions so that it could better cooperate with the West, as particularly evident in the case of China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank initiative. This project is closely connected to the BRI and has gradually been accepted by Western states and banks despite initial criticisms (Hameiri & Jones 2018; Karmazin 2019). In other cases, the BRI framework has been used by China to increase its leverage over the domestic politics of other countries, including those in Central Asia (such as Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan), South Asia (Sri Lanka) or Europe (Greece) (Shullman 2019), alongside China's increasingly apparent ambitions in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, and its increasing utilisation of cyber-based tools to influence local politics outside China (Seiff & Penh 2018).

### *Conclusion*

The essay pointed to three different constellations of domestic politics that have influenced the great power orientation of Russia, the United States and China in international affairs. The concept of strategic narrative was used to bridge domestic socio-political developments, the elite practices of the three respective presidents and the wider international system. This research strategy allowed us to study the multifaceted connections between domestic forms of populism, revisionist discourses and the practices of the three key states in the international system. It is noteworthy that the domestic conditions of all three revisionisms derived from—rather than negated—the previous configuration of state–society relations and the regime type. Based on the previous discussion, changes in these set-ups can be understood as phase shifts of state configurations.

The case of Russian revisionism is remarkable. While Russia is arguably the least stable of the three states discussed—especially so far as structural indicators such as economic development, institutional effectiveness and innovations—it is the most consolidated in terms of the personal leadership of Vladimir Putin. Unlike China's revisionism—a forward-looking strategy encapsulated by the 'China Dream' narrative—and the 'Make America Great Again' revisionism of the United States under Trump, essentially a strategic narrative that promises to replicate an imagined past, Russia's calculated revisionism has had no strategic narrative of similar centrality or intensity. While the narrative is based on a mix of Soviet nostalgia and negativism (anti-Westernism), it does not offer a commensurately powerful, forward-looking national vision. Instead, Russian

<sup>11</sup>'Spotlight: AIIB Should Become Platform for Cooperation between US, China—Bank Chief', *Xinhua*, 26 April 2017, available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-04/26/c\\_136235770.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-04/26/c_136235770.htm), accessed 1 November 2018.

<sup>12</sup>'Spotlight: AIIB Should Become Platform for Cooperation between US, China—Bank Chief', *Xinhua*, 26 April 2017, available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-04/26/c\\_136235770.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-04/26/c_136235770.htm), accessed 1 November 2018; 'AIIB is Multilateral Development Bank Operating by Int'l Standards: AIIB President', *Xinhua*, 17 January 2018, available at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/17/c\\_136902044.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/17/c_136902044.htm), accessed 1 November 2018.

revisionism rests on Putin's high personal popularity, verging on a cult, based on his exploitation of existing nationalism and xenophobia and on external scapegoating. His successful hollowing-out of the state and his effective appropriation of the state apparatus, coupled with limited pressure from civil society and no real political alternatives, prepared the ground for a revisionist configuration. In this way, Putin fully seized his opportunity following the chaotic quasi-democratisation of the 1990s. As he fostered illiberal trends, Putin also partly recrafted the Soviet model. Its features—a strong leader, a capitalisation on declared civilisational confrontation with the West, sidelined during Yel'tsin's rule in the 1990s, and a sense of Russia's global decline—stood at its heart. When it comes to the political sustainability of the course set by Putin (Gessen 2016), the biggest liability for Putin and the regime he epitomises—as well as of his revisionist politics—is the increasing brutality of his regime, especially his dependence on (varyingly and variously manipulated) elections, from municipal through gubernatorial to presidential elections, extending all the way to those in the near abroad (Khodarkovsky 2019; Sestanovich 2019).

In the case of the United States, the phase shift has rested on what might be labelled as the polarisation of polyarchy with negative effects for democracy, which has evolved in the context of a technologically confused and socio-economically divided society, the strengthening of populist elements in US politics and the rise of Trumpian personalisation. The Gramscian envelopment arising from this socio-political environment is playing out between the radical anti-politics of Trump and his supporters, on the one hand, and US public institutions (including most of his own administration) and the rest of the electorate on the other. Despite its central strategic narrative, the US case is the most polarised domestically, with clear limitations on the sustainability of this Trump-promoted, revisionist course of action. While Trump's revisionist agenda may even be extended and entrenched through re-election, the continued functioning of the sidelined politico-bureaucratic apparatus indicates a resilience and institutional elasticity suggesting a possible, if not guaranteed, eventual return to the country's doctrinal, liberal democratic standards (Savage 2019). For these reasons, we consider the US revisionist case to be the most episodic. Its current intensity is less a result of Trump and more that of the primary significance of the United States in the international system.

In China, Xi's principal response to the challenge of managing the negative externalities of rapid socio-economic modernisation has been to strengthen the strategic tenets of consultative Leninism. This has involved reliance on nationalism and the utilisation of cyberspace and modern technologies (especially artificial intelligence) to upgrade the restrictive and controlling capacities of the Chinese party-state in order to focus on economic performance and to consolidate presidential power within the Communist Party. The 'China Dream' strategic narrative is a specific way of addressing various issues, as it contributed to the international enhancement of China's status. While it offers a positive and (pro-) active vision of China's development, which—in theory—has some appeal, even outside China, on the basis of its rhetorical emphasis on cooperation, mutual respect and win-win relations, the China Dream has served the narrower interests of Xi Jinping by linking all his prioritised issues, ranging from economic problems to the environment and political support for the Communist Party. Based on our findings, we see China's limited revisionism as the most lasting version, chiefly due to its gradual character and careful if increasingly assertive attempts to exploit the contemporary *status quo* as much

as possible. The structural characteristics of the country point to its continuation, perhaps paradoxically, well beyond the figure of Xi. While the centrality of China's revisionism has been achieved by Xi's unprecedented concentration of political power, unseen since Mao Zedong, it could well work through a more diffused, small collective leadership. It could foreseeably continue under the strategic narrative of the 'China Dream' and 'China's century', international recognition and national pride. Xi's recent cumbersome and—from the perspective of many Western observers—unreasonable handling of the crisis in Hong Kong points exactly to such a possibility (Lee Myers *et al.* 2019).

The revisionist positions of the three countries are highly linked to phase shifts in domestic set-ups, especially the leadership structures. As noted above, the dividing line for the US does not lie between administration and international politics or between the Republican/Democratic divide as much as between the US president (a revisionist) and his own administration (*status quo* keepers), thereby reproducing the domestic context of the divided country (society) in international affairs. China's Belt and Road Initiative, the strategic counterpart of the 'China Dream', has intensified China's engagement with the international liberal order and other countries in different regions. While such engagement emphasises China's stake in the international *status quo*, it has also increased the possibilities both of economic and security confrontation with various actors, including states in East and Southeast Asia or the United States. However, it is notable that China's aspirations have been presented in a positive, win-win fashion, updating and refining the official portrayal of the 'Beijing Consensus' that preceded Xi's revisionism. While Russian foreign policy has some ideological visions as well, its positioning has been largely different from that of Chinese foreign policy, lacking the potential to produce a global 'Moscow Consensus' model. Moreover, Russia has been more open to risk and has had a lesser stake in the *status quo* under the current leadership. While the appropriation of the state apparatus and social dynamics have allowed Putin to concentrate on confrontation with the West, such a confrontation has intentionally remained limited and below the threshold of a major conflict. Thus, Russia's strategy has been a guerrilla-like focus on consolidating its own power base (in the domestic space and the near abroad) and launching selective, disruptive strikes at its Western opponents. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, this has often meant cyber-attacks, building on long Soviet experience in information warfare going back to the Cold War period.

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## **The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and China's Strategic Course**

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Creating the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a multilateral development bank initiated by the People's Republic of China, has been one of the key symptoms of Xi Jinping's ambitious "China Dream" foreign policy. The previous studies mainly focused on providing a description of AIIB's creation or general motives and context through which they explicated the establishment of the Bank. Building on the literature focused on strategic culture and grand strategy, I supplement the general motives of AIIB's creation by characterizing the style and process of AIIB's materialization. I argue that the style (procedure) of AIIB's implementation largely resembles the previous Dengian model of strategic procedure which Deng himself described with the Chinese saying "crossing the river by touching the stones" which evinces flexibility and "step-by-step" characteristics in its procedure. This helps to illustrate that China's engagement with the international order can be adaptive to a significant degree and China does not necessarily follow a pre-planned vision of how to take over international (institutional) order. While China's foreign policy in some areas is often regarded as being assertive and rigidly defending its positions, AIIB is a different case to a high extent. Moreover, analyzing the creation of AIIB indicates ambiguity of Xi's foreign policy regarding general aims it wants to achieve and identities on which it should be based.

**Keywords:** Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, China Dream, Belt and Road Initiative, Xi Jinping, Chinese foreign policy, grand strategy

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\* E-mail: ales.karmazin@gmail.com. Author would like to acknowledge the support by the Charles University (Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Political Studies) under the grant project GAUK 504816 (Americký a čínský sen: člověk, stát a mezinárodní společnost / The American and Chinese Dream: Human, State and International Society).

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Since Xi Jinping's accession as a new leader of the People's Republic of China (China, PRC) at the turn of 2012 and 2013, China has been pursuing a more ambitious foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> During his first year as the head of the country and the Communist Party of China (CCP), Xi introduced a very aspirational foreign policy program. His slogan of "China Dream," expressing the ambitions of rejuvenating the Chinese nation and its position in international politics, paved the way for projects which can be regarded to be unprecedented in China's foreign policy. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB),<sup>3</sup> a multilateral development bank initiated by China, is one of them and can be understood as one of the key symptoms of the changing character of China's strategic course in international affairs. It was for the first time that China led a process of establishing an international institution with global reach. Not only was it supposed to support China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but also to influence and (co-)define international order and its institutional structure. As such, the establishment of AIIB could be understood as a crucial testing case for understanding China's foreign policy. Hence, I ask and examine how China's strategic course evolved in China's approach to the establishment of AIIB.

China's ambitions connected with AIIB's creation stimulated a debate of whether China is a revisionist or status quo player in international affairs with many authors arguing for the former option. In their view, China's revisionism can be characterized by some or all of the following aspects: contradicting Western actors' practices, interests and diplomatic initiatives; building its own distinctive institutional framework separated from the existing liberal-order institutions; limiting the influence of Western actors; becoming more assertive; and following a specific blueprint based on the previous points.<sup>4</sup> However, a few authors have problematized such a view. Wilson<sup>5</sup> and de Jonge<sup>6</sup> draw our attention to the evolving relationship between the Bank and liberal order as they show that both entities have been influencing each other. Hameiri and Jones<sup>7</sup> point to the role of multiple Chinese actors that tried to influence AIIB and link up their interests with AIIB. This paper aims to contribute to the latter stream of literature. These works indicate that a closer inquiry into the evolution of AIIB in connection to China's foreign policy is needed and imply that explaining AIIB's creation through stressing China's general (strategic) motives, as it is done in various papers, is not sufficient by itself.

To understand AIIB's role in international affairs and explicate AIIB's significance as well as the process of its creation, this paper examines the strategic course of China's foreign policy (mainly represented by the top political elites) in relation to the process of AIIB's implementation. Being inspired by the literature of grand strategy and strategic culture, I will argue that the style (procedure) of AIIB's implementation largely resembles the previous Dengian model which Deng himself aptly described with the Chinese saying "crossing the river by touching the stones" (*mozhe shitouguo he*).<sup>8</sup> It follows an incremental attitude towards forwarding the state's strategic direction and evinces "step-by-step" characteristics. This helps illustrate that when it comes to AIIB,

China's engagement with the international order has been adaptive and conciliatory to a significant degree and has not necessarily followed a coherently sustained plan.

Whether coming from an academic, policy or think tank environment, authors who previously explained AIIB usually focused on providing a description of AIIB's creation and/or general motives and context through which they explicated the establishment of the Bank.<sup>9</sup> However, witnessing how AIIB developed from an initial proposal in 2013 to its ceremonial launch in January 2016 as well as how it operated during the first three years after the inauguration, i.e., from 2016 to 2018, we might ask how the Bank's form and shape evolved and might want to complement the general motives of AIIB's creation by characterizing the process of AIIB's materialization. Examining these topics will indicate some ambiguity of Xi's foreign policy regarding general aims it wants to achieve and strategic identities on which it should be based.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next (second) part, I specify my analytical approach. The third part introduces a structural strategic characterization of China's approach under Xi Jinping which sets the stage for the analysis of AIIB's evolution in the subsequent parts. The fourth part analyzes the process of AIIB's creation until its official launch. In the fifth part, the Bank's operations during the first three years after the launch is examined.

## **Analyzing Strategic Course of China's Foreign Policy**

Drawing on the literature on grand strategy and strategic culture, it is possible to distinguish three key components which constitute an actor's strategic course, i.e. the strategic path it follows. These are grand strategy, strategic (international) identity and strategic style. While the literature on grand strategy and strategic culture does not usually connect all the mentioned elements into one analytical framework, it suggests linkages among all of them.<sup>10</sup> Being inspired by Colin Gray's strategic culture for context and his view on a nexus between ideas and behavior,<sup>11</sup> I try to connect structural (relatively static) dimensions of analysis, represented here by grand strategy and strategic identities, with a more dynamic dimension of strategic style. While structural characteristics and motivations connected with BRI and AIIB have been well described in academic literature, I focus on strategic style to elucidate how China's strategic course unfolded through developing AIIB.

Grand strategy can be understood as a bedrock of a state's policies and development of itself in international affairs. I analyze grand strategy as an (implicit or explicit) outline or a plan<sup>12</sup> involving key goals and means, connections between them and preferences about them. As conceived here, a state's (strategic, international) identity embodies an understanding of itself, one's own position in international politics as well as its relationship to (or demarcation against) others. As such, both grand strategy and strategic identity are closely related and express different aspects about a state's international role. The former expresses a strategic setting proposed by a specific leadership while the latter relates to broader traditions of a state's foreign policy. They

form a background against which AIIB's actual development will be assessed.

Strategic style relates to the actual implementation of a specific project and, hence, analytically complements grand strategy and strategic identity.<sup>13</sup> I conceive of strategic style as an abbreviation for a state's approach to forming strategic issues which captures procedure and key characteristics of such a development. When analyzing strategic style, researchers often face a methodological dilemma. While the ideal way would be to examine actual decision-making including its constraints, it is often impossible to do so, especially if an analyzed case is very recent and the political regime is authoritarian. A potential work-around, which is adopted in this paper, is to use auxiliary reasoning, observing related effects and happenings.<sup>14</sup> This will be done through the following analytical questions.

- How is a specific project (AIIB in our case) related to a strategic setting, i.e. grand strategic plan and identities? In what ways does it utilize such sources? How is it related to a broader (international) strategic environment)?
- How is a specific project officially presented and demarcated? What are key shifts or continuities?
- How does a given actor (China) react to other actors' reactions to a concerned project?

Attention to the propensity for conflict, a degree of adaptation and flexibility, consistency (integrity) of one's approach or a level of ambitions,<sup>15</sup> then, serve to further sensitize the analytical questions.

Hence, when examining strategic style during the establishment of AIIB (fourth and fifth part), I firstly discuss AIIB's development *vis-à-vis* China's strategic outline, goals and means, then its relationship to strategic identities and, partly, to other aspects of a broader strategic environment. As I move from the very beginning of AIIB to its actual operation, I also pay attention to Chinese reactions to other actors and their views.

## Changes in China's Strategy Course: A Strategic Setting

This part summarizes changes in China's political and strategic orientation under Xi Jinping's leadership. By addressing China's strategic identities and grand strategic vision, it expounds key outlines of a strategic setting from which AIIB unfolds. Because Xi's strategy involves reconsideration of the previously established Dengian strategic consensus as one of its defining features, it will be appropriate to briefly introduce the Dengian course. Although the reconsideration of the Dengian strategic course partly evolved even before Xi, it is only during Xi's rule that it has become fundamental for understanding China's foreign policy.<sup>16</sup> As I show below, while the Dengian strategic course was defined by a congruence among strategic identity, grand strategic plan and strategic style, the interconnection among these elements has been less clear under Xi.

Deng Xiaoping replaced the Maoist understanding of the world based on class

struggle by the paradigm of development connected with the strategic identity of China as a developing country according to which the key goal is to pursue its socio-economic development together with, rather than in opposition to, international order.<sup>17</sup> Following the reorientation of China, Deng came up with the strategy of keeping a low profile. The strategy presupposes that China should develop peacefully, devote its energy and resources to economic development instead of confrontation with the West, and find ways to strengthen its relations with the Western international order. The strategic style dominant during Deng's rule corresponded with the character of the strategy. It was explicitly expressed by Deng with the help of the Chinese saying "crossing the river by touching the stones."<sup>18</sup> The guideline postulates that it is necessary to make incremental steps while adjusting one's course. It is also partly a trial-and-error approach as it presupposes that some steps will not find support and will need to be corrected. At the same time, it evinces strong characteristics of incrementalism as it relies on gradual (sequential) advancement. In short, this strategic style entails a high level of adaptation to others' reactions, broader environment and feasibility (profitability) of specific policies, flexibility, avoiding conflicts and down-playing ambitions. In Deng's era, the style of implementation especially influenced the key issue area of economic reforms as well as a general strategic orientation while some authors argue about its relevance for other policy areas as well.<sup>19</sup>

Instead of the single dominant identity present during the times of Deng, it was possible to distinguish at least three of them at the turn of Hu Jintao's and Xi Jinping's rule. It is remarkable that even during fora that were supposed to provide guidelines for Xi's foreign policy (the Work Forum on Chinese Diplomacy Towards in 2013 and the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in 2014), Chinese leadership referred to all three of them.<sup>20</sup> Hence, while I introduce their characteristics here, it will be very important to see how China's foreign policy built on them when initiating AIIB.

These are: 1) developmental, 2) Asianist, and 3) great power identity.<sup>21</sup> 1) The identity of a developing (and developmental) country was strongly established during Deng's rule largely stemming from the previous China's attachment to the third world (the so-called theory of the three worlds). As partly indicated, the developmental identity portrays China as relatively weak and under-developed and postulates the need for socio-economic development together with the Western-led international order. Although the identity contains a certain level of suspiciousness in relation to the West as the West is deemed responsible for various kinds of harm and injustice in international affairs, the West is also seen as a model for modernization in many respects. 2) The Asianist identity claims that the main framework for China's actions is Asia. China should pay the greatest attention to the region even if it might damage or diminish relations with Western countries. According to its proponents, China should be a leader of the region in which Asian problems should be dealt with by Asians and security should be provided by Asians for Asians. 3) The great power (major country) identity sees China as one of the great powers in international politics influencing the international system, order and distribution of power. As such, China should act and contribute to political, security and economic management on a global scale.

Contours of Xi Jinping's grand strategy can be introduced generally and in connection to BRI and AIIB. From the most general point of view, Xi Jinping's grand strategy as it has evolved is concentrated around the following aspirations: 1) increasing China's power resources including wealth and military power, 2) gaining more influence in international affairs, 3) improving China's status and legitimacy recognition as a significant international player.<sup>22</sup> What is connected to these aspirations is a double-edged relationship to the Dengian strategic approach. While China's development closely attached to and benefited from the Western-led international order and win-win relations are still cherished as a general precondition for China's continuing rise and a tool for mitigating others' (potential) overreaction to it,<sup>23</sup> Xi's foreign policy clearly aspires for a greater role in international affairs. It "strives for achievement" (*fenfa youwei*) and pursues "pro-active" (*gengjia jiji, gengjia zhudung*) foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Xi's foreign policy is also set apart from the Dengian strategy by an increasingly vehement defense of specific Chinese interests as it expressed through the official discourse interconnection sovereignty, security and development, which has appeared since the late 2000s.<sup>25</sup> Shifting China's strategy was arguably understood as even more urgent due to Xi's adoption of the previous analysis of CCP according to which the first two decades of the 21st century will provide China with a major window of strategic opportunity for realizing ambitions.<sup>26</sup> As such, the Dengian dictum of biding our time turned into an outdated notion. One of the main tools for achieving the aforementioned general goals and taking advantage of the window of opportunity was to actively shape the existing international order through materializing significant and concrete steps.

Considering a more specific side of China's grand strategy, BRI and AIIB were intended to be the main steps for realizing the aspirations and achieving the China Dream. It is necessary to bear in mind that at least initially, AIIB was strongly connected with the China Dream and BRI. The relationship between them was explicitly recognized and highlighted by China's foreign policy.<sup>27</sup> They were underpinned by a couple of mutually supporting rationales. 1) Connecting less developed Western regions of China with expected international trade routes, BRI should help them with their economic progress. 2) Establishing an international network of economic partnerships is expected to help when it comes to China's overcapacity in some sectors of the Chinese economy (especially construction and civil engineering) and China's excess capital as China's industrial capacities as well as capital should be exported more easily. 3) By providing the regional countries with a stronger economic cooperation framework, BRI might serve as a tool for conflict management especially in relation to the countries in Southeast Asia with which China has various disputes (often related to the South China Sea).<sup>28</sup> 4) It can help counterbalance the U.S. pivot to Asia. 5) Connected with the previous motives, China probably realizes that a further geopolitical expansion eastward might be difficult due to its aim to cultivate its westward connections. Because AIIB is created as a concrete tool of BRI and is expected to finance specific projects within it, the previously mentioned motives can be regarded as applying to this as well. However, a few specific ones may be added. AIIB may help to 1) internationalize China's currency and 2) increase pressure for reforming global economic institutions (specifically e.g.

voting shares at IMF).<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the above structural outline suggests that China could be understood as a (potential) revisionist as argued by literature mentioned in the introductory paragraphs. New identities, including that of a great power or an Asian leader, coexisted with Xi's general aspirations to increase China's power, influence and legitimacy, his more active approach and specific strategic motivations backing BRI and AIIB.

## **Creating the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank**

AIIB's relationship to the strategic setting (grand strategy and strategic identities) and its official presentation at the initial stage of its development (around 2013 and 2014) shall be introduced first. Initiating AIIB could be seen as a concrete step for pushing forward China's own visions about regional order with itself at its center.<sup>30</sup> China's own rhetoric supported this as it portrayed AIIB as a tool for exerting pressure on the West and contributing to a change in international order. China aimed to "democratize" and "reform" international (economic). Although China had raised similar claims before, they were supported by a very specific action (i.e. creating AIIB) this time. Fitting into Xi's risk-averse mindset, there apparently was a shared notion within Chinese policy circles that AIIB would help China achieve an increased degree of impact and leverage in the non-Western world, making it ready for parallel (not necessarily direct) competition with the United States.<sup>31</sup> Hence, it clearly corresponded with the general goal of gaining influence. Combined with these aspirations, AIIB was clearly defined in terms of its geographical focus and scope. It was obvious that China intended AIIB to be mainly or perhaps exclusively joined by Asian countries.<sup>32</sup> This was made even more apparent by the indicated criticism directed towards IMF and distancing from other Western-led institutions that accompanied AIIB's introduction.<sup>33</sup>

The three key identities which were introduced above, i.e. developmental, Asianist, and great power identity, played an important role in the process of establishing AIIB. The initiation of AIIB (and BRI) in 2013 was explicitly connected with a specific and relatively narrow regional demarcation—the regions of Central and East Asia. In doing so, China's foreign policy partly indicated connection with the Asianist identity during the initial steps. This followed Xi Jinping's previous emphasis on the same identity and the Asian dimension of China's foreign policy articulated at the Boao Forum earlier that year where economic as well as security issues were discussed or at other occasions at home.<sup>34</sup> However, key references seemed to be made to China's traditional developmental identity. China clearly tried to construct a vision of modernization needs common to developing countries, which could be almost naturally reciprocated by similar countries mainly, but perhaps not exclusively, in Asia, which would be addressed by AIIB (and BRI).<sup>35</sup> China also explicitly assures the others that it belongs to the same category of developing countries and, hence, the project would not serve interests of a (potential) hegemon but rather of all the (prospectively participating) developing countries together.<sup>36</sup>

With regards to further details concerning AIIB's origins and demarcation, many gaps appeared. While their existence should not be seen as completely surprising, the following lines suggest a noticeable degree of adjustment since the very initial stage. At the time of writing the paper, it may seem natural that AIIB functions as a multilateral developmental bank. However, there are indications that the purpose and demarcation of the project were not agreed upon when Xi Jinping announced the intention to create it in 2013. In the beginning, it was unclear whether AIIB should be an extension of the successful China–ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund, which would profile it differently in terms of the scope of its strategic significance. While outside observers speculated about that, it might have been an option considered even within China's foreign policy decision-making process as well.<sup>37</sup> *The New York Times*' detailed insight into the early stage of AIIB establishment indicates that there really were different opinions about the course of action.<sup>38</sup> Chinese decision-makers probably considered that the project could be an aid agency or a commercial bank.

While China declared early on that AIIB should be built around the values of equality and inclusiveness,<sup>39</sup> it did not pay much attention to specifying particular norms AIIB should be based on during the initial stage of AIIB's creation. Moreover, there was even a less clear relationship between AIIB and the New Development Bank (NDB) of the BRICS group. It is so despite the fact that both these banks were initiated as major projects within China's foreign policy. NDB was created before AIIB and during the process of NDB formation (the NDB treaty was signed in 2014), it seemed that China's foreign policy put great emphasis on the project. However, when AIIB gained momentum in 2014 and 2015, the importance of the projects shifted as NDB was getting overshadowed by AIIB from the point of view of China's foreign policy.<sup>40</sup> For example, in 2014 when the fortunes of AIIB were still unclear, Xi Jinping often referred to NDB rather than AIIB when trying to develop a positive diplomatic engagement with (especially) non-Western countries.<sup>41</sup> Since then, the relationship between AIIB and NDB has remained largely unclarified by Chinese foreign policy.

During the later period of AIIB's initiation and China's reactions to others' positions (until early 2016), we can perceive further important adjustments. While it should be noted that China started to consider cooperation with some Western states around mid-2014,<sup>42</sup> a key turn for AIIB's overall development happened in the first half of 2015 when the United Kingdom and then other Western countries announced their interest to join AIIB. Official Chinese press started to write about China's "diplomatic triumph."<sup>43</sup> However, it came as a truly unforeseen surprise for China as it did not expect that AIIB could attract substantial support from Western countries.<sup>44</sup> In reaction to it, AIIB started to evolve from a regional to a global institution. Since then, China has started to gradually demarcate AIIB as more open to cooperation with Western states and also other international institutions. Alongside that, a window of opportunity for increasing its and AIIB's legitimacy and status opened for China,<sup>45</sup> which Chinese foreign policy relatively quickly utilized. In other words, the emphasis on AIIB's strategic function changed from providing influence to increasing legitimacy. It can be hypothesized that China understood it as an opportunity for making up for a damaged reputation as

the political regime under Xi faced different types of criticism from the international community.

Analogously, when international (mainly Western) pressure was increasing during 2014 and 2015 to demand standards of good governance and operation to be followed by AIIB as well as that AIIB should cooperate with existing (Western-led) institutions, China was very attentive to that. At the beginning of its establishment, AIIB's relationship to the World Bank (WB) or Asian Development Bank (ADB) was largely unspecified.<sup>46</sup> During the spring of 2014 when there was the aforementioned pressure on China to clarify AIIB's relationship to these banks, China ensured others that AIIB was going to be compatible and complementary with them.<sup>47</sup> As China was responding to further queries from (mainly) Western states and as AIIB was being globally accepted in 2015 and 2016, China's discourse started to accent that the ADB and WB are models AIIB can learn and borrow from,<sup>48</sup> which contrasts with China's previous criticism of the WB and IMF.<sup>49</sup>

A similar adjustment in China's position was apparent regarding the normative profile of AIIB. Following the Western pressure which also called for standards of good governance and operation to be followed by AIIB, China started to devote more energy to clarifying basic principles of AIIB. Thus, statements emphasizing that AIIB should be based on openness, equality but also accountability, transparency and efficiency start to appear in 2014 and even more frequently in 2015.<sup>50</sup> They were accompanied with China's discourse, which started to more explicitly and actively mitigate differences and discrepancies between AIIB and other global institutions and which continues until today.<sup>51</sup>

It is also possible to identify shifts taking place alongside the aforementioned changes. In 2014 and especially 2015, when AIIB was getting global attention to a largely unexpected extent, China started to present AIIB as a bridge between developed and developing countries.<sup>52</sup> Emphasizing complementarity of interests between developed and developing countries (i.e., in fact, great powers and smaller states), China positively narrates AIIB's (potential) role and relatively unique position which is due to the relatively strong position of both developing and developed countries at the bank. However, China was not perfectly clear about its own identity in such statements as it partly obfuscated to what extent it sees itself as developed or developing country. It might be understood as China's effort to increase its flexibility and room for maneuvering in the crucial and turbulent period of AIIB's formation.

The Asianist identity, however, did not truly disappear and continued to be articulated along with the others although most usually at different occasions or fora. From 2014 to 2016, China emphasized that Asia should be the space which is led by the Asian nations as well as that the Asian nations should take responsibility for dealing with Asian problems.<sup>53</sup> It implied a diminishing role of the Western powers in Asia while AIIB was portrayed as a tool for Asians managed by Asians (with Chinese leadership).<sup>54</sup> Yet on different occasions, China relied more on its great power identity (a major power/country with Chinese characteristics)<sup>55</sup> although it is so without reference to its relationship to the United States, which often serves as a key channel of construction of

this specific identity.

The above exposition of AIIB's development before the official start of its operation reveals that China significantly modified its approach to AIIB, exhibiting a high degree of adaptation, flexibility, a gradually apparent tendency to avoid conflicts and a relatively low level of coherence of the project's key characteristics sustained across time. Moreover, China's activities related to creating AIIB highlighted, rather than overcame, difference in its strategic identities.

### **The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in First Years of Its Operation**

The process of AIIB's creation, which included some surprises for China, might have gotten AIIB where China did not originally expect it to be. At the same time, however, China's foreign policy has adapted to and seems to be relatively comfortable with this evolution. AIIB's development after its official launch in January 2016 further documents the shift from being detached from Western actors and institutions to cooperating with them. From 2016 to 2018, AIIB established rich cooperation with other international financial institutions, mainly the ADB and WB.<sup>56</sup> After some initial tensions, WB's president endorsed AIIB in 2015. A year later, AIIB and WB agreed on conditions under which they can co-finance projects and AIIB also signed a memorandum of understanding with the ADB which has opened space for their mutual cooperation.<sup>57</sup> This resulted into rich collaborative interactions between AIIB and other international financial institutions. At the same time, AIIB has become largely dependent on the cooperation with these institutions. From 2016 to 2018, the majority of AIIB's projects were co-financed by other actors while AIIB usually played the role of a junior (minor) contributor.<sup>58</sup> It is also striking that AIIB joined the majority of these projects, rather than it initiating them in the first place. "In short, the AIIB was wholly dependent on other [multilateral development banks] to supply it both bankable projects and the technical expertise to execute them."<sup>59</sup>

Not only does it suggest AIIB's genuine internationalization, but it also points to an emerging gap between AIIB and BRI, i.e., a gap in the strategic framework that initially outlined a close link between AIIB and BRI. Although AIIB provides funding to projects in countries falling under BRI, AIIB's dependence on other institutions and actors diminishes its role as an agency whose function is to materialize BRI.<sup>60</sup> Only about one-third of the funding AIIB spent up until 2017 is unambiguously related to BRI.<sup>61</sup> Reacting to that, many other—this time solely Chinese—institutions have become crucial in funding BRI projects, which diminishes AIIB's role within BRI.<sup>62</sup>

In regards to the question of the identity China "invested" into the project, two issues are apparent. First, China's identity connected with AIIB continued to be far from neatly organized. China still worked with the identity of "developed–developing" bridge<sup>63</sup> that largely corresponded with the previously discussed shifts of AIIB's position. While this identity seemed to get established as the dominant one, this should not be read

as a definitive conclusion of the identitarian positioning as other identities kept re-appearing as well.<sup>64</sup> Secondly, and to make it a bit more complicated, China's post-2016 discourse connected its identity to AIIB less often and less clearly, which correlates to the discussed internationalization of AIIB and its (partial) detachment from the BRI framework.

When it comes to further details concerning its demarcation, AIIB's developments show its emulation of existing practices of governance and organization typical for similar institutions. This was accompanied by the effort of China's foreign policy to emphasize that AIIB should "supplement" existing international institutions. In other words, Chinese representatives continually persuaded the international community that AIIB was not intended to be a tool of China's influence, and they rhetorically emphasized compatibility and cooperation between AIIB and related institutions.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, as implicitly recognized even by AIIB's director Jin Lique, the post-2016 importance of AIIB for China and the weight ascribed to AIIB by China's post-2016 rhetoric do not match China's earlier highly ambitious presentation of AIIB.<sup>66</sup> And as commented by one observer, the operation of and bargaining within AIIB could be described as "normal and boring."<sup>67</sup>

Thus, after AIIB's official launch, China's approach continued to evince signs of adaptation and mitigation of conflictual tensions that combined with downplaying its ambitions in relation to AIIB. China quite clearly realized that the presence of many Western countries within AIIB meant close supervision from well-experienced actors that made (potential) Chinese efforts to openly manipulate AIIB to its advantage untenable or, at least, highly costly. Thus, China's foreign policy followed the opportunity to construct AIIB as a legitimization device, rather than building AIIB as a tool closely interconnected with strategic goals of BRI (as portrayed by China's official narratives since 2013 until at least 2015) or as a tool for pressuring Western economic institutions or forwarding institutional innovations (as suggested in the early phases of AIIB's development).<sup>68</sup>

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that Xi Jinping moved China from Deng Xiaoping's strategic course more than two previous presidents ago. Establishing AIIB has been one of the important symptoms of the change. However, when trying to understand to what extent China's foreign policy during the establishment of AIIB resembles Deng's strategic course, we can witness both differences and similarities. The current state of strategic identities and grand strategic vision as structural dimensions of China's foreign policy suggests that China could be understood as (at least partially) revisionist as argued by literature mentioned in the introductory paragraphs. New identities, including that of a great power or an Asian leader, coexisted with Xi's general aspirations to increase China's power, influence and legitimacy, his more active approach and specific strategic motivations backing BRI and AIIB.

However, when examining AIIB's actual implementation and its style, the conclusion is rather opposite. China's demarcation of AIIB's aspirations, values, role, connections to China's own strategic identities and other actors significantly evolved from 2013 to 2018. Moreover, it should be noted that changes in these areas largely, though not completely, correlated with each other. Despite the initial tendency to portray AIIB as distanced from and opposed to Western institutions, China significantly modified its approach to AIIB, exhibiting a high degree of adaptation, flexibility, a gradually apparent tendency to avoid conflicts and a relatively low level of coherence of the project's key characteristics sustained across time. Moreover, China's activities related to creating AIIB highlighted, rather than truly overcame, differences in its strategic identities.

Based on these characteristics, I make two arguments. First, AIIB's implementation largely resembles Deng's "crossing the river by touching the stones" guidance that represents an incremental but also adaptive approach and that was defined by very similar characteristics as those mentioned above. The point is not that we should be surprised to see such an approach in Chinese foreign policy or that it is a feature typical for China only. However, its presence helps realize that the current state of AIIB is not a foregone conclusion and AIIB might have become something China had not originally expected. Second, AIIB can hardly be seen as a revisionist project in the sense as outlined above. By contrast, China's foreign policy adjusted AIIB as per Western pressure, cooperated and got entangled with Western actors or exhibited tendencies to overcome conflicts. Nonetheless, two disclaimers shall apply. First, it was beyond the scope of this paper to assess whether AIIB could be understood as revisionist in different terms. Second, I did not aspire to reveal the ultimate ideals of Xi Jinping (or other Chinese politicians) about the future of AIIB. Although Xi's desired preferences might be much more revisionist, it is safe to claim that its evolution affected AIIB in the way that it has accommodated to the global institutional order more than initially expected and that it has become a part of the institutional order rather than its (open) antagonist.

During the analyzed period, AIIB underwent at least the following interrelated shifts that co-defined its strategic course. Strategically, the Bank changed from being a tool for supplementing the China Dream and BRI to providing China with an option on how to increase international legitimacy and reputation. Economically (geo-economically), its purpose moved from putting pressure on the Western-led international economic order to closely cooperating with its champions like the WB or ADB. Institutionally, China's position within the Bank changed from (almost, potentially) having hegemonic power to being closely observed by other very experienced states and accepting many norms or principles promoted by Western liberal actors. All of these changes seem to have one aspect in common. China reacted flexibly to make AIIB more defensible and sustainable internationally utilizing windows of opportunity which appeared along the way. I do not claim that this approach which I wish to call incremental is followed intentionally or unintentionally but argue that it should not be overlooked.

To summarize, China's strategic course as it developed in the context of AIIB's initiation can be characterized by A) a grand strategic position that gradually consented to a close cooperation with Western actors, utilized AIIB for gaining legitimacy rather

than straightforwardly competing for influence and tolerated an increasing gap between AIIB and BRI, B) incoherent strategic identities with the identity of China as a bridge between developed and developing countries as the potentially, though not completely, unifying one, and C) the incremental and adaptive strategic style.

The relatively important role of incrementalism in China's procedure creates possibilities for other states to influence China's foreign policy in the discussed area. It also opens ways for accommodating China's visions of international (institutional) order to those of Western states. It illustrates that China's and Xi Jinping's current approach to global order and strategic issues may be more adaptive and flexible than often thought. The future development of AIIB seems to be open as well, especially as China will have to balance between 1) different identities and normative promises it connected with the Bank, 2) using the Bank as its instrument for supporting the ambitious BRI project and preserving AIIB's status as a true multilateral institution, or 3) between pursuing its proactive strategic course and receiving diplomatic recognition, while both these elements *together* are necessary for increasing China's status in international politics, i.e. something Xi Jinping apparently tries to achieve along with his foreign policy endeavors.

## Notes

1. The author would like to thank the professors, researchers and fellows of Peking University, Renmin University, China Institute of International Studies, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Shanghai Institute for International Studies, East China Normal University, and Shanghai Jiao Tong University for interviews in autumn 2015 and spring 2016 which serve as a background for the paper.
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