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# ***Trends of Scholarship in the Study of the Politics and International Relations of Contemporary China***

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### **Abstract**

This paper considers recent trends in the study of the politics and international relations of contemporary China. It suggests that changes in the focus of research have tended to reactively follow changes in policy – for example, the recent focus on China's resource diplomacy. Notwithstanding an increasing diversity of theoretical positions, dominant approaches still focus on the state as the main actor in international relations, and tend to separate the domestic from the international as independent spheres of enquiry. In order to fully understand the complex dynamics of change within China, and to gain a realistic understanding of Chinese power in world politics, the paper calls for a reconnection between the domestic and the international. It also suggests that a focus on ideational change and the changing nature of class formation (and alliances) should not be overlooked by those searching for political change in the domestic sphere.

*Keywords: International relations theory, realism, international political economy, political change, China*

It is not surprising that “politics” and “international relations” (IR) are typically grouped together as a single discipline. The two are usually taught alongside each other in individual academic departments or schools – many of which happily carry the title of “politics and IR”. But in many respects, the starting point for this consideration of politics and IR studies of contemporary China is the continued separation of the two as separate and distinct fields of enquiry. Clearly, there are exceptions – indeed there will be exceptions to every bold statement made in an essay such as this one, which necessarily entails generalisations and broad brush overviews. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that many in the IR

community will disagree, I suggest that the integration of the two fields of inquiry are important if we are to gain a full understanding of the dynamics of change within China. Perhaps more important, such a re-integration is essential if we are to gain a realistic understanding of China's current place in the world, and China's potential future(s).

## **The De-linking of the Domestic from the International**

There is a growing diversity in approaches to studying contemporary China. Perhaps most notably, sociological/constructivist and broadly defined political economy approaches have become increasingly common in recent years. Nevertheless, the discipline of IR remains dominated by those who focus on the national state as the level of analysis, and statist and realist notions of IR in particular – not least because of the sheer number of articles, chapters and conference papers based on realist assumptions that emanate from North America and Asia in particular.

For realists, there is an assumed “national interest” pursued by state actors (and state actors alone) that is unaltered by either the changing ideological preferences of state elites or shifting societal interests and alliances (indeed, the Sino-Soviet split and the move towards Sino-US collaboration was a classic example for some realists of how ideology was always put aside by rational state actors searching to maximise power and the national interest). Once more we have to generalise – there are different varieties of realism, some of which (for example, neoclassical realism) that do consider domestic “unit level” factors. But for many realists – where these interests come from is irrelevant – the job of an IR scholar is to study the resulting interplay of politics between states, leaving the study of politics within states for others to consider. The diversity and complexity of different opinions, aspirations and interests is often ignored or considered irrelevant, and the language of IR focuses on a single unit of analysis – ‘China thinks’, ‘China says’, and ‘China wants’.

The example of the Sino-Soviet split is just one of many cases where the rhetoric and actions of the Chinese government give ample support to those who favour a realist approach. Indeed, it is impossible to study Chinese IR without referring to realism – even if it is just to explain the mindset of the Chinese leadership and the dominance of realism amongst Chinese academic and policy related academics who both feed and interpret Chinese IR. Central to this approach is the concept of hegemony and how to resist it. In the post Cold War

era, Chinese IR thinking has largely been dominated by the geometric problem of triangles with only two points, and the search to find a counter-hegemonic bloc to provide that third pole, or perhaps to create an alternative pole to the unipolar US hegemony (notwithstanding the fact that the rhetoric is always phrased in terms of the desirability of constructing a multipolar order). Perhaps even more than Thucydides and the Peloponnesian Wars, PRC foreign policy provides considerable justifications to support basic realist assumptions about the nature of politics between nations and IR.

Although this essay is primarily concerned with the study of China, it might be worth briefly noting here that the study of Europe within China has gained more importance as a result of the search for potential anti-hegemonic allies. It is certainly true that relations with individual European states have long been important for Chinese IR – not least relations with the UK prior to the resumption of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong. It is also true that more recently, economic relations with Europe (both in terms of a market and a source of investment) have become ever more important. If we are being honest, we should also accept that European funding initiatives in China (for example, the EU-China Higher Education Cooperation Programme) have resulted in an increased number of Chinese scholars adopting European (or more often, EU) focuses within their research. But the search for an alternative global power structure to unipolar US hegemony has clearly generated a renewed interest in Europe as a whole – and notwithstanding divergent European relationships with the hegemon, the potential for the emergence of a clear and coherent unified European voice and interest in IR. In this respect, some Chinese policy makers and scholars seem to be keener on the emergence of the EU as a coherent unified actor in IR than many (perhaps even most) in the EU itself – and perhaps also sometimes imbue the EU with “actorness” that does not exist in reality.

Interestingly, it is not just realist scholars that tend to treat China as a single actor or entity in IR. Those who write from a liberal tradition should be aware of the need to disaggregate the state and consider on whose behalf state actors are undertaking IR. They should also be aware of the need to move beyond the state as an actor in IR, considering the role of a range of non state actors – but most clearly economic actors. Yet although there is a strong liberal tradition in writings on Chinese IR, the liberalism often only extends to the process and objectives of engaging China – the way in which engaging China can bring it into the international system and socialise it into the dominant western liberal global



order. It is also sometimes extended to an understanding of who is engaging China but moving beyond a simply statist understanding (though typically based on an understanding that it is still governments who are the main actors and facilitate engagement). But much of this liberal literature in some ways stops being liberal when it gets to the Chinese side of the equation, still treating the Chinese state as a single straightforward unit of analysis and of Chinese state actors as the actors in IR. The concept of China as the unit of investigation is not always questioned, and the question of who Chinese state actors are representing is rarely asked.

## The (De)Linking of IR and Economics

Many realists are also largely unconcerned about economics viewing it as a separate sphere of enquiry to be left to economists to study. However, there are two exceptions to this general rule. First, international economic relations are considered to be important when they embody or reflect power politics between states in a game of mercantilist competition – a subset of politics that can be dealt with by state-to-state diplomatic relations with little attention paid to the role of non-state actors. Second, economic factors are important in establishing conceptions of national power that move beyond traditional security issues – something akin to the Chinese conception of comprehensive national power (*zonghe guoli*) (more of this later). Here the language of IR that focuses on the state as actor is echoed in political analyses of actors in international economic relations, which in turn feed into understandings of China's rising economic power – 'China dominates in the production of', 'China leads the way in exports of', 'China is the leading producer of', and so on.

Here international economic relations are typically viewed in terms of interactions between nation states (or equivalents<sup>1</sup>). In the process, the domestic economy is aggregated into a single unit – "China". Not only does this approach fail to disaggregate "China" itself, it also ignores the reality of transnationally fragmented post-fordist production processes – if you like, the analysis remains international while the reality of production is transnational or globalised. Put (over)simply, if analyses are only based on what comes out of China and ignore what goes into China (and where it comes from) then considerations of Chinese power are likely to be considerably exaggerated.

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<sup>1</sup> Bearing in mind the definitional problems of how to classify relations with Taiwan.



## New Directions in IR Studies

At the risk of oversimplification, we can identify two broad issues that dominate IR studies of China. The first issue revolves around the interrelated questions of how much power China has, how much it will have, and how this power will challenge the power of the existing hegemon and dominant global norms. The second issue (which has many common threads with the first) is the extent to which China provides a more straightforward threat to international security – primarily through the possibility of military conflict with Taiwan and in the long term perhaps Japan.<sup>2</sup> There is little to suggest that this emphasis will decline in the foreseeable future. However, we can expect a further shift in the focus of attention within this broad “power perspective” along the lines of emerging research agendas over the last few years.

In many respects, new agendas have been shaped by changing priorities within China itself, and the extent to which academic agendas follow the shifting political agendas of the country under consideration. A crucial watershed here was the move towards accepting wider definitions of “security” than just guns, bombs and bullets in China that became apparent in and after 1997. In particular, there is already a growing interest in the implications of China’s energy and economic security (oil, gas and broader raw material supplies) on both China’s IR and also the global liberal order. It is not just that Chinese demand is impacting on the price and supply of materials on global markets, though this is important in its own right in terms of providing challenges to the energy security of other states. It is also that there is a concern about the impact of China’s resource diplomacy. Put bluntly, when China engages a developing country seeking economic relations and access to resources, there are no political strings attached – there are no demands for trade relations to be contingent on democratisation and human rights reforms. In the case of Venezuela, the suggestion is that China provides a new alternative market to reliance on the US, freeing Venezuela from the need to simply respond to Washington’s objectives. In the case of “pariah” states like Zimbabwe, the suggestion is that China is undermining all the liberal western world is doing in an attempt to encourage or force “positive” political change.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, strictly speaking from a Chinese perspective, relations with Taiwan are a domestic issue and not part of International Relations, but are considered as the latter by the vast majority of non-Chinese scholars (and not just because relations with Taiwan have spillover implications for relations with other states).

This suggests not just a shift in an analysis of the nature of IR, but also an expansion in the consideration of case studies of bilateral relations. Relations with the USA and Japan (and Taiwan) are likely to remain the most studied both within and outside China, but a focus on resource diplomacy also suggests a renewed focus on China's relations with what once were termed Third World countries. Just as Africa, Latin America and Central Asia become more important for Chinese resource diplomacy, so relations with these areas will increasingly become the subject of academic scholarship.

## **Regionalism and Regionalisation**

Shifting Chinese policy agendas have also resulted in an increased academic interest in relations with Southeast Asia, and the possibility of the creation of some form of East Asian regional community. Again, Chinese initiatives to move towards more formal regional cooperation were in no small part inspired by the redefinition of security and the importance of economic security in the wake of the Asian financial crises. Perhaps the three most important and concrete consequences of this policy shift are Chinese participation in the Chiang Mai Initiative (where regional states agree to support each others' currencies if they come under speculative attacks), the formalisation of ASEAN+3 (ASEAN plus China, South Korea and Japan) political summits and economic surveillance mechanisms, and the ongoing process of creating a fully functioning ASEAN-China Free Trade Area.

But while political economists might focus on the economic logic of closer and more formalised regional economic ties, within the IR community the focus is rather different. Here the focus is on relations with Southeast Asia as part of a "charm offensive" in a power game designed to enhance China's position vis-à-vis either Japan, or the US, or indeed both. The "peaceful rise of China" hypothesis promoted by Zheng Bijian over recent years is considered to be the quasi-ideological arm of this attempt to build a regional order dominated by China and to serve Chinese interests. For these scholars, the potential for a regionalised future remains distant given the political differences between China and Japan (or China and Japan as a proxy of US interests) that dominate regional relations.

The example of relations with Southeast Asia highlights three key issues in the study of Chinese IR in the foreseeable future. First, it highlights the residual chasm between mainstream scholars of IR, and the smaller group of international political

economy (IPE) scholars. It would be nice to think scholarship could proceed through collaboration – but in practice the ontological differences between the two remain so strong that they are likely to evolve as distinct and separate spheres of enquiry. Second, it highlights a renewed interest in the conception of China’s “soft power” (or the above mentioned comprehensive national power) and the move towards a “Beijing consensus”<sup>3</sup> built not just on military might and ambitions, but also on economics and cultural relations. To this end, while future analyses of Chinese soft power will inevitably entail an economic dimension, economics is largely conceived of as a strategic tool deployed by national elites in the pursuit of the national interest.

## Ideas and Actors

Third, it makes us think about who the actors are in China’s IR. The predominant focus remains on state actors identifying strategies to maximise the national interests – in this respect, many analyses remain leader-centric. In the case of relations with Southeast Asia, there is also a need to disaggregate the state itself and consider the role and importance of local level leaders as actors in IR – primarily through their role as agents of international economic relations. Furthermore, while separating enterprises from the state remains a difficult (some would argue flawed) endeavour – particularly when it comes to China’s outward looking large state conglomerates – we need to ensure that we don’t get stuck in fixed and unmovable conceptions of actors and interests. The interest of economic actors should be an increasing focus of IR scholars – even if the relationship between economic and state actors may remain very close. Perhaps most important in the immediate term is the political context of China’s increasing outward investment in Southeast Asia – is this economic activity to support power maximising goals, or political initiatives designed to attain economic objectives?

The debate has been moved forward by considering the importance of the expansion of advisors and think tanks in policy making. Whilst this understanding still concentrates on a relatively small number of actors at the elite level, it is important as it brings the importance of ideas to the fore. Rather than just take, for example, new conceptions of security as a given, we need to think more in terms of where those ideas came from, how they are transmitted into the policy

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<sup>3</sup> After the Foreign Policy Centre report of the same name (Ramo 2004).



process, and whether these ideas reflect or reinforce specific sets of interests (and power). An increased focus on the ideational basis of IR would be very valuable. The focus on ideas is related to understandings of who state actors are acting for in developing foreign policy – which subset of interests for liberals or which social forces/classes for (post)Marxist scholars – with awareness that these groups are not necessarily purely contained within the domestic sphere of politics.

The ideational dimension is also important in the increasing number of important studies that consider the external construction of an idea of “China”. These studies start from an assumption that images and understandings of China are created to serve specific interests. For example, to what extent is the idea of China as a threat to global security constructed by those who have something to gain from the adoption of policy towards China that is based on a fear of this threat? Rather than ask questions such as ‘what is China?’, ‘what does China want?’ and ‘what should *we* do about China?’, these researchers instead ask ‘who creates this image of China?’, ‘how do they do it?’, and ‘to serve whose interests and objectives?’.

There is also a strand of literature (including some academics within China) that considers the way in which China’s national identity is constructed within China – and crucially, the extent to which this identity is being changed by international interactions. Here, there is a focus on the way in which not just the norms of IR are internalised, but also the way in which other political norms are internalised within what we might call the domestic realm of politics. Indeed, one of the basic principles of liberal IR theory is that participation in a liberal global economic order will not only lead to the spread of liberal economic ideas, but through a dense network of transnational relations, will also promote the transition to political democracy. We should also remember that one of the explicit justifications for encouraging China to join the WTO was that this would bring “positive” democratising impulses.<sup>4</sup> There is already a relatively large literature on the changing basis of Chinese conceptions of Human Rights, and more work on how ideas and norms are understood and transmitted would help re-link the study of Chinese politics and China’s IR.

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that promoting political change was the primary reason, but was instead depicted as a useful side-effect in addition to the economic benefits for the West.

## The Search for Political Change in China

Considerations of the political consequences of internationalisation/globalisation highlight the fact that the separation of the international from the domestic is not always the case for all scholars, and brings us to the future of studies of Chinese politics. In some ways, Chinese politics is less interesting – less ‘sexy’ – today than in previous eras; trying to understand what happened in the Hundred Flowers, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution is perhaps more exciting than getting to grips with the “the socialist conception of honour and disgrace”.

One of the most often used definitions of politics is “the art and science of government”, and this is reflected by much of the work on Chinese politics. What elite politicians say and do is crucially important, and studies of elite level politics will continue to be an essential strand of research in the future. It is probably true that the nature of economic reform means that leaders’ ability to fundamentally change the path of future reform is perhaps more difficult – more limited – than before. But within the overarching framework of the transition from socialism, there is still considerable leeway for leaders to have an impact. Note, for example, the extent to which Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao were expected by many in 2002 and 2003 to remain under the political shadow of Jiang Zemin. Yet while they have not abandoned reform and overturned the overall trajectory of the reform process, they have nevertheless had a significant impact in terms of introducing a more cautious political (anti-liberal?) line, and by trying to direct the focus of growth to previously relatively neglected areas and sectors.

Interestingly, there are still relatively few studies of policy processes in China – or put another way, there is certainly room for more such studies to enrich our knowledge and understanding. As with earlier comments on IR thinking in China, a focus on how ideas are transmitted into the policy process could be an important component of this agenda.

The nature of the Chinese political system means that what happens at the centre matters more than it does in many other political settings that we are considering at this conference. But there is nevertheless a widespread acceptance that the political centre in Beijing is not the only locus of power in contemporary China. The idea that the study of Chinese politics must consider what happens at the sub-state level is now firmly accepted by scholars of contemporary China. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the main focus here was on the power of provincial governments. More recently, the focus of attention has moved further down

the power hierarchy to consider lower levels of administration, and this level of analysis promises to be a fruitful source of research in the future. Significantly, the aim is not to find a single model or single explanation of the relationship between the local and the centre, but largely to explain and understand difference.

There is also a relatively strong strand of work that focuses on the dilution – or more correctly, potential dilution – of party power, rather than just devolution within the administrative structure. Here, research tends to focus on the growth of broadly defined “civil society” and/or democratisation. As with the study of IR, there is an element here of research following policy changes within China, with the extension of grass roots elections higher up the administrative hierarchy providing a context for the study of democratisation. But there are two other important impulses here. First, there is an extent to which this research follows the priorities of major funding agencies and the political aspirations of external actors. For example, the search for civil society in China fits in with the applied research requirements of organisations like the Department for International Development in the UK, while the European Commission is eager to discover if its support for the extension of democracy at the local level in rural China has yet to bear any fruit. Second (and very much related), this research agenda is also partly generated by a focus on the “expected” change that some think “should” occur in China – “should” in terms of what major agencies want to happen, but “should” also in terms of expectations generated by theoretical preferences. For example, there remains a conviction in some theories that the extension of economic freedom must inevitably result in political freedoms and ultimately democracy, and it is just a matter of time before evidence is found in China to support this belief.

The search for the roots of democratisation will continue. But it is important not just to equate “political reform” with “democratisation” for two key reasons. First, economic reform in its very inception is acutely political in that it entails a key ideational change, and the ideational dimension of political change remains an important research area. There is some good work that has considered the nature of key debates in China over ideas. For example, the strength of nationalism in contemporary China and its causes and consequences have resulted in a number of interesting studies (and studies that relocate the international within the domestic). Interest in ideas has also been bolstered by the increasingly confident critical voices of the “new left”, which highlight the negative social consequences of rapid economic reform and liberalisation, and the (rhetorical at least) adoption of parts of the new left agenda by the Hu-Wen leadership. But as further considerations of



ideas would not go amiss – more on the evolution of a new Chinese nationalism, and more on the idea of neoliberalism as manifest (and as discussed) in China.

Second, economic reform has already created massive political reform in the transformation of social groups/forces or classes and the transformation of political alliances between these social strata. The class base of both Chinese society and Communist Party rule has changed – and crucially, the nature of these alliances cannot simply be confined to the study of the domestic sphere, but also needs to consider the extent of trans-national alliances.

Some of the best studies of the fragmentation and reformulation of Chinese social strata have come from within China itself.<sup>5</sup> So too have some of the more critical investigations into the negative social consequences of reform. And while some define politics in terms of government, others prefer Harold Lasswell's definition of politics as the study of "who gets what, when and how". This Lasswellian understanding encompasses the government and governance dimensions of the first definition, but adds to it the significance of distribution and power over distribution. Parts of the IR and policy related communities – particularly but not only in the US – have helped establish a vision of a successful and soon to be (if not already) powerful China that will be (or is) a challenge to the US and to the liberal global order. Such works typically pay scant or no attention to the unequal distribution of the benefits of reform within China, let alone considering the myriad economic and social (and therefore potentially political) problems that the Chinese government is more than aware need to be addressed.

It is certainly true that millions of Chinese have been brought out of poverty. But it is also true that the task is not complete and millions are still living in abject poverty (no matter how poverty is defined) and millions more live above the poverty line but would count as "poor" in most societies. Yet in some analyses of China's place in the world, the millions of poor and the unemployed and other socially disadvantaged groups are not represented at all. As such, adding to the existing works on inequality, poverty and social dislocation are not only important in their own right, and are not only important in helping to understand the government's own political agendas and priorities, but also important in re-embedding at least some interpretations of China's global power in domestic political realities.

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<sup>5</sup> Chinese work on social stratification tends to use the concept of social strata (*shehui jieceng*) and shies away from conceptions of class (*jiejì*) – not least because "class" was usually followed by "struggle" (*douzhen*) during the cultural Revolution and still has negative connotations for many.

## Conclusions

This essay was originally written for a conference organised by the Institut für Asienkunde designed to reflect on trends in scholarship on East Asia. Halfway through preparing the original conference paper, it occurred to me that I wasn't sure whether our task was to write on what will be the main future trends, or what they should be. In terms of will, the agendas that have dominated the study of contemporary China, particularly in the IR realm, will continue to dominate. To be sure, new focuses will emerge in terms of case studies, but basic approaches will most likely endure. It is also likely that Chinese scholars will continue to make ever greater contributions to the study of Chinese politics and IR as has increasingly been the case over the last decade.

In terms of should, each of us will be influenced by our own theoretical preferences – and as I am influenced by IPE, then I not surprising make the case for the extension of IPE perspectives to China; partly to enrich the IPE discipline itself by testing assumptions and theories in the Chinese case, but more importantly for this essay, partly to overcome some of the problems that I think often emerge from IR studies of China's global economic role. These include the separation of the domestic from the international, the understanding (or misunderstanding) of the trans or even de-nationalised nature of production, and the importance of ideas (and most clearly the neoliberal idea).

The intention of such an approach is not simply to 'domesticate the international', but also to 'globalise the domestic'. Indeed, it's tempting to make the tentative (and largely provocative) suggestion that despite the lack of access to reliable information on China, studying the politics dynamics of change in pre-reform China was in some ways easier than the contemporary task in that was all but possible to think entirely in domestic terms. To be sure, China was never a purely totalitarian state where central leaders spoke and everybody else just fell in line, and considerable time and effort was spent trying to find the real locus of power, with particular emphasis on elite factionalism, the role of the military, and the power of provincial leaders. And of course, China's leaders always had relations with the superpowers in mind when defining domestic development strategies. But you could all but ignore the global and focus purely on the dynamics of domestic politics.

With China's re-engagement with the global economy in the post-Mao era, and particularly after Deng Xiaoping's southern inspection tour (*nanxun*) in

1992, such a domestic focus can no longer be efficacious. This is not to say that the domestic context is unimportant – far from it. As this essay has hopefully demonstrated, I am convinced that domestic considerations must remain crucial for any understanding of the contemporary political economy. It is just that on their own, domestic issues do not let us truly understand the many dynamics at play. Trying to get to grips with the domestic context of reform is hard enough in itself, but I suggest that the rather daunting reality for students of contemporary China is that it is now essential to also get to grips with the dynamics and workings of the global political economy as well.

## References

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