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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

GERGELY SALÁT

Editor's Foreword 6

China Column

ERIC HENDRIKS

Tianxia Philosophy and the China-World Problem 13

PHILIP PILKINGTON

Six Stages of Chinese Economic Development 35

WANG QIUPING

Theoretical Innovations and Practices of Chinese
Soft Power in the Context of the New Era 55

DUAN SHUANGXI

Historical Evolution and Innovative Development
Pathways of Chinese Higher Education 75

RAMACHANDRA BYRAPPA

India, China, and the Global South: Don't Forget the Trust Factor 93

DANILO LORENZO DELOS SANTOS – ZOLTÁN VÖRÖS

The South China Sea Dispute: The Future of China's
Grand Strategy and ASEAN's Counterbalancing Narrative 109

ÁGOTA RÉVÉSZ

The Image of China in the German Media – Changes between 2018 and 2024 127

Conference Report

PÉTER KLEMENSITS

China-Europe Cooperation in the Era of Great Transformation
– International Conference Organised
by the Eurasia Center of John von Neumann University and Fudan University **147**

Book Reviews

FERENC BÁNHIDI

David Daokui Li: China's World View:
Demystifying China to Prevent Global Conflict **153**

GERGELY SALÁT

David Morris: A New Era of Risk: Why
We Need a New, Sustainable Internationalism to Manage the Rise of China **161**



INTRODUCTION

Editor's Foreword

The primary driving force behind the global changes unfolding before our eyes is the rise of China. For millennia, the East Asian giant occupied a central position, only to be pushed to the periphery from the 19th century onwards. In recent decades, however, it has been marching inexorably back towards the centre – a long march that is transforming the entire world.

China's rapid economic ascent, strategic assertiveness, cultural projection, and intellectual self-reflection have together produced a presence that is impossible to ignore, simultaneously commanding admiration, anxiety, and critical inquiry. The narratives surrounding China's rise are as multifaceted as the transformations taking place within China itself. Whether interpreted as a revisionist challenger, a civilisational actor, or a developmental success story, China's trajectory calls for a nuanced and interdisciplinary assessment. This issue of *Eurázsia Szemle* brings together such an assessment, engaging with the philosophical, economic, educational, strategic, and discursive dimensions of China's contemporary global engagement.

The issue opens with Eric Hendriks's investigation into the philosophical underpinnings of China's global imaginary through the lens of *tianxia*, a classical Chinese concept meaning "all under heaven". In contemporary Chinese political and intellectual discourse, *tianxia* has been revived not as a nostalgic relic, but as a conceptual tool to reimagine China's place in the world. Hendriks argues that *tianxia*-ism contests the very epistemological foundations of globalisation. Rather than entering into a pre-existing world system, *tianxia* thought situates China as a civilisational origin point from which world-order radiates. This perspective challenges the conventional liberal frameworks of international relations and calls for a reassessment of what it means for China to be a "global" actor. The article offers a valuable theoretical entry point for the rest of the issue, setting the stage for debates over how China relates to the world, not merely as a participant, but as a potential shaper of worldhood itself.

Philip Pilkington follows with an incisive periodisation of China's economic development, offering an account that resists simplistic binaries of market versus planning. Through six distinct stages, beginning with the post-Great Leap Forward era and culminating in China's contemporary turn towards technological sovereignty, Pilkington reveals the dynamic adaptability of the Chinese economic model. He challenges prevailing Western assumptions about China's trajectory and draws attention to how China blends elements of mercantilism, capitalism, and state planning into a hybrid form. This article serves as a critical intervention in the ongoing debate over whether China conforms

to, diverges from, or redefines existing economic paradigms. Importantly, it reminds readers that economic development in China cannot be understood without attending to the ideological, political, and institutional innovations that have underpinned it.

Soft power, as one such domain of innovation, is the subject of Wang Qiuping's contribution. Beginning with Joseph Nye's foundational concept, Wang examines how Chinese thinkers and policymakers have localised soft power in ways that reflect China's own civilisational values and strategic objectives. Culture, history, and development achievements form the bedrock of this reconfigured soft power, which is seen not merely as image management but as a form of international influence embedded in policy, most notably through the Belt and Road Initiative. Wang's analysis highlights the dual effort to blend tradition with modernity and to craft a form of soft power that aligns with China's broader goal of contributing to global governance. The article sheds light on how China seeks not only to be heard on the global stage but also to shape the terms of discourse itself.

Duan Shuangxi's article turns to another foundational pillar of China's transformation: the higher education system. Tracing the evolution from imperial examinations through phases of Western emulation and engineering-focused expansion to the current push for world-class universities, Duan situates educational reform as a strategic imperative. With the release of the *Outline for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024–2035)*, China is responding to demographic pressures, technological changes, and global competition by fostering institutional autonomy, AI-driven governance, and international partnerships. Duan's contribution emphasises that education is not only a domestic policy priority but also a domain through which China builds human capital, global prestige, and long-term soft power.

Ramachandra Byrappa brings the discussion to the evolving dynamics of the Global South, a term whose salience has been unexpectedly revived in the wake of geopolitical shifts such as the war in Ukraine. His article contrasts the different relationships that India and China maintain with the Global South: for India, a deeply rooted identity; for China, an increasingly vital strategic frontier. Byrappa interrogates the trust factor that underlies South–South relations and suggests that mutual perceptions between India and China – ranging from rivalry to ambivalence – could decisively shape the trajectory of cooperation or fragmentation in the Global South. This article adds a vital geopolitical and normative layer to the issue, questioning the unity of non-Western powers and the sustainability of emerging South–South solidarities.

China's growing assertiveness in the maritime sphere is the subject of the article by Danilo Lorenzo Delos Santos and Zoltán Vörös. Focusing on the South China Sea dispute, Delos Santos and Vörös analyse China's transition from a narrative of peaceful rise to a posture marked by strategic ambiguity and territorial assertiveness. Drawing on neorealist and neo-institutionalist theories, as well as middle-power dynamics, they explore how the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries – particularly the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam – have responded through strategies of hedging, balancing, and limited appeasement. The article provides not only a detailed account of regional responses but also situates the maritime dispute within China's broader grand strategy. It

makes a compelling case for why narrative control has become a key battleground in geopolitical rivalry.

The last article in the issue is Ágota Révész's empirical study of how China is represented in German media between 2018 and 2024. Through a quantitative content analysis, Révész documents a marked increase in negative coverage, with China increasingly framed through the language of threat, espionage, and systemic rivalry. This shift corresponds to political developments such as Xi Jinping's term extension, China's industrial policy moves, and high-profile acquisitions of German firms. The article highlights the role of media in shaping public perceptions and policy orientations, and illustrates how European views of China have hardened, complicating efforts at dialogue and cooperation. Révész's contribution turns the analytical gaze back onto the West, reminding us that the global reception of China is as complex and contested as China's own efforts at global positioning.

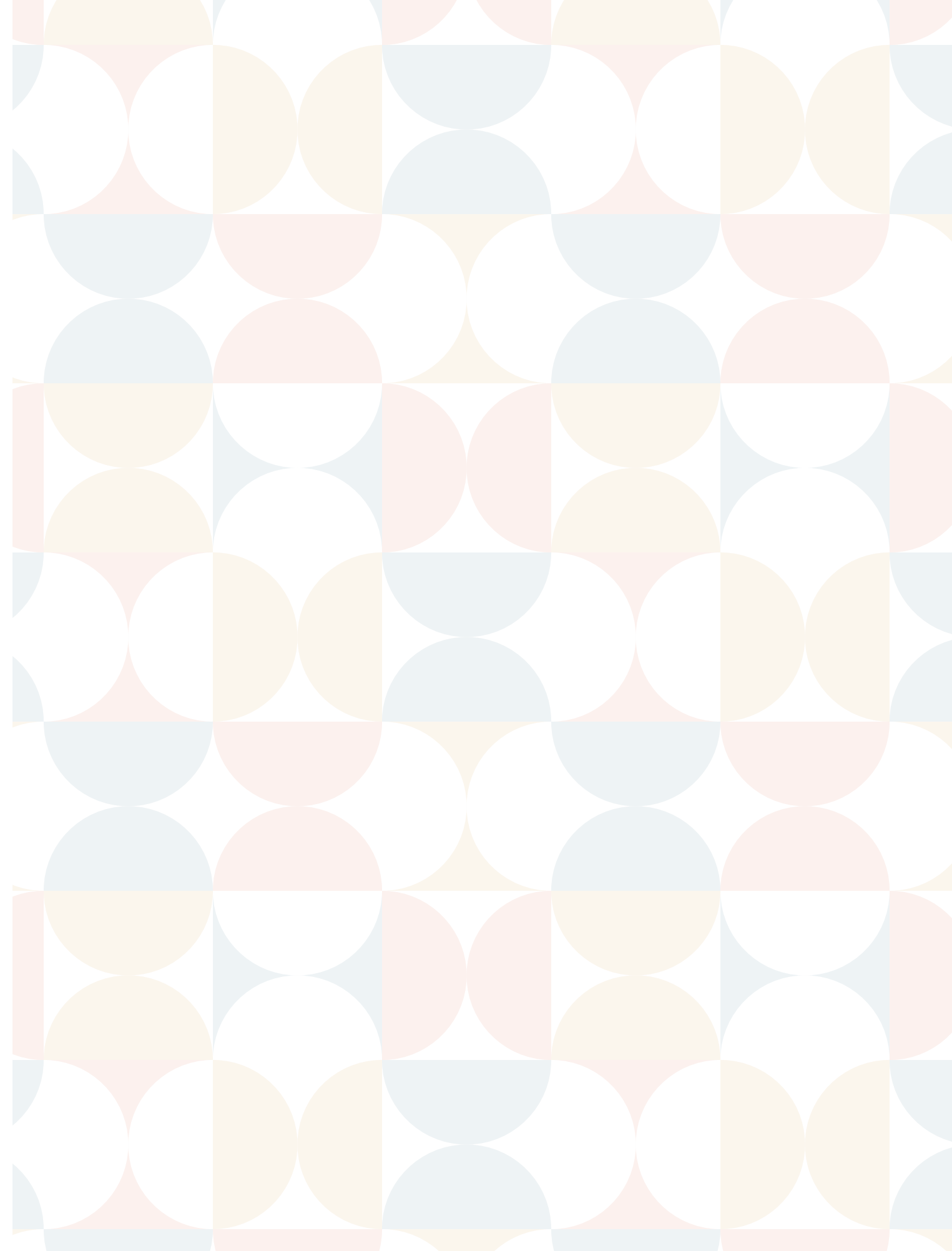
The issue concludes with a conference report and two reviews dealing with important new books on China's rise.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue reveal that understanding China's role in the 21st century requires more than tracking its material rise. It calls for a serious engagement with its ideas, narratives, aspirations, and contradictions. From philosophy to soft power, from economic modelling to international education, from strategic rivalry to media discourse, the contributions herein reflect the diversity of ways in which China's global presence is articulated, contested, and experienced. By approaching China as both an object and subject of global transformation, this issue of *Eurázsia Szemle* offers readers new conceptual tools and empirical insights for navigating the complexities of the current era – an era in which Eurasia, and China in particular, stands at the very heart of unfolding global change.

Gergely Salát, PhD habil.
Deputy Editor-in-Chief
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I
CHINA COLUMN



ERIC HENDRIKS

Tianxia Philosophy
and the China-World
Problem



TIANXIA PHILOSOPHY AND THE CHINA-WORLD PROBLEM

ERIC HENDRIKS¹

Abstract

How does China relate to the category “world”? Though seemingly trite, this question is complex and ideologically consequential, forcing itself upon us in the context of shifting geopolitical relations and rising Chinese intellectual ambitions. Tianxia-ist discourses in contemporary Chinese academia and politics challenge the idea that globalisation is something that China integrates into, couples with, or otherwise falls out of. Reviving and rewiring the classical concept of *tianxia*, “all under heaven”, tianxia-ism holds that world society is instead a co-existence China shares in, activates, or ignites. China does not enter a globalised world from the outside but, to the contrary, stands at its root, planting the worldness of the world. This article explores this tianxia-ism by identifying the intellectual, scholarly, and political ideas and realities against which it reacts.

Keywords: Globalisation, Tianxia, world society, the China-world problem, Pan-Asianism, revisionism, social ontology

1. China-World

At first glance, it seems odd that the question of how China relates to the category “world” could be contentious, for, conceptually, the relationship between “China” and “world” should be straightforward. Here is a simple truth: China is part of the world, existing alongside other parts, all of which exist within the world. How could there be any discussion about this? What more is

there to say? How is it that thinkers and scholars not only disagree on this matter but disagree in ways that are ideologically and philosophically consequential? It is because humans imbue space with meaning. We imagine, reimagine, ritually demarcate, politicise, and theorise the spaces in which we and others live. In this way, the question of how the category China relates to the category world – the China-world problem – could become contentious and politically laden.

In fact, the China-world problem has preoccupied Chinese and Western social and political theorists for one-and-a-half centuries, the shifts in their conceptualisations running like a red thread through the last two centuries of Chinese history. Along the way, Chinese discourses variably painted China as the world itself, the world’s world-carrying central part, an outcast on the world’s periphery, a developing country catching up with the world, and the founder of a new, emerging world order that is socialist or harmoniously diverse. An influential example of the latter is China’s new or revived tianxia imagining, the focus of the present analysis.

In a parallel way, yet with less existential urgency, some Western imaginings of globalisation also foreground the relationship between China and world but come at it from the opposite direction. Such imaginings often assign China the role of a paradigmatic periphery. China then functions as the periphery against which hypotheses about globalisation can be tested (“X is global if it is also in China”). Or it is a periphery that jeopardises or decouples from the “rules-based global order”, as in “China threat” discourses. Conversely, it reaffirms the global order’s truly globalised character (“Surely the world is globalised if even China is globally connected”). I categorise these as different responses to the China-world problem.

Tianxia theory challenges China’s reduction to a peripheral status (even though Western social thought often elevates China to a paradigmatic periphery in the ways listed) by centring traditional Chinese wisdom, which it regards as the seed of a truly worlded future world. Besides the Tianxia School in mainland Chinese social and political philosophy, i.e., the formalised scholarship, conceptually aligned discourses move through a broader and more diffuse landscape of political thought. Let us call this philosophical and broader intellectual movement, taken together, “tianxia-ism” or “the new tianxia-ism” (新天下主义). I take this term from the title of Chinese historian Xu Jilin’s celebrated manifesto (2015). Tianxia-ism is thoroughly modern yet neotraditionalist and revivalist. It attempts to revive the classical cosmographic and philosophical idea, ideal, inspiration, and reality of tianxia (天下) “all under heaven” – a family-like or harmonised world that is said to have once existed and must again exist to save humanity in the 21st century.

Responding to the China-world problem, tianxia-ism is formed by two dialectical negations. First, as scholarship, what is most interesting about tianxia-ism is that it negates the crucial axiom underlying Western-centric, liberal globalisation theories and world imaginings, including the Luhmannian and Stanford schools of world society theory: the axiom that “the political world”, “the world order”, or “globalisation” are things that China integrates into, couples with, or otherwise falls out of. In contrast, tianxia-ism depicts the emerging world society as a co-existence China shares in, activates, or ignites. China, then, would not enter a globalised world from the outside; instead, it would stand at its root, planting the worldness of the world. Interpreting tianxia-ism in this way, as a social ontology

¹ Eric Hendriks, PhD, Fellow, Danube Institute, Budapest, Hungary; Director, China Initiative of the Telos-Paul Piccone Institute, New York, USA.

of world and world society, sets my analysis apart from previous academic analyses of tianxia-ism, which interpreted it as an exotic international relations concept or as a normative philosophy of global justice (e.g., Ames et al., 2023; Kholi & Kwak, 2021). Instead, I explore tianxia-ist scholarship in socio-ontological terms, i.e., as offering a theory of the fundamental being of world society. Tianxia-ism's scholarly thrust is its theorisation of the meaning of "world" in "world society" and "world history". However, note that it does not directly engage Western theories of globalisation; it does not cite any Luhmannian or Stanford School scholar, for instance. I name these Western theories to extrapolate the axiomatic debate, steelmanning both sides of this debate with the most forceful theory resources I am familiar with.

Second, in a broader (and thus partly overlapping) macro-political or ideological dialectic, tianxia-ism negates the self-conception of Western liberal hegemony, which centres legitimacy, temporality, and thus worldness itself on the liberal West, depicting the liberal West as the supposed carrier of universal values and humanity's future. In this politico-ideological dialectic, tianxia-ism is a revisionist political world theory standing alongside Eurasia's other traditions of revisionist world-regionalist theorising, each of which is intimately tied up with pan-regionalist nationalism and takes as its object one of Eurasia's civilisational states: China, Russia, India, Iran, or, in previous lives, (Ottoman) Turkey or Japan. The "worlded" object, i.e., the particular cultural world of the civilisational state, is deemed to provide access to the true universality (in contrast to faux Western universalisms) through its very self-recognised particularity, its opening up to the universal condition of coexisting as a historical-cultural particular among particulars.

However, before this article explores tianxia-ism's meaning within those two overlapping scholarly-theoretical and politico-ideological dialectics, it places it in the history of Chinese approaches to the China-world problem.

2. From World to China and Back Again

The China-world relationship is so complex in Chinese social and political thought because, historically, the concept of China differentiated out of the Chinese concept of world. Modernising intellectual Liang Qichao (1873–1929) noted that before its confrontation with more powerful modern states, "China *was* the world" in its self-perception (Liang quoted in Luo, 2008, p. 94). Or at least it was the world's civilisation-carrying centre, i.e., the part of the world that gives the world its worldness, that makes it a world. It did not see itself as a state among states and, therefore, lacked a particularising name; the word "China" is an etic descriptor derived from the Sanskrit term for China, *cīna*, that, until the modern era, lacked a Chinese emic equivalent. As Liang observes: "A state obtains a name to differentiate it from other states. ... If only one state in the world existed, it would not have a state name" (1936, p. 66). Instead, the locus of legitimate imperial authority was identified as *tianxia* 天下, "all under heaven". The lands of the Han were *Zhonghua* 中华 and *Zhongguo* 中国, both of which mean "central area" or "Centralia" (F.-L. Wang, 2017, p. 11).

"China" constitutes a conceptual shrinkage in the history of Chinese social and political thought. What's more, the notion of China as a country alongside other countries is the ur-shrinkage that catapulted China into modernity. Modern Chinese intellectual history began with, in historian Joseph R. Levenson's phrase, "the contraction of China from a world to a nation in the world" (quoted in Luo, 2008, p. 5). The idea that China was the central, civilisation-bearing part of the world, or even the world as such, died in the waning days of the Qing, China's last imperial dynasty, which ended in 1912. International conditions forced Chinese thinkers and politicians to reconceptualise China as a state alongside other states *in* the world. However, as a state, China could still be world-leading. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Maoists imagined China driving the communist "world revolution" as the leader of the "Third World". In the 1990s, however, Chinese liberals exchanged "socialist and Third World internationalism" for "the universal norm of West-led modernity", i.e., their call for China to "get on track with the world"; hence, they equated the "world" with the wealthy market economies of the G7 (B. Wang, 2022, p. 155). China ended the 20th century on the world's periphery, "behind" the "world standard" in developmental terms.

However, in the latest reversal, China and world again converge in influential 21st-century theorisations. Following Sheng Hong, the pioneer of contemporary tianxia discourse (Sheng, 1996), Chinese academics such as Zhao Tingyang, Wang Xiaodong, Yao Zhongqiu, Wan Songshen, Liang Zhiping, Kwak Jun-Hyeok, Xiang Shuchun, Xu Jilin, and Jiang Shigong assign China an exceptional role as the bringer of global harmony-in-diversity (Ge, 2023, pp. 163–170). Wisdom from China's tradition must form the basis for a new tianxia world. However, though exceptionalist and sometimes chauvinistic, the discourse also offers resources for criticism because China, as it currently exists and treats its minorities and neighbouring states, is not yet living up to its world-historical mission. Historian Xu Jilin, for example, sternly reminds Chinese readers that "as a global nation [世界民族] that bears Hegel's 'world spirit' [世界精神]," China "must take responsibility for the world and for the 'world spirit' it has inherited" (Xu, 2015). Similarly, philosopher Zhao Tingyang believes that China, though not yet a tianxia in actualised form, carries within its cultural tradition the seed of a future global tianxia: "China is a 'microcosm' of tianxia because China is a 'world-patterned state' that takes tianxia to be internal to its structure" (Zhao, 2021, p. 124). Once tianxia sprouts up in China, and from there transforms society and morality internationally, a world time will commence: the present "nonworld" (非世界) of competing powers and capitalism will make way for what philosopher Zhao Tingyang calls a *tianxia shijie* (天下世界), an "ecumenical world" or, literally, a "world world" (Zhao, 2016, p. 161; Zhao, 2009, p. 316). Within it, all the different cultures, nations, and civilisations will co-exist in harmonious diversity.

Tianxia-ism is a neo-traditionalist revivalist movement drawing on a classical cosmographic and philosophical concept that has had various meanings through the centuries. In Chinese history, the concept of *tianxia* (天下), "all under heaven", referred varyingly to the human realm or everything on earth, or only to imperial China's sphere of influence, or the civilised realm within the world (Lewis & Hsieh, 2017). In imperial China, it was always both a descriptive and a normative term (M. Wang, 2012). To invoke tianxia meant to describe the existing world: we humans all live "under heaven";

i.e., we all live in the human realm. Yet, since tianxia is supposed to conform to *tian*, “heaven”, the moral-cosmic order, and since, according to Confucian belief, tianxia had been actualised in its perfect form in a distant past far predating even Confucius (551–479 BC), to invoke tianxia also implied normatively measuring the then presently existing socio-political conditions to an eternal cosmic order and to an idealised past (in which that cosmic order had guided affairs under heaven).

China’s modern tianxia theorists take this traditional Chinese-Confucian glorification of the days of yore – this idealisation in Confucius’ time and during later Chinese dynasties of a harmonious ancient past far predating Confucius – and turn it into a futuristic utopia. These tianxia-ists envision a utopian future tianxia in which all the world’s cultural and political diversity will coexist harmoniously. This time, the tianxia will be achieved on a genuinely global geographical scale. But for the worldwide tianxia future to arise, humanity must plant the tianxia consciousness of China’s past in the present non-world. As Xu asserts, China has preserved a fragmented but enduring sense of tianxia throughout its dynastic history. “Behind the traditional Chinese empire was a tianxia consciousness for all humanity, a universal set of values that transcended the individual interest of any given dynasty” (Xu, 2015). The tianxia theorists believe this consciousness is the seed from which the future tianxia will sprout. The new tianxia will be characterised by an “unlimited compatibility” with diverse local ways of life, yet, unlike its historical predecessor in China’s days of yore (Zhao, 2012, p. 25), it will be non-imperial and centreless and extend beyond China and East Asia to encompass all the earth’s peoples, thus worlding the world in its human totality.

Tianxia’s worlding of the world is a moral revolution. It will uplift people’s hearts and minds, fostering harmony among all cultures and political systems, and eliminating diplomatic tensions. Mutual respect will rule supreme. Geopolitics will end. History-as-strive will end. And an endless post-historical future will open up. Western liberals will no longer delegitimise rivals through human rights criticism made in bad faith. Instead, everyone will approach policy and diplomacy with impartiality, guided by a commitment to humanity as a whole. Politics, rather than being a means of managing competitive conflict, will be centred on friendship. As Zhao Tingyang writes, “Politics must become an art for transforming enmity into friendship rather than a technology for coping with competitive conflict” (Zhao, 2021, p. 36).² Thus, the world will become ecumenical, a *tianxia shijie* – a world in the true sense (Zhao, 2009, p. 316).

The relevance of the new tianxia discourse reaches beyond the academy, entering into an ecosystem of political thought complexly shaped by the interaction and intertwining of scholarly theories and Communist Party doctrine. In March 2023, paramount leader Xi Jinping launched the Global Civilization Initiative, which, like tianxia theory, prophesies an emerging harmony-in-diversity of co-existing civilisations inspired by Chinese traditional culture. Also, in his *Work Report to the Nineteenth National Party Congress*, Xi Jinping concludes by quoting from the *Book of Rites*: “When the heavenly way prevails, tianxia is shared by all” (大道之行，天下为公) (Xi, 2017). More outspoken

² Here the Chinese original: “政治就需要成为化敌为友的艺术，而不是斗争的技术” (Zhao, 2016, p. 23).

in their endorsement of tianxia-ism are speakers at CPPCC conferences.³ At a CPPCC conference I attended in Shanghai in 2024, Ma Jiantang, a member of the CPPCC National Committee’s Standing Committee, proclaimed that “Chinese civilisation emphasises ‘harmony under heaven’ and ‘the world as one family’” (Ma, 2024).⁴

Moreover, tianxia-ism has a diffuse presence throughout intellectual life. For example, its conceptual framework implicitly informs Jiang Shigong’s reinterpretation of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, the official state ideology. Jiang, a well-known philosopher of law and public intellectual, hardly references tianxia yet draws on the same foundational contrast between traditional Chinese harmony and the power-lusting, immoral, and fragmented character of the international order under Western hegemony. In his reinterpretation of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, the elusive Chinese characteristics are those of a “Chinese culture” (中国文化) essentially geared to harmonising (harmonising-in-diversity) the world’s nations, national cultures, and civilisations. Chinese culture, he insists, can “absorb all positive elements from throughout the world” and “ultimately create a new order for human civilization that both transcends and absorbs Western civilization” (Jiang, 2018). However, his sense of China’s world-harmonising mission differs from that of tianxia-ists like Zhao Tingyang and Xu Jilin because he assumes that its agent is Chinese culture as it presently exists, not a forgotten traditional insight equally lost yet potentially available to all of humanity; that is, he sees in China an actualised world-founding capacity where Zhao and Xu see in the revival of Chinese tradition a potential (but as of yet unactualised) capacity to unleash worldness upon the world. In this way, Jiang’s tianxia-ist reinterpretation of Chinese socialism weaponises Chinese exceptionalism against American international dominance but lacks the double critical thrust of Zhao and Xu’s tianxia-ism; Zhao and Xu’s tianxia-ism challenges American dominance too, yet simultaneously serves as a vehicle for criticising Chinese present-day politics as falling short of its tianxia inheritance.

Jiang’s exceptionalist idea that Chinese culture is the purest wellspring of diversity, inclusivity, and harmony – and can incorporate within itself the “positive elements” of all other cultures – recalls the exceptionalist-imperialist theorising of the Japanese Kyoto School philosophers during the Second World War. Parallel to China’s contemporary tianxia theorists, the Kyoto School philosophers modernised the tianxia conception of Chinese imperial history, which incidentally produced striking conceptual resemblances between these two schools of world philosophy, resemblances that have been widely noted in the scholarship (Chen, 2012, p. 477; Kosuke, 2011, 2015, p. 4; Krummel, 2022; Takashiro, 2023; Uhl, 2023). The Kyoto School is highly complex and sophisticated philosophically and interacted in multivarious ways with politics during the war; all those complexities lie beyond this article’s scope. Yet, three of the ways its wartime world philosophy refurbished the Sino-imperial tianxia imagining is that it (i) weaponised it in a polemic against the West (in the Pan-Asianist style, which I will discuss later), (ii) moved its centre from Beijing to Tokyo, and (iii) renamed it *hakkō ichiu*,

³ The CPPCC (Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference) serves as an advisory body to the CPC (Communist Party of China) and a platform for exchanging ideas. It connects the CPC with journalists, intellectuals, and non-party elites more generally and invites contributions by foreign scholars and experts.

⁴ The China Economic and Social Forum 2024 (2024年经济社会论坛) was organised by the China Economic and Social Council, which belongs to the Shanghai Committee of the CPPCC. The quote: 中华文明注重天下大同，强调四海一家。

“The eight corners of the world under one roof”, or, more literally, “Eight crown cords, one roof”. The phrase has a contrived Japanese source, but *bakkō ichiu* “was a modern version of the traditional ideology of the Chinese Empire, [...] but this time with Japan at its apex,” writes historian Miwa Kimitada (2004, p. 21).

The Kyoto School’s wartime world philosophy held that Japan’s national essence was uniquely “empty”, enabling Japan to absorb all the world’s plurality within itself. Thereby, Japan supposedly substantiated the very principle of world formation, the emergence of *bakkō ichiu* out of “absolute emptiness” (無) (Nishida, 1943/1996, p. 102, p. 105f). In 1943, under political pressure to support the war effort, Nishida, the founder of the Kyoto School in Japanese philosophy, equated Japanese national polity with formative globalism’s grounding in emptiness: “As this is the essence of our national polity, formative globalism does not lose the subjectivity of our nation. Rather, this is precisely the principle of subjectivity unique to our country – that it contains others by emptying self” (Nishida, 1943/1996, p. 105). Hence, Japan can be all and everything: “The radiant quintessence of [our Japanese] national polity is that the internal is the external and the external is the internal” (Nishida, 1943/1996).

Tianxia-ism’s many critics, both inside and outside China, are dismayed by the historical analogy and, more generally, by the politics driving tianxia-ism. Still, we should not overdraw the analogies or fall prey to sensationalised alarmism. Some caveats are in place. First, Jiang’s exceptionalist idea, though influential and embedded in a broader intellectual ecosystem, does not represent the official party line. Second, Zhao and Xu put China and tianxia at a much greater distance than 1943–Nishida did Japan and *bakkō ichiu*, which is crucial, because China’s new tianxia-ism therefore lacks the imperialistic implications that the Japanese *bakkō ichiu* notion had. Third, the political circumstances in which today’s tianxia theorists operate are markedly different: 2025 is, to put it mildly, a far calmer year than 1943. Correspondingly, contemporary Chinese theorists are considerably more peaceful and loving in tone than their Japanese counterparts were 80 years ago.

All that said, tianxia-ism likewise emerged in the context of a rising East Asian power encountering Western ideological hostility deployed in defence of the existing geopolitical and epistemic order. It is, at its core, imbued with a spirit of resistance. Accordingly, the rise of tianxia-ism in Chinese political thought signals that “China will increasingly advance its own distinctive worldviews on international affairs and will no longer be content with simply being socialized by other actors in the international system” (Zhang, 2009, p. 32).

That is a neutral observation of the political context. Of course, Western-oriented critics will add negative labels to that contextualisation, often even descending into downright alarmism. Kenneth Fan, for example, warned in a letter to *Taiwan News* that “The existence and survival of Taiwan’s democratic sovereignty are essential for curtailing Xi Jinping’s Tianxia dream. If unchecked, such a vision would be a nightmare for mankind” (Fan, 2023). More dramatic still, *Newsweek* columnist Gordon Chang discerned the reemergence of “China’s totalitarian *tianxia* system”, penning his warning in critical theory journal *Telos* (2022, p. 43).

In contrast, in an article that appeared in the same *Telos* issue as Chang’s hyperbolic warning, I tried to offer some balance. My article argued that though tianxia-ism’s political intent is undeniable and its many conceptual equivalences (there are more than just the above-mentioned example) with Japanese imperialist thought of the 1940s can seem ominous, those equivalences are not necessarily intellectually, ethically, or politically disqualifying. A rising power with a different civilisational embedding, like China, will eventually come up with new visions, imaginings, and conceptions of world order and global co-existence. It is natural and potentially beneficial for rising powers to think the world anew – in the literal sense of reconceptualising world politics, world society, and world order – and for such reconceptualisations to be political and polemical, countering past and rival conceptions associated with political and ideological precursors and competitors (though admittedly, such philosophical counters can eventually come to bolster the rising power’s war propaganda if war breaks out). I wrote: “Under multipolar globalisation, world designs face counter-designs in a global polemical context” (Hendriks, 2022, p. 36).

Similarly stoic, historian Ge Zhaoguang of Fudan University, a sophisticated critic of tianxia-ism, suggests that the emergence of tianxia-ism alongside other political world theories raises the politico-normative question of who gets to define, organise, and evaluate the socio-political world as a systemic totality. He asks, “Who is the author of the world system, and who is to judge the rationality of this system?” (Ge, 2023, p. 206). I would argue that liberal and Western-centric conceptions of world and worldness still dominate internationally, though epistemic power relations may be shifting rapidly. That brings me to tianxia-ism’s positioning in scholarly-theoretical and politico-ideological dialectics. Let me now turn first to its meaning in scholarly-theoretical dialectics before I move on to the broader politico-ideological dialectic.

3. Tianxia-ism in Scholarly-Theoretical Dialectics

Tianxia-ism challenges the Western-centric integration model that continues to dominate Western imaginings of globalisation and has been impactful in China, too. In the integration model, Chinese structures count as ‘globalised’ if and insofar as they have integrated into a pre-existing globalisation process. It conceives globalisation as a process that, historically, was set in motion by Western developments and is still “Western” in many ways, though China now co-shapes it. The Western-centric integration assumption is packed into mundane phrases such as: “Although joining late, China has joined the globalised system much more enthusiastically than Japan” (Overholt, 2005, p. 5). Following the same logic, critics who fear China will disrupt global order from within may suggest the country should never have been “let in”. Others worry, by contrast, that China is leaving globalisation again or that it has left already and will not return, as this recent newspaper headline implied: “No Hope China Will Rejoin the World, Top Beijing-Based Businessman Says” (Bourke, 2023). In discourses of global integration, “the world” can stand in for anything from international

trade and capitalism to the liberal West, liberal democracy, human rights, the “rules-based order”, and the primacy of functional differentiation (*funktionale Differenzierung*), to cite the Luhmannian sociological theory.

In the Western social sciences, the Western-centric integration model is the implicit axiom underneath the most influential and advanced schools of globalisation theory. These include the world society theories of the Stanford School and Luhmannian School, both of which have sought to theorise the social-structural features that define world society qua world society,⁵ and have been very persuasive, despite their axiomatic error. Chinese New Tianxia theorists do not cite or directly engage these schools, but by juxtaposing them with these Western-centric schools, I unearth the latter’s Western-centric “integrationist” axiom, which helps extrapolate the theoretical stakes in the wider dialectic.

The Luhmannian School of *Weltgesellschaftstheorie*, founded by Niklas Luhmann and further developed by Rudolf Stichweh, Boris Holzer, and others (e.g., Holzer et al., 2015; Luhmann, 1986; Stichweh, 2000), holds a prominent place in German sociology. For the Luhmannians, the key feature of world society (*Eigenstruktur der Weltgesellschaft*) is functional differentiation. Functional differentiation involves the differentiation of modern society into functionally specialised sub-systems of communication (*ausdifferenzierte Funktionssysteme*). These societal subsystems are law, economics, mass-mediated journalism, politics, religion, sports, intimate relationships, academic scholarship, art, medicine, and education (Luhmann and the Luhmannians somehow always omit the military and technology in their list of societal subsystems).

Besides carving up and thereby creating modern society, the subsystems also constitute the primary carriers of world society (*Weltgesellschaft*). That is, it is through the subsystems that communication and social connections can bind together different world regions in an institutionalised and scalable way, enabling frequent, massive, and consistent inter-world-regional flows of communicative content. For example, an international trade transaction (a type of communication in the Luhmannian model) unfolds within the economic subsystem and furthers economic globalisation. Breaking news travels across countries through journalistic institutions like newspapers, broadcasts, and blogs. Student exchanges occur via an international education system linking national school systems. Sports competitions bring teams together globally. Individuals from different countries – a Mongolian and a Malaysian, for instance – may form an intimate relationship. Thus, global connections emerge primarily within specialised domains, rather than between “peoples as wholes” or “civilisations as wholes”.

Although these sub-systems historically originated in Europe and North America, the world society they generated has expanded to encompass all of humanity, according to the Luhmannian model. China’s integration into world society – a process unfolding over at least two centuries but accelerating after Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening Up – thus reflects its gradual incorporation into various sub-systems such as the economy, finance, education, and sports. Integration, in this

⁵ A comparison of the two schools, albeit with a distinct Luhmannian preference can be found in B. Holzer, F. Kastner, & T. Werron (Eds.) (2015). *From globalization to world society: Neo-institutional and systems-theoretic perspectives*. Routledge. John Meyer’s replies to the Luhmannian criticisms of his world-cultural school on pp. 317–328.

view, is not a holistic absorption into “the world” as a unified entity, but a multifaceted, sub-differentiated process. Paradoxically, in the Luhmannian model, this integration is considered both an ongoing process and an already completed fact: like any other region, China is fully embedded in world society, whose functional sub-systems facilitate connectivity between institutions and individuals across world regions.

The Stanford School, by contrast, conceives integration into world society as graduated, with the measure of integration subject to empirical investigation. Represented by John W. Meyer, John Boli, Francisco Ramirez, and many others, the Stanford or Neo-Institutionalist School has long been influential in sociology, education studies, and political science. It posits a world society – alternatively labelled “world culture” or “world polity” – composed of the rationalised myths and standardising scripts of liberal individualism, formal institutions, human rights, female emancipation, mass education, market systems, and democratic politics (Carney et al., 2012, p. 381). To this isomorphic world society – which, as John Meyer acknowledges, is carried by Western and American dominance (Boli & Elliott, 2008; Carney et al., 2012, p. 380) – non-Western world regions are coupled to varying extents. So, like other non-Western regions, China would fall partly within world culture and partly outside it, the normative integration of its institutions with “world values” being one of degree.

If being part of world society entails integration with Western-centric or West-originated structures, while integration thus can be merely partial or inexistent, it is possible to be partly or wholly *outside the world*. The notion that, in this way, China might be excluded from the world itself has worried Chinese intellectuals ever since their familiarisation with Western-centric imaginings of world history at the dawn of the 20th century. For example, in 1901, Liang Qichao sighed that “not only Chinese history but China itself was in most cases ‘outside the world,’” as historian Luo Zhitian observed (2008, p. 99). Because the concept of a world of states had only recently replaced the pre-modern tianxia notion, the world felt “mainly external to China” (Luo, 2008). Luo, who wrote this in 2008, added that contemporary Chinese sometimes still feel excluded from the category. “Even today, we can still see this difference in Chinese conceptions of the world: strictly speaking, China is, of course, a part of the world, but in many cases, ‘the world’ in the minds of many people in China does not necessarily include China.” Similarly, Jin Huimin explains in *Telos 195* that contemporary Chinese tend to feel external to the category of the universal, which they instead associate with things Western: “Anything modified with the adjective ‘universal’ always equates to Western imperialism, Western capitalism, Western values, Western modernity, and their invasion and oppression of the Chinese nation” (Jin, 2021, p. 99).

Note that we have come full circle. Approaches to the China-world problem cover the entire spectrum, running from China being the world or its central part to China being excluded from the category “world”. The saga started with world-China’s late Qing shrinkage into a state. It led to a present in which China is varyingly imagined as outside the world, a multipolar diversifier of globalisation, and the fountainhead of a coming worlded world. The China-world problem, then, is as alive as ever.

The tianxia-ist approach to the China-world problem is novel in implicitly challenging the socio-ontological – Western-centric integrationist – assumptions underlying Western theories of world and worldness. Take the assumptions about global integration in the Luhmannian and Stanford schools of world society theorising. One could ask whether the Stanford School theorists can reasonably maintain that a “world society” that can partially exclude an entity the size of China is entitled to the name “world society”? Does the Luhmannian theory of *Weltgesellschaft* not carry misguided Western-centric implications in de facto rendering a particular part of the world – the Western world and particularly its most liberal features – the part that defines the world’s worldness? The Luhmannian School conceives non-Western world regions, cultures, and civilisations as theoretically trivial local variations underneath a world society (*Weltgesellschaft*), the defining features of which (*Eigenstrukturen der Weltgesellschaft*) approximate liberal idealisations of the West as the perpetual epitome of modernity, cleanly differentiated into functional subsystems (Holzinger, 2018; Rappleye, 2014).

Yet, the conceptual destabilisation also runs in the other direction: the integrationist assumptions of Luhmannian and Stanford schools of world society theorising implicitly challenge tianxia-ism. About tianxia-ism, one may ask, for example, whether it is feasible – as is commonplace in Chinese conceptions of harmonious global relationality – to think of this relationality in terms of different cultures and civilisations “getting along” as collectives, i.e., to think of cultures and civilisations approaching the Other in “block form”. Does Luhmannian sociology not show that globalisation is multidimensional and operationally fragmented, running through society’s differentiated subsystems? Is it not the international proliferation of isomorphic liberal scripts and templates for institutional organisation and international connectivity that hold together what we call “globalisation”? Can interacting civilisations and national collectives be real actors in, and potential building blocks of, globalisation or world harmony, as tianxia theories assume, or does globalisation or global connectedness exclusively work through differentiated function systems or liberal templates and scripts? If the latter is the case, then does that imply that globalisation, in its core being, has a liberal bent?

Finally, one may ask how the tianxia-ist challenge – i.e., the challenge posed by the tianxia-ist idea of “harmonious relatedness” to the integration model of globalisation – holds up to other philosophical criticisms of such global integration models. Springing to mind is world philosophising that grounds the world’s worldness in nothingness (without associating that nothing with the essence of a particular nation or imperial state). Nishitani Keiji (1983, pp. 77–167) and Jean-Luc Nancy (2002), for example, who respectively represent a Heideggerian Buddhism and an atheistic French postmodernism, seek the world’s home ground neither in liberalism or differentiated function systems nor in the substantive normativity of harmonious relationality (as do tianxia-ists like Xiang, 2023, pp. 87–88) but in the ontological nothing (compare: Krummel, 2022). However, this philosophical option lies far beyond this article’s scope.

By raising these questions and juxtaposing these schools and philosophies, I do not mean to suggest the named schools and philosophies are of equal academic value, scholarly rigour, or philosophical profundity. The Tianxia School offers a utopian vision with religious dimensions and calls for a particular kind of moral activism. In contrast, the Luhmannian and Stanford schools (especially the

Stanford School) seek to guide empirical social-scientific research. Yet, all these schools (including the very philosophical and Buddhist-inspired Kyoto School) have in common that they venture to theorise the worldness of the world, i.e., that which renders world society a world society. Hence, my brief contextualisation of tianxia-ism within scholarship focused on the social ontology of globalisation. This socio-ontological dimension – tianxia-ism as a response to the Western-centric integration model of globalisation in Western social science and journalism – has been neglected in the academic scholarship on tianxia-ism, which exclusively treats tianxia-ism as an area studies reference in international relations theory or as a Chinese philosophy of global justice (e.g., Ames et al., 2023; Kholi & Kwak, 2021).

However, beyond a dispute in academia about theoretical assumptions and modelling, the contestation of worlds in question also has a politico-ideological dimension. That is, besides implicitly challenging each other on the level of theorisation (as rival theorisations of globalisation, world society, and global justice), the worlds imagined by, and inspiring, tianxia-ism and Western world society theories exist and interact in a broader politico-ideological dialectic.

4. Broader Politico-Ideological Dialectic

In the broader politico-ideological dialectic, tianxia-ism is a revisionist political world theory that counters the liberal Fukuyama-ist eschatology (note that “world” is even more temporal than it is a spatial category) of and self-centring of political legitimacy in the liberal West. Revisionist political world theories are a subcategory of political world theories, which, in turn, are a subcategory of political world imaginings. A political world imagining can express itself in all sorts of forms, including less theoretically explicated socio-communicative forms such as myths, rituals, and poetry. However, at least in modernity, influential political world imaginings usually come with a theoretical component or variant. They have a theory of what makes, or would make, the societal, human, or geopolitical world a world – regardless of whether that theorised world is supposed to exist presently, as with Luhmannian *Weltgesellschaftstheorie*; or is believed to have emerged only in part, as with the Stanford School of world culture theory; or is prophesied as being imminent, as with tianxia theory.

In the definition proposed herein, a political world theory (i) provides both a socio-cosmographic account of the socio-political world’s main temporal and spatial structures and divisions and a socio-cosmological account of its temporality, orderliness, or mode of integration, in short, of its constitutive worldliness; (ii) does so using the semantics of “world”, “the global”, “world history”, or some equivalent reference to politico-social and historical totality; and (iii) is activist in character in that it tries to uphold, bolster, or actualise the world it idealises or constructs in thought, even if it purports only to describe the facts or inevitable trends. In the context of the present global ideological dialectic, a political world theory is revisionist if it challenges world imaginings centred on the West, liberalism, the USA, or the Atlantic realm and seeks to offer an alternative to Western-centric and liberal universalisms and their declarations of world-historical completion.

Tianxia-ism is revisionist. It stands alongside Eurasia's other revisionist traditions of political world theory, each of which has one of Eurasia's civilisational states as its object. Besides the Chinese philosophy of tianxia and tianxia-adjacent interpretations of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, such revisionist traditions include India's *vishwaguru* (the notion of India as a "universal guru") and Russian Neo-Eurasianism and the concept of *Russkiy mir*, "the Russian world". Each revisionist tradition of world theorising idealises a particular national tradition, state, civilisation, or civilisational state, to which it attributes worldness, i.e., world centrality, an exceptionalist universality, a world-historical mission. Through this attribution, they "world" their respective objects. The worlded object is deemed to carry civilisation, open up an eternal future for humanity, define what about the world is genuinely world-like, uphold the global order, revolutionise humanity's existence, and/or bring the world into the world by turning a fragmented disorder into an ordered whole. Fast-grown bodies of scholarly literature historically and politically contextualise (though rarely comparatively) the parallel world imaginings currently making waves in China, India, and Russia (Bassin et al., 2015; de Estrada, 2023; Laruelle, 2004, 2008; Shlapentokh, 2007; Torbakov, 2007).

Eurasia's revisionist traditions of political world theorising are rooted in the anti-colonial and anti-liberal pan-movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that emerged outside of – and in opposition to – the Western Europe and the North Atlantic core areas. Romantically infused, these pan-movements include Pan-Germanism, Pan-Slavism, Pan-Asianism (which lives on in tianxia-ism but also inspired the Kyoto School), Pan-Islamism, Eurasianism, and Pan-Arabism; later came Third Worldism and Pan-Africanism. Each of these movements wanted to bring together an entire world cultural region and thus free it from the yoke of European colonialism and/or Anglo-American cultural and economic domination. They set up moral dichotomies in which Europe or the West represented quasi-universalist domination and their politico-cultural world region a better, emerging world – a world of cultural and civilisation particularism that, precisely through its particularity-among-particulars, brought forth a more authentic form of universalism.

Russia's Neo-Eurasianism, for example, evolved out of Eurasianism, which, in turn, developed out of Pan-Slavism. The ultimate source of the many pan-regionalist nationalisms on the Eurasian continent was German Romanticism's resistance to the universalistic programme of the French Revolution and Napoleon's conquests, while the original model was Pan-Germanism. Yet, leaving that more extended history aside, Eurasianism was born in the White Russian émigré diaspora of the 1920s, carried by thinkers like Nikolai Trubetzkoy and later by Lev Gumilyov. It emphasised Russia's unique civilisational identity as distinct from both Europe and Asia, opposed Western liberalism, and drew on Romanticist ideas of historical destiny and cultural unity. Russia's Neo-Eurasianism, which emerged in the 1990s, added the notion of a sublimely authoritarian state and the dualistic image of a competition between the rootless materialism of Atlanticist sea power and the spiritual grounding of Russian land power (Dugin, 2014, p. 11).

Analogous to this sea-land or materialist-spiritual dualism, Pan-Asianism paints an essentialist dualism of a domineering West and a diversely harmonising Asian East, claiming that Asia (or specifically Japan or China as the East's standard bearer) should lead the way in harmonising-in-

diversity Asia and, in extension, the world. Pan-Asianism advocates for the symbolic and existential unity-in-diversity of Asian peoples based on their shared cultural, historical, and civilisational ties in opposition to European colonialism and American capitalism. Since the promise is that a world of worlds will flourish harmoniously (harmonious-in-diversity) when Asian particularities open the true universality, the world's true worldness, by coalescing around their self-recognising particularity, Pan-Asianism hovers ambivalently between "nationalism, regionalism, and universalism" (Miwa, 2004, p. 21), forming a "kind of regional universalism" (Miwa, 2004, p. 28).

Different varieties of Pan-Asianism gained widespread international popularity after Japan's 1905 victory in the Russo-Japanese War, inspiring anti-colonial grassroots movements in Japan, China, and throughout Asia's European colonies. Anti-colonial and revolutionary intellectuals had received the Japanese victory as a win for Asia (Aydin, 2007, pp. 121–123, 161–190). "We regarded that Russian defeat by Japan as the defeat of the West by the East," Sun Yat-Sen shared in 1924 in his famous Kobe speech on Pan-Asianism (1924/1941, p. 150).⁶ Sun, who had founded the Republic of China in 1912, celebrated Pan-Asianism in front of a Japanese audience of Pan-Asianists as a remedy to "European oppression" (Sun, 1924/1941, p. 150). Applying to the geopolitics of his time a conceptual pair deriving from Mencius and Xunzi, he dismissed Europe's conquests and colonialism as *badao*, "the rule of might" (霸道), and claimed that the Eastern tradition, by contrast, taught *wangdao*, the benevolent "kingly way" (王道). Sun urged China and Japan to revive the quintessentially Eastern *wangdao* spirit and cautioned Japan to resist using its new industrial prowess to establish *badao* over other East Asian peoples in the way of European powers (Sun, 1924/1941), which, tragically, is precisely the temptation to which Japan fell in the 1930s.

Painfully ironic, Japan's war propaganda sought to legitimise Japan's *badao* tragedy, in part, with Pan-Asian motifs. Pan-Asianism was abused to undergird the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Comprising the territories conquered by Japan in China and Southeast Asia from 1931, the Co-Prosperity Sphere was imagined as a geocultural regional whole bonding the Asian peoples in self-actualising liberty and harmony-in-diversity as a prelude to a global, world-birthing harmony-in-diversity, though the Sphere's realities on the ground were cruel and vicious – an affront to humanity. Japan's wartime abuse of Pan-Asianism discredited the movement for a generation. Still, its conceptual duality returned to East Asia and Chinese political thought under new names and forms, one of which is tianxia-ism.

To be clear, tianxia-ism is not merely a Pan-Asianism. Tianxia-ism also has other and more extended intellectual genealogies, some stretching far into pre-modern history. As mentioned, China's contemporary tianxia theorists adapt the traditional imperial Chinese ideal of a familial-harmonious world for 21st-century conditions, prophesying the coming of a morally elevated global order in which different cultures, civilisations, and political systems coexist without power games or intolerance. Still, their modernising reformulation of this classical-imperial or ancient (even pre-Qin) ideal (M. Wang, 2021), draws heavily, albeit largely implicitly, on early 20th-century Romantic

⁶ The 1924 speech was delivered in Mandarin by Sun but then quickly translated to Japanese for print publication. I take the quotation from the official English translation of 1941.

neo-traditionalisms, including Kang Youwei's future-projected *datong* utopianism and Sun Yat-sen's Pan-Asianism (H. Wang, 2017; B. Wang, 2017).

What renders tianxia-ism a Pan-Asianism is that its core categories revolve around a mutation of the Pan-Asian conceptual-normative dualism of Western hegemony versus Eastern harmony. For Zhao Tingyang, the most prominent proponent of tianxia-ism in contemporary China, this is the dualism between history's two macro traditions of conceiving and ordering world. "The world order has two traditions: imperialism invented by the Romans and the Tianxia system invented by China" (Zhao, 2019, p. 11). These two traditions are the choice "between a unilateral universalism and a compatible or inclusive universalism" (Zhao, 2016, p. 217). The unilateral faux universalism of the Romans – forcing your way on others – is the tradition inherited and exported globally by European colonialism and US foreign policy, tianxia-ists across the board believe. Among tianxia-ists, there is moreover agreement that only a future tianxia can transform the "non-world" into a "world world", the aforementioned *tianxia shijie* (天下世界).

Again, the conceptual structure throws us back to the early 1940s, as if an arc stretches from the present to that intense culmination period of revisionist world theorising. Between the arc's two legs, time compresses, pulling together like the ends of a horseshoe. In 1943, Nishida diagnosed that "[u]p to now the world has been abstract and unreal" – but, lo, imminent was a real world, a "worldly world" (*sekaiteki sekai*) (Nishida, 1943/1996, p. 104, 96f). This mid-20th-century Japanese millennialism, even in its phraseology, closely resembles contemporary Chinese tianxia-ism, partly because Nishida's Kyoto School also drew from Pan-Asianism, or at least did so during the war. As a Pan-Asian vision, Nishida's wartime world philosophy sets up a contrast between Imperial Japan as a carrier of "the principle of world formation, that is, the principle of 'Eight corners, one world'", on the one hand, and "Anglo-American imperialism and federalism that colonize others" and establish an "abstract and unreal" sense of worldness, on the other (Nishida, 1943/1996, pp. 102, 104).

In conclusion, the critical evaluation of tianxia-ism should be two-pronged. Since tianxia-ism, as a particular approach to the China-world problem, counters both scholarly-theoretical assumptions – notably the (liberal) Western-centric integration model in the socio-ontology of globalisation – and American and liberal ideological hegemony in a broader politico-ideological dialectic, its evaluation warrants both scholarly and political inquiry. On the scholarly front, we should ask whether tianxia-ism effectively challenges the idea that China entered a Western-centric globalisation process from the outside. Is there a meaningful sense in which it is instead China that brings the 'world spirit' or 'world time' into the world? Are there variants of tianxia-ism that constitute a believable solution to the China-world problem?

In the overarching politico-ideological dialectic, Chinese revisions of world order and world history – revisions and experiments in thought (and hence direct movements in the world) – force us to position ourselves politically in the most comprehensive way, namely, vis-à-vis the world's worlds. Drawing on liberal-imperialist categories, we could demand that the liberal "rules-based order" (if there is such a thing) fights back against the "authoritarian" revisionist world-making of a neo-imperialist regime. However, that would be to live in a fantasy of control and moral superiority; you

cannot conquer, submit, or erase the world of a politico-cultural Other, for insofar as that world is a world and not a mere posture in abstract theory, it will always have an unconquerable interiority that lies beyond your horizon, as well as a positioned sharing-out externally.

The intellectual and ethical challenge is sharing in intelligent and constructive ways the global field of world imaginings with China's new worlds of the mind. Surely, this is not a question of "thought diversity" management. One cannot 'manage' something as overwhelmingly pluriform and deeply ruptured (ruptured by *altérité*) as the global field of world imaginings. Nonetheless, we do have to manage diplomacy and politics under conditions of multipolar globalisation; that is, we have to go ahead and act politically despite our actions unfolding in worlds behind whose horizons lie further worlds. As Nancy reflects, we inescapably think and act (and act through thought) in "a world of worlds" (2003, p. 173).

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PHILIP PILKINGTON

Six Stages of Chinese
Economic Development



SIX STAGES OF CHINESE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

PHILIP PILKINGTON¹

Abstract

This article explores the evolution of the Chinese economy from its origins in central planning under Mao Zedong to its current manifestation as a state-guided capitalist economy with unique characteristics. While China officially surpassed the USA in purchasing power parity (PPP)-adjusted gross domestic product (GDP) in 2017, widespread Western recognition of this fact has been delayed, often overshadowed by persistent economic myths. This article systematically analyses six key stages of Chinese economic development: the Maoist investment-heavy period; Deng Xiaoping's reform era focused on consumption and rising living standards; the inflation-focused policy of the 1990s; the mercantilist phase centred on foreign trade surpluses; the maturation era with a services-driven domestic economy; and finally, the current phase of dirigiste technofuturism characterised by targeted technological investments and shifting trade alliances. Central to the argument is a comparison of Western and Chinese macroeconomic accounting frameworks, which reflect deeply divergent philosophical approaches to the role of government in economic development. Western frameworks typically view government investment as consumption, whereas the Chinese model sees it as wealth-creating. This distinction informs how growth, investment, and inflation have been understood and managed in each context. The analysis reveals that China's development has not been a linear shift from socialism to capitalism, but rather a complex hybrid model that continues to blend central planning with market forces. The article also contends that Western economic commentary has often underestimated China's structural resilience and institutional adaptability. By dispelling persistent myths and providing a grounded historical-economic account, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary Chinese economy and its implications for global power dynamics in an emerging multipolar world.

Keywords: Chinese economy, economic development, state capitalism, purchasing power parity, industrial policy

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1. Introduction

In 2017, China surpassed the USA as the largest single-country economy in the world based on PPP-adjusted GDP – the preferred method that economists use to compare the wealth of countries. In 2024, according to International Monetary Fund (IMF) data, the Chinese economy was around 27% larger than the US economy (IMF, 2024). Yet even almost a decade after China surpassed the USA, this still does not seem to be widely understood by the educated public in the West. It appears that this might be due to a sense of denial setting in, which has led Western commentators, especially since 2017, to try to look for reasons why this situation might be reversed. Yet even just considering China's enormous population size, it seems almost impossible that the USA will ever overtake China again, and if we consider China's extremely impressive developments in the field of technology, this seems even more unlikely.

Due to this political environment, many myths have sprung up around the Chinese economy. Most of these myths allow those who believe them to think that the Chinese economy is on the verge of total collapse, after which the West will pull ahead once more. But every year, as China hits its growth targets, and the Western economies slip into deeper stagnation, this position seems not just untenable but counterproductive. This article seeks to remedy this situation somewhat by providing a simplified, but condensed account of Chinese development since 1958, when Chinese macroeconomic statistics started being collected. Such an account dispels many of the myths that currently circulate about the Chinese economy and gives us a better grasp of how, far from the Chinese economy having transitioned from a wholly planned economy to a wholly market economy, it has instead evolved into a capitalist economy that has integrated many of the more useful aspects of central planning into itself.

2. Economic Growth: Western and Chinese Perspectives

We start by looking at the drivers of Chinese growth from the point of view of expenditure. In Western countries, it is typical to break expenditure down into four components:

$$GDP = C + G + I + NX$$

where:

C = Consumption of households.

G = Government expenditure on goods and services.

I = Investment spending by the private sector.

NX = Net exports, or exports minus imports.

The Chinese approach to national accounting is slightly different. They break down GDP in terms of expenditure in a different way than Western countries. This reflects the fact that Chinese policymakers view the economy differently from how it is viewed by Western policymakers. In China, expenditures are broken down as follows:

$$GDP = C_{HH} + C_{GOV} + I_{Total} + NX$$

where:

C_{HH} = Consumption of households.

C_{GOV} = Consumption by government.

I_{Total} = Total investment by both the government and private sector.

NX = Net exports, or exports minus imports.

It should be clear from looking at this approach how Western policymakers and the Chinese view the economy in fundamentally different ways. In Western countries, government investment is lumped in with government consumption. The implicit value judgement here is that the government does not create wealth; it only consumes it. So, if the government engages in investment and builds a road or a railway, this is not seen as wealth-creating investment in the true sense; rather, it is seen as a sort of consumption. In China, however, government investment is lumped in with private investment. This means that the Chinese view both government and private investment as creating wealth. When the Chinese government builds a road or a railway, the statistical apparatus in China records these as equivalent forms of investment to a private sector investment.

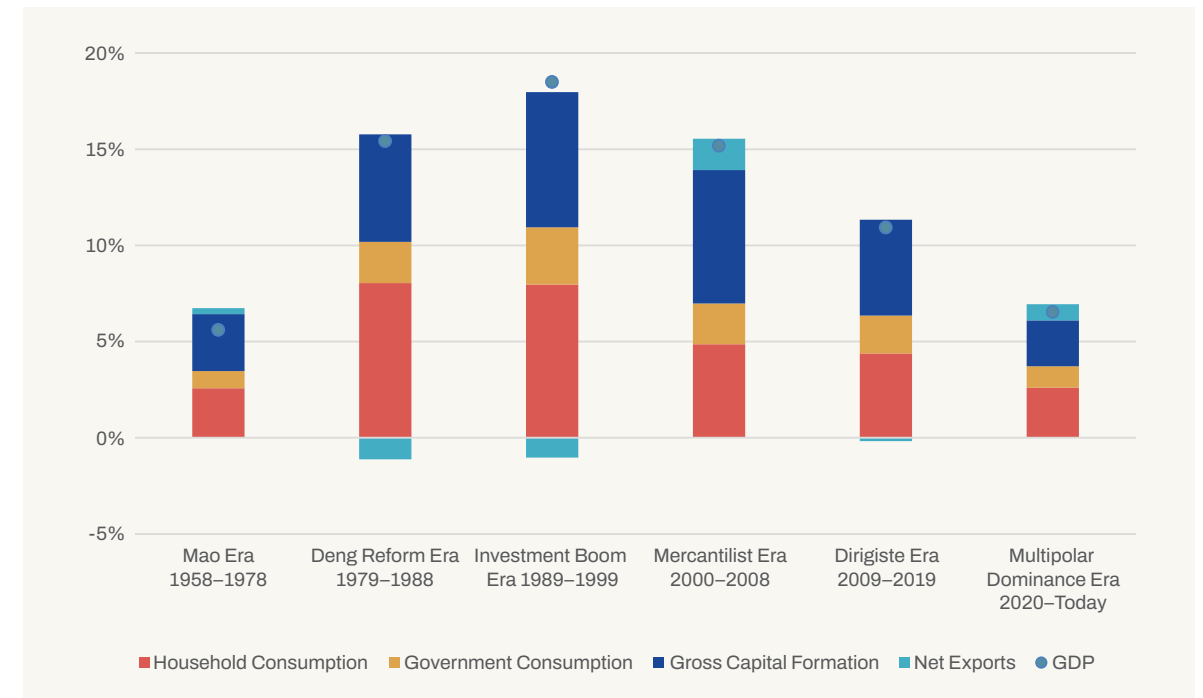
The argument in favour of treating government investment as a type of consumption rests on the notion that only investment that is subject to competitive market forces should be seen as creating wealth. While this perspective makes some sense, it is very difficult to argue that, say, the creation of large-scale high-speed rail networks – which the Chinese government has built in recent years – does not contribute to the wealth of the nation. We should also consider the fact that in China, many industries are intertwined with the government.

In the past, these industries were purely state-owned industries, representative of the fact that China was a socialist country. But as the Chinese economic system has evolved, we have seen looser partnerships emerge where the government directs loans to the private sector, which is then allowed to compete and create a sort of state-driven market economy. This approach to what in the West might be called “industrial policy” has proven enormously successful and calls into question previous assumptions about the difference between public and private sector investment. The Chinese statistics reflect the fact that the Chinese economy is run in a fundamentally different way from how Western economies are run.

2.1. Stage 1: Unforgotten Errors

Now, let us turn to the statistics to see how the drivers of growth in the Chinese economy have evolved. Figure 1 shows the weighted components of Chinese growth. These show us which expenditure components were driving overall GDP growth in the six periods that we are studying.

Figure 1: Chinese GDP growth composition

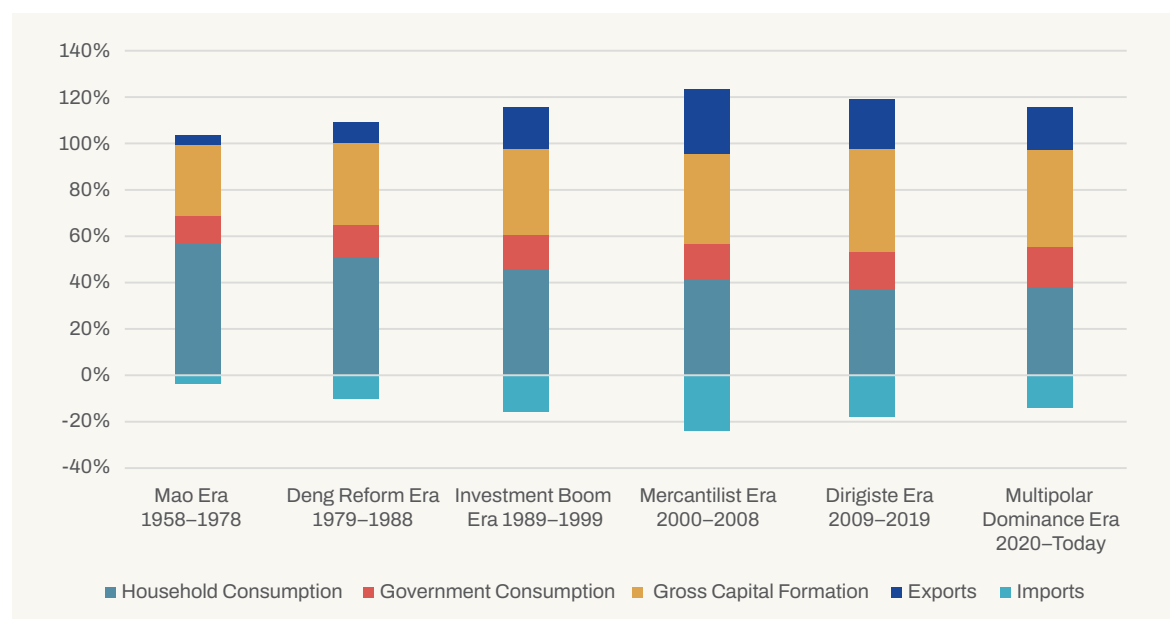


Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

In the Mao era, overall GDP growth was relatively low for such an impoverished economy. The economy was mainly investment led, with investment making up around 52% of total GDP growth in this period. This is likely reflective of the fact that the economy in this period was a command economy in the truest sense of the term. Between 1958 and 1962, the country, led by Chairman Mao, undertook the Great Leap Forward, an attempt to rapidly industrialise the Chinese economy. Mao bet that by rapidly industrialising agriculture, the Chinese economy would have sufficient space to also create a true industrial base. Presumably, looking at the rapid industrialisation of the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin in the 1930s, Mao believed that a similar process could be undertaken in China, which was at the time a much more heavily agricultural economy. “Ten thousand years are too long”, Mao said when he was criticised by a colleague for going too fast, “Seize the day, seize the hour!” (Li & Yand, 2005).

The result of the experiment was catastrophic. In 1959, national grain output fell 15% and then fell another 16% in the following two years. A famine ensued that killed anywhere between 16.5 million and 30 million people. The problem was that the peasantry was barely able to produce enough food for subsistence. When they were ordered by the state to increase industrial output, they were forced to reduce their agricultural production, and this led to a fall in food production. What were they producing instead? Often, they were producing largely useless industrial output, such as very poor-quality iron and steel made in backyard furnaces (Chan, 2001). The investment-heavy growth that was undertaken in this period was mostly wasted investment, which explains why GDP growth was unusually low. The instability in this period can be seen in the inflation numbers in Figure 2. Here we see a very large outbreak of inflation in 1961, which took place against the backdrop of a 15% decline in GDP. This is a classic inflationary recession characterised by such an extreme collapse in output that, despite the economy contracting, prices rise regardless. This was the low point of the famine years 1959–1961. In 1962 and 1963, as the economy attempted to return itself to a stable equilibrium, prices violently contracted, presumably to bring the affordability of basic products back in line with wages.²

Figure 2: Chinese expenditure component as % of GDP



Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

² Readers might be struck throughout at the relatively low inflation numbers in China in these crisis years. Typically, we see much higher inflation when, for example, a famine occurs (we might think of Mugabe’s Zimbabwe). But once again, we must remember that for much of this period China was still a mostly centrally planned economy and in such an economy the prices of most consumer goods are set by the government, as are wages. In such an economy it is the quantity of goods sold that adjusts, rather than the price. Or, phrased differently, whereas in a market economy shortages are distributed by higher prices, in a socialist economy they are distributed by rationing.

But as Figure 2 shows, one positive aspect of this disastrous period is that it trained the Chinese economy to expand investment. In the Mao era, investment as a share of total GDP was much lower than it would go on to be. It could be argued that the Mao era had the positive effect of getting Chinese people used to an investment-heavy economy and, once this investment was better distributed and balanced against the consumption needs of the population, this would pave the way for the future Chinese growth miracle.

2.2. Stage 2: Rising Living Standards

The next stage of Chinese economic development was the Deng reform era. The turn towards economic reform in China appears to have been remarkably abrupt. In 1977, at the Eleventh Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), there was no sign that a break would occur with the past. Party leaders seemed committed to the older socialist policies. Deng Xiaoping had been exiled from politics by Mao due to the latter’s fear of the former’s reformist agenda. But he returned to politics in 1977, a year after Mao’s death, and rapidly built support for a reformist agenda that would treat economic policy non-ideologically and based on results. This was summed up in Deng’s memorable phrase: “It doesn’t matter whether a cat is black or white, if it catches mice, it is a good cat.” The desirability of Deng’s reform agenda was accepted by the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978.

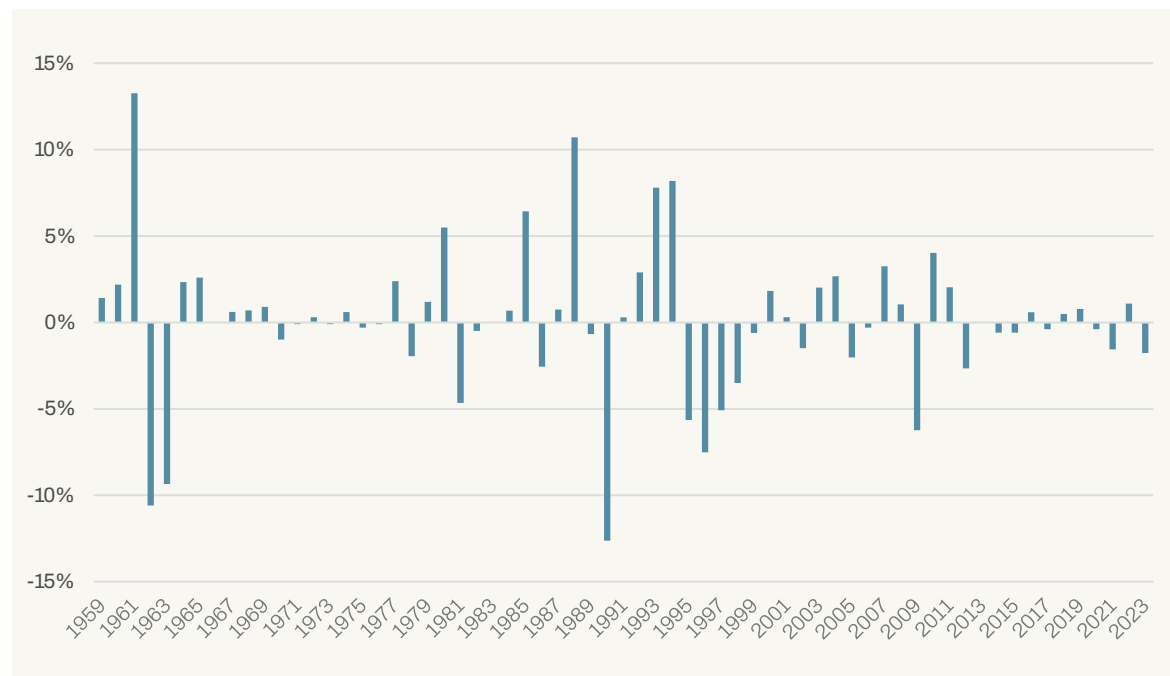
Deng’s approach to reform would be multifaceted. Economic cooperation with other countries would increase, meaning more openness to trade and investment. China would make a concerted effort to adopt new technologies. Four modernisations were emphasised: agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology. Above all, however, was a commitment to rising living standards with the party now committed to “rapid growth in production [to] improve the people’s living standards significantly and strengthen national defence” (Tisdell, 2009, p. 276). This meant reducing bureaucratic centralised management and eliminating hurdles to market activity, especially at the lower end of the economic production chain. Having learned from the mistakes of the Mao era, the focus was first put on increasing agricultural output so that there would be no more famines, and any further economic development could rely on a stable base of food consumption (Tisdell, 2009).

Even the early phases of this reform were remarkably successful, as can be seen in Figure 1. GDP growth almost tripled, rising from an annual average of 5.6% in the Mao era to 15.4% in the Deng reform era. Whereas investment led much of the economic growth in the Mao era, the Deng reform era was true to its word: economic growth mainly came from household consumption growth and rising living standards. In this period, household consumption growth made up around 52% of total growth, with investment taking a back seat and only making up around 36% of total growth. Despite this composition of growth, however, we see in Figure 2 that investment as a share of GDP rose from 30.7% in the Mao era to 35.6% in the Deng reform era. This was allowed to occur simply due to the explosive nature of the growth in this period overall. Deng unleashed the latent forces in the Chinese economy that had been suppressed in the Mao era and achieved something on the order of an economic miracle.

2.3. Stage 3: Fighting the Inflationary Dragon

Despite being an enormous success, the Deng reform era did see some issues with inflation. As Figure 3 shows, in 1980 and 1985, the Chinese economy saw higher than usual inflation at 5.5% and 6.4%, respectively. These overlapped with particularly intense years of economic growth: 12.2% in 1980 and a record 25% in 1985. Given these extremely high growth rates, the fact that inflation could be contained to single digits is impressive and shows the capacity for command economies to suppress price increases (Li & Yang, 2005). But by 1988, the pressures on the economy being exercised by the runaway growth were too much: inflation hit 10.7% amid economic growth of 24.7%. This was the first double-digit inflation growth the socialist economy had seen since the Mao famine in 1961. The year after this rapid rise in inflation, the Tiananmen protests broke out in Beijing. Although these have since been reframed as pro-democracy protests in the West, their actual origin was in protesting the high inflation and the impact on their wages (Yang, 1994).

Figure 3: Chinese annual inflation



Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

Since the 1988 inflation and the 1989 protests that followed, Chinese policymakers have been laser-focused on containing any economic pressures that might lead to discontent among the Chinese youth. This has meant a focus on economic growth and youth employment while preventing any sustained outbursts of inflation. Containing inflation was a particular problem in the 1990s because of two related issues. The first issue was that, because the authorities wanted to ensure that no more social unrest broke out, they allowed household consumption growth to rise rapidly, contributing an

average of 8% of GDP growth in the period. These were levels almost identical to the 1980s. The difference between the 1990s and the 1980s, however, was that during the 1990s, the authorities undertook a rapid “rush for growth” strategy where investment growth contributed around 7% to GDP growth – whereas in the 1980s it had only contributed around 5.6%. Chinese policymakers in the 1990s were thus running the economy extremely “hot”.

Related to this were the wage reforms that had taken place. In part in response to the pressures put on the CPC by the 1988 protests, policymakers wanted to ensure that wage growth followed a healthy, natural path – this is tied to the fact that they wanted to ensure high consumption. To achieve this, they engaged in wage reform:

The wage reform [in state enterprises] contributed greatly to the fast growth of cash income per worker in the reform period by raising the labour compensation of state-sector workers... These new measures under the wage reform provided state enterprises with greater discretion in determining labour compensation and allowed these enterprises to expand wage and bonus payments rapidly. As mandatory wage plans and uniform wage scales had been replaced by a complex set of indirect regulations, enterprise managers had, on the one hand, found much room to negotiate with the authorities for favourable treatment, or to circumvent regulation. On the other hand, the greater power granted to managers by the authorities exposed them to expectations and pressures from workers. The new regulatory environment had unwittingly strengthened the power of workers relative to that of the state in setting labour compensation. (Imai, 1997, pp. 187–188)

As we have already seen, in the Mao and Deng periods, the economy was still mostly socialist; inflation was “suppressed”, and product shortages were treated with rationing. As China liberalised, it learned a harsh lesson about wage inflation: while command economies tend to suffer from “suppressed inflation” due to shortages brought about by price controls, they are nevertheless completely insulated from wage inflation because workers have no effective bargaining power with respect to the state. Once the wage-setting process becomes decentralised, workers will react to price changes by bidding up wages to keep their real income intact. These wage increases will imply higher costs for the firms, which will have to increase prices. This cycle will continue until something interrupts the process.

As we see in Figure 3, in 1993 and 1994, inflation started to rise once more in response to these pressures. Chinese policymakers immediately felt like they needed to act in case the inflation gave rise to another round of social unrest. Their response was to try to manage the economic cycle. First, policymakers raised central bank interest rates, and then they started to cut government expenditure. But this was not a typical IMF-style “austerity programme” as we might be familiar with in the West. Chinese policymakers still conceived of the Chinese economy as something that they exercised control over at a granular level and tried instead to dampen what they considered “speculative” spending and encourage “productive” spending.

The key was to fine-tune the economy to ensure stable growth, not stifle it. Therefore, [Politburo Standing Committee member] Zhu [Ronji] stated that his goal was to “redirect financial resources away from speculative sectors to areas that are more important to the overall economy.” Credit-tightening measures targeted only certain sectors of the economy, such as the speculative property market. Loans illegally extended to these projects were called in, and the resources were redirected to support infrastructure, energy and agricultural projects. (Winckler, 1998)

The key to the success of the 1993–1996 austerity projects seems to have been a robust project of credit rationing that allowed the authorities to steer investment towards productive activities that added to the productive capacity of the economy and away from speculative activities that created aggregate demand without a concomitant increase in aggregate supply. In this respect, we must conclude that in the early to mid-1990s, the central government still had control over the level of investment in the economy. This leads to the conclusion that in important respects the economy was still functioning largely as a command economy in this period.

After the austerity of 1993–1996, the way the Chinese economy grew was entirely different to what had come before. It remained a high investment economy, but as consumption growth slowed, it became increasingly reliant on demand from foreign markets to ensure high levels of economic growth. This leads us to China’s mercantilist stage. Before moving on to this, however, it is worth briefly exploring the consequences of China’s rush for growth in the 1990s.

2.4. Interlude: The Mess and the Cleanup

We have already seen that China’s “rush for growth” strategy in the 1990s was punctuated by policies designed to clean the economic system of “speculative” investment. This obviously raises the question: Who paid for this investment? After all, if investment is purged from the system, it will not be allowed to earn revenue, and therefore, whoever financed it will experience large financial losses. This question has an immediate bearing on interpretations of the Chinese economy at the time of writing. Some authors have pointed out that China has mounting private sector debt loads that are unsustainable because they are being used to finance investments that will ultimately yield no revenue (Pettis, 2015). If this interpretation is correct, then China may be facing a financial crisis in the future.

It is true that during the “rush for growth” in the booming 1990s, the Chinese accumulated an enormous amount of non-performing loans (NPLs):

The amount of NPLs increased more than five times from RMB 421.62 billion in 1992 to RMB 2,262 billion in 1998 while the ratio of NPLs to total loan rapidly rose from 19 percent in 1992 to 33 percent in 1998 (Huang, 2006).

To deal with this enormous rise in NPLs, the Chinese authorities moved to set up financial vehicles to absorb these loans onto their balance sheets and dispose of them.

In 1999, the four Asset Management Companies (Huarong, Orient, Cinda and Great Wall) were established to take over and dispose RMB 1.4 trillion (US\$168 billion) worth of NPLs from the four SOCBs within ten years from their establishment. Each of the four AMC pairs up with one of these big four banks in China, i.e. Cinda with CCB, Huarong with ICBC, Orient with BOC, and Great Wall with ABC. The loans transferred to AMCs were primarily “substandard” or “doubtful” loans (under the old 4-category classification mechanism) made prior to 1996 and overdue for more than one year by the end of 1998. The AMCs purchased the NPLs at book value. The recovery value of the NPLs will surely be below the full book value that the AMCs paid for the assets. (Huang, 2006)

The actual recovery rates on these loans were very low. Huang shows 10% and 35% depending on which bank absorbed them and whether we look at them in terms of cash recovery or asset recovery. In effect, then, the Chinese authorities simply “buried” these loans in the banking system. Any stresses that the banking system then suffered could be remedied by giving the banking system access to central bank credit or cash lines. Some might say that this is in effect “money printing”. Yes and no. This is indeed a form of debt monetisation – although ultimately all money is debt and all debt money – but it is misleading to think that the act of disposing of these loans represents a net increase in the money supply. By the time the loans become NPLs, the money is already in the system and deployed in the economy. This means that any inflationary pressure from the investment spending associated with these loans should logically be felt when they are first issued, not when they are ultimately disposed of.

What does this tell us about the situation in China today? It tells us that those who think present borrowing or investment rates are unsustainable simply do not understand the Chinese banking system or the NPL issues the country encountered in the late 1990s. The Chinese banking system has ample experience dealing with NPLs and has an entire infrastructure in place that is set up to deal precisely with this problem. The NPL issues in the late 1990s were not followed by a financial crisis or a recession in the early 2000s. Rather, the disposal of the NPLs was done swiftly and efficiently with no impact on the economy or the financial system. If China is ever confronted with another increase in NPLs, it is almost certain that the architecture in place to deal with these loans will be reactivated, and they will be quietly disposed of.

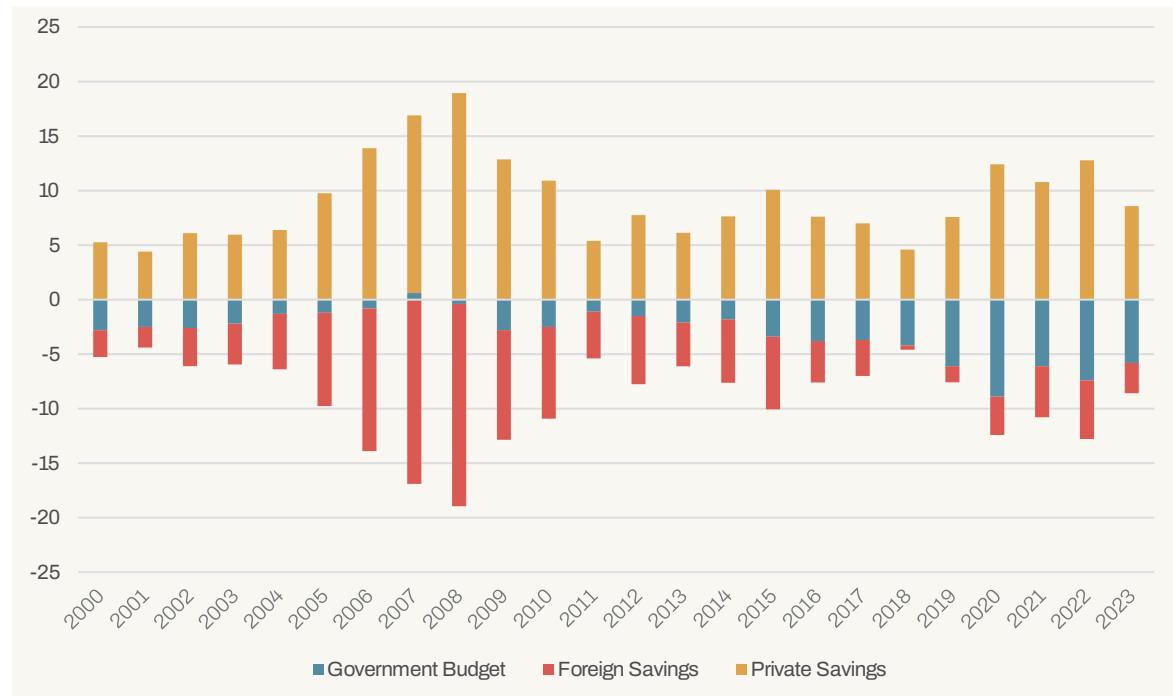
2.5. Stage 4: Flood the World Markets

After the runaway investment spending in the 1990s, the Chinese had acquired a very large capital stock. By 2004, investment as a share of GDP had hit a record 42%. The question that Chinese policymakers faced as this capital stock matured was straightforward: With this level of productive capacity, where would China find the demand for its goods? As we have already seen, in the 1990s, China made no attempts to stifle consumption growth. No doubt policymakers were therefore concerned that growing consumption any more than they already had might risk inflation and social unrest. So, in the 2000s, the Chinese fundamentally altered their growth strategy: by selling far

more goods to the world market than they were purchasing, they started to pursue massive foreign surpluses. This is why we refer to this period as the “mercantilist era” in Chinese development.

The best way to conceptualise this growth strategy is to look at what economists call “sectoral balances”. The sectoral balances are a way of looking at the economy in terms of who is saving and who is borrowing. For one sector to save, another must borrow, and the sectoral balances let us see these dynamics at a macro level. Figure 4 lays out China’s sectoral balances between 2000 and 2023.

Figure 4: Chinese sectoral balances



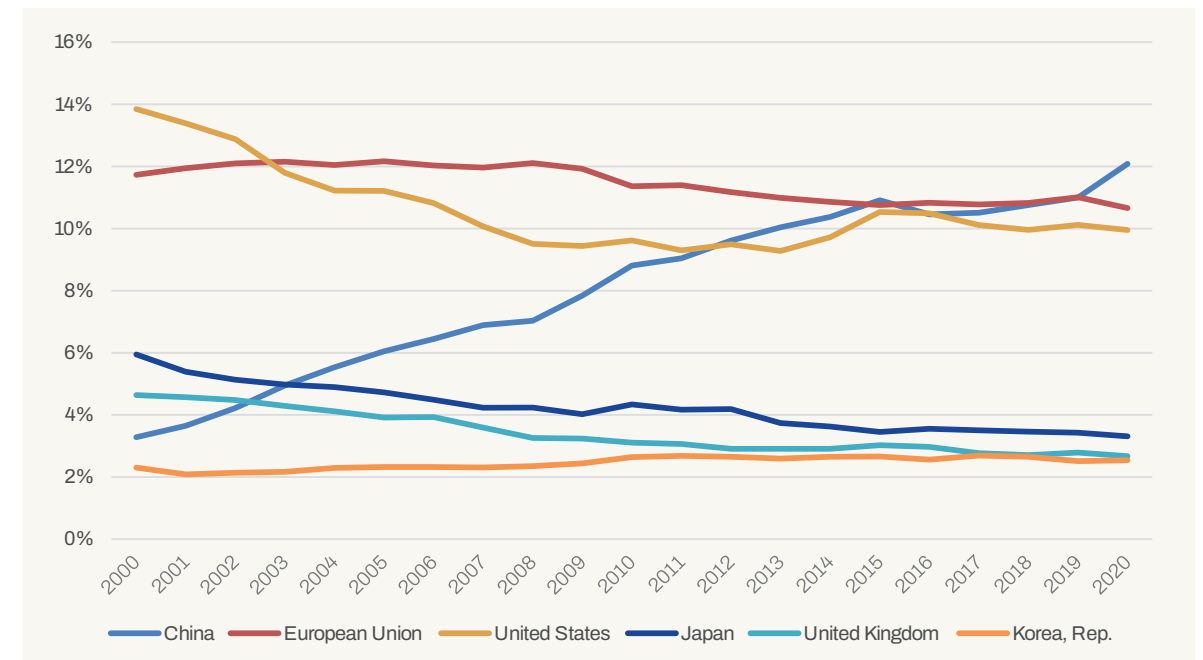
Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China and author’s own calculations.

Here we clearly see the Chinese mercantilist model of the 2000s in full swing. Beginning in 2005, foreigners started borrowing enormous amounts of money from China to buy their goods. Since the government maintained a relatively neutral budget position – i.e., taxes and expenditures were relatively balanced – this meant that the Chinese private sector ran up enormous savings. When we dig further into the data, we soon see that most of these savings are held by households. Here we should briefly note something about causality. Some economists claim that China ran large trade surpluses in this period because Chinese households decided they wanted higher savings (Bernanke, 2005). Thinking this through for even a few moments shows it to be nonsense. China ran trade surpluses in this period because global consumers wanted Chinese goods. If global consumers did not want Chinese goods, they would simply not have bought them, and China would have been unable to run a trade surplus. The savings behaviour of Chinese households has absolutely no bearing on, say, the decision by an American consumer to buy a Chinese electrical product in this

period. If, for example, Ghanaian households decided to save significantly more, this would not cause American consumers to purchase mountains of Ghanaian products simply because Ghana does not produce compelling consumer products. This is a long way of saying that the high household savings of the Chinese in this period were a “residual”: they did not drive American consumers to purchase Chinese rather than American goods. That decision was a decision made by American consumers.

Running these enormous trade surpluses naturally started the process of China’s rise as a global trading superpower. As Figure 5 shows, in 2000, when the Chinese started to ramp up trade, the country only made up around 3.2% of global trade. By 2008, when the mercantilist model started to wane, China made up 7% of global trade and had almost caught up with the USA. China doubled its share of global trade in less than a decade.

Figure 5: Percent of total global trade



Source: World Bank

Once again, this remarkable achievement by the Chinese was mainly because they succeeded in producing compelling consumer products at low prices. There are arguments to be made that, as China began to develop its massive trade surpluses, it should have allowed the currency to appreciate so as not to produce enormous imbalances in other economies – in this case, mainly the US economy. If China had simply “cheated”, then no doubt other developing countries could have copied, say, their currency strategy. But no other country managed to do this for the simple reason that no other country managed the impressive industrial feats that China managed in this period. Ultimately, the story of China’s rise as a leading player in global trade is primarily a story of a country that managed to massively increase its productivity and its manufacturing capabilities.

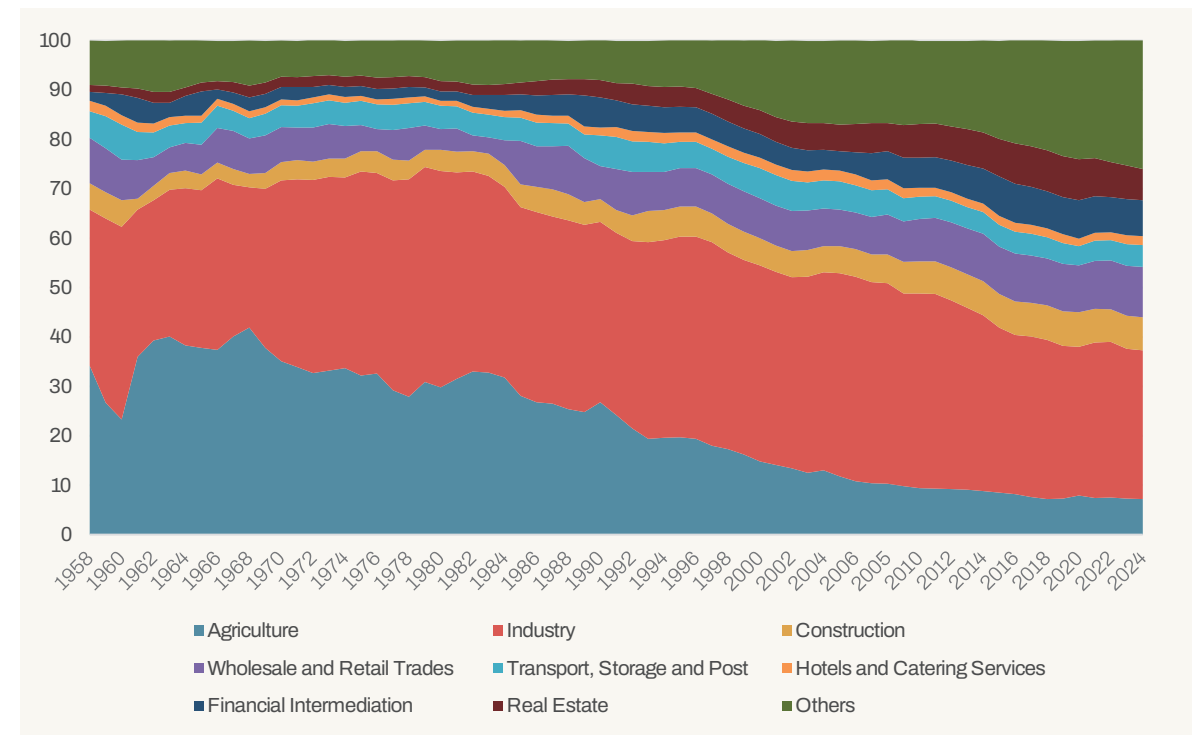
2.6. Stage 5: A Thousand Flowers Bloom

As Figure 4 shows, the Chinese mercantilist strategy peaked in 2008 and waned afterwards. After the collapse of Western financial and housing markets, there was no longer as much of an appetite for Chinese goods from these countries. In the five years after the 2008 financial crisis, Western economies grew much more slowly than they had in the 2000s and with less overall growth, there was less demand for Chinese imports. By 2011, the Chinese trade surplus had shrunk back to pre-2005 levels. It is interesting to note here that after the 2008 crisis, a debate began in Western countries about the Chinese mercantilist model and whether it was fair or unfair. This debate continues to this day and has featured prominently in the USA, especially associated with the first and second Trump administrations and the Biden administration. Yet a brief look at Figure 4 shows that this debate has been largely irrelevant since China no longer relies on enormous trade surpluses to grow its economy, and it has not for nearly a decade and a half.

During this period of Western stagnation, Chinese policymakers focused on propping up Chinese growth by expanding both the construction sector and the provision of modern services in the Chinese economy. This is why we refer to this period as the “maturation era”: it was a period when China turned its economy from being a developing one with a limited services sector into a mature economy that rivals the West in this regard. The Chinese managed to do this amid Western stagnation. Before examining the statistics, however, let’s once again turn to the idiosyncrasies of the national accounts in China. In the West, the national accounts have granular breakdowns of different service types in the economy. For example, professional services will be distinguished in the accounts from insurance and healthcare. Because of the socialist origins of the Chinese system, this is not the case in the Chinese national accounts. All of these services – apart from simple banking, which is classified as “financial intermediation” – are lumped in the category “others”. As we can see from Figure 6, this “others” category had two large waves of expansion. The first took place between the mid-1990s and the 2008 financial crisis. In 1995, this category made up around 9.4% of GDP, but by 2008 it made up around 16.7% of GDP. After the financial crisis of 2008, this sector expanded enormously, reaching 26.1% of GDP.

We should note here that Western commentators tended to focus on the expansion of the construction sector in China in this period. By doing so, they argued that the entire Chinese model was based on a property bubble. But as we will see in what follows, while the construction sector did expand, the expansion was not nearly as large as the “others” category. The main driver of Chinese growth post-2008 was not the construction and real estate sector, but rather the expansion of this “others” category, which represented the shift from China being an emerging economy with a limited services sector to being a modern economy with a services sector we might be familiar with in the West.

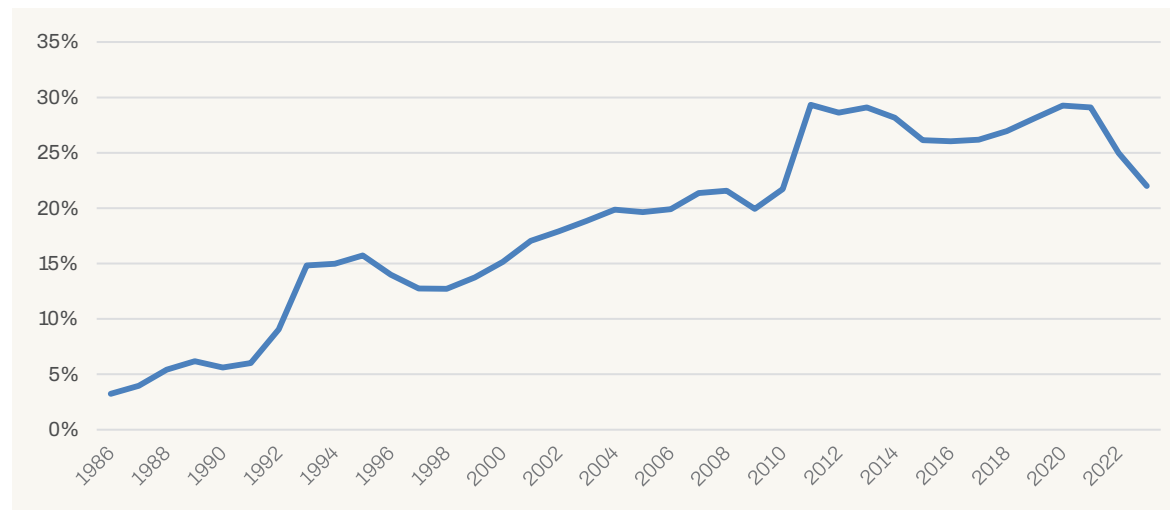
Figure 6: Composition of Chinese GDP by industry



Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

The expansion of the real estate and construction sector in this period, by contrast, does not seem nearly as important. In 2008, the construction sector made up around 5.8% of GDP, and the real estate sector made up around 5.7% of GDP. By 2024, these had increased to 6.7% of GDP and 6.3% of GDP, respectively. Certainly, we can say that this sector increased, but its increase pales in comparison to the expansion of the multitude of services that were introduced to China in the same period. Where we do see some tangible impact of the construction and real estate sector in this period is if we look at fixed asset investment. This can be seen in Figure 7. As we can see, after 2008, there was a sharp jump in real estate fixed asset investment as a percent of total fixed asset investment – from 21.5% in 2008 to 29% in 2011. This high level of real estate fixed asset investment was maintained throughout the dirigiste era.

Figure 7: Chinese real estate fixed asset investment as % of total fixed asset investment



Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

If a Westerner reads Western publications on the Chinese economy, they will likely be under the impression that, after the 2008 global financial crisis, China rested for most of its growth on a booming real estate market. It is certainly true that in this period, real estate investment as a percent of total investment increased, but relative to history, this increase was not too dramatic. This narrative is seized upon by Westerners who are intimidated by recent developments in the Chinese economy and want to convince themselves that the economy suffers similar problems as the Western economies did before the 2008 crash. The reality is somewhat different. After the Western stagnation triggered by the global financial crisis, the Chinese moved to turn their economy from a developing one into an economy with full access to the sorts of services that we are familiar with in the West. This is the actual truth behind the economic growth the country saw in the maturation era.

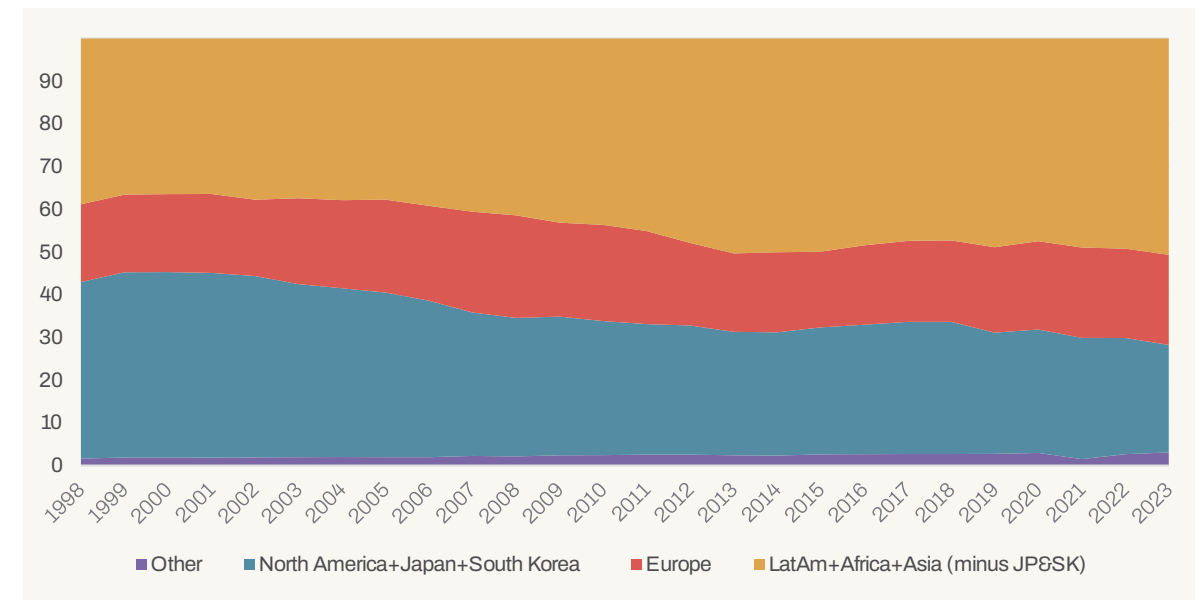
2.7. Stage 6: Dirigiste Technofuturism

In the first half-decade of the 2020s, China quietly shifted its economic policy in a way that is both subtle and profound. It is subtle insofar as it is hard to detect in the macroeconomic statistics. It is profound in the sense that watching its effects at a microeconomic level is very hard to ignore or discount. As we can see in Figure 7, after the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–21, Chinese real estate investment fell back to the pre-2008 level. At the same time, as we can see in Figure 4, large government deficits started to open. Typically, if we see this happen to an economy, we would assume that a housing bubble had burst, and the shortage of demand that this caused was propped up by a Keynesian government spending programme. But this is not what has happened in China. Instead, what we have seen in China is a government-led dirigiste model to allow the country to leapfrog Western countries in technological development. China is using a sophisticated government-led investment programme to dominate with cutting-edge technology products. This strategy is being

coupled with a related strategy to shift its trade from the West to the developing countries to do to the rest of the world what the USA did to Europe after the Second World War.

As Figure 8 shows, this strategy was already in place after the 2008 crash. In 2008, Western countries accounted for around 56.5% of China’s exports, while developing countries accounted for around 41.4%. But by 2023, Western countries accounted for 46.3% while the developing countries accounted for 50.6%. Most of this drop in dependence on Western countries came from North America and the Westernised Asian countries, which fell in the same period from absorbing 32.5% of Chinese exports to 25.2% of Chinese exports.

Figure 8: Chinese export by partner as % of total



Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

The technological changes that took place are difficult to quantify, but they include China’s development of its own semiconductor industry that can supply its smartphone companies with advanced semiconductors, and so it has no need to rely on external supply chains. In this period, China made strides in artificial intelligence (AI) too, releasing a much cheaper alternative to Western models called DeepSeek. China also created a world-competitive domestic automotive industry that was so competitive on price and quality that it led Western countries to engage in tariffs to protect their own car industries. Many of these developments were the product of China’s extensive industrial policy, which identified strategic sectors to compete globally and financed and nurtured them until they became world-leading industries (Chen et al., 2024).

China appears to be pursuing this strategy in line with the enormous economic and geopolitical shifts that we have started to see in the 2020s, as the world moves from the unipolar world that existed at the end of the Cold War to the multipolar world that we are beginning to see develop.

3. Conclusions

This survey of the various stages of Chinese development is by no means complete. But what it lacks in completeness it makes up for in brevity. It allows us to clearly conceptualise the various steps that Chinese policymakers have taken to arrive at where they are today, together with the strategies that they deployed to get there. It shows us that the binary notion that China was once a centrally planned economy that then transitioned to a market economy is untenable. The Chinese economy of 2025 is far more related to the Chinese economy of 1958 than the Russian economy of 2025 is related to the Soviet economy of 1958. The reforms in the Deng era should not be seen as a break with the past, but rather as part of an evolution of the Chinese economic system as it developed over time. No doubt, pointing this out will make some Western economists uncomfortable, as many believe that command economies are wholly dysfunctional and even partial command economies will always be beaten by market economies. China arguably proves that this is not the case. The binaries that many economists and policymakers set up in the Cold War and clung to after it ended can no longer be held in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

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WANG QIUPING

Theoretical Innovations
and Practices of Chinese
Soft Power in the Context
of the New Era

THEORETICAL INNOVATIONS AND PRACTICES OF CHINESE SOFT POWER IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NEW ERA

WANG QIUPING¹

Abstract

This article explores the evolution and application of Chinese soft power in the 21st century, amid a complex and rapidly changing global landscape. It examines the theoretical foundations of soft power, initially introduced by Joseph Nye, and its subsequent localisation within the Chinese context. The article delves into the diverse sources of China's soft power, including its rich cultural heritage, philosophical traditions, and modern economic achievements. It also addresses the critiques and adaptations of the soft power concept by Chinese scholars, highlighting the strategic importance of cultural soft power as a national policy. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road, China aims to enhance its international influence and foster peaceful, cooperative global relations. The article underscores the significance of integrating traditional culture with contemporary development to build a robust framework for China's soft power, contributing to global governance and international stability. Additionally, it briefly examines the regional implementation effects of China's cultural soft power strategy in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Europe.

Keywords: China, soft power, cultural soft power, comprehensive national power, Joseph Nye, Xi Jinping, international relations

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1. Introduction

In the first quarter of the 21st century (2001–2025), the global landscape has become increasingly complex and variable, with a significant rise in uncertainty. Behind the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the situation in the Middle East lies heightened strategic competition and fierce manoeuvring among the USA, China, Russia, and Europe, resulting in a marked increase in geopolitical tensions. The global economic structure is also undergoing profound reconfiguration, as the forces of economic globalisation and anti-globalisation intertwine, gradually shifting the centre of global economic gravity from Western countries to Asia. Against this backdrop, national leaders are closely monitoring the profound transformations in the global landscape and adopting proactive strategies to address these challenges.

President Xi Jinping of China summarised the international situation back in 2018 as “a great change unseen in a century” (Xi, 2018). In his address at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), he further noted: “Currently, the great change unseen in a century is accelerating, a new round of technological revolution and industrial transformation is deeply developing, and the international balance of power is profoundly adjusting, presenting new strategic opportunities for our development” (Xi, 2022). Under President Trump's administration, the international order may be characterised by the law of the jungle with the prioritisation of power, which may even lead to a redrawing of the world map. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, while speaking at a conference organised to evaluate Hungary's EU presidency in January 2025, explicitly articulated the changing world order: “It is now generally accepted that we are living in the years of a change in the world order, of the rise of the East – of Asia. The world order as we have known it – the West, or more precisely, the Anglo-Saxon dominated world order – has come to an end. The world's dominant powers and centres of power are now shaping the new economic, political, and cultural framework in which we will live, presumably for many decades to come” (Orbán, 2025).

In this complex and ever-changing international environment, countries are engaged in fierce competition to safeguard and expand their national interests and international influence. This competition for power has long transcended the traditional domains of military, trade, and technological hard power. In this context, the importance of soft power has become increasingly prominent, as values, culture, policies, and institutional soft power have emerged as new battlegrounds for nations.

This article employs qualitative research methods, beginning with the dissemination and reception of the soft power theory in China. It delves into how Chinese academia critically assimilates this concept and innovates it based on the country's unique social and cultural context. Simultaneously, by conducting a diachronic study of the CPC's policy documents, it explores the two major innovations in the soft power concept by the Chinese government: cultural soft power and political party soft power. It analyses their historical evolution and developmental pathways, highlighting the strategic significance of this theoretical paradigm, distinct from the Western model for the construction of China's soft power. Finally, through comparative case analysis, the article investigates the implementation effects of China's cultural soft power as a national strategy in different regions, including Africa, Southeast Asia, and Europe.

2. Acceptance and Critique of the “Soft Power” Concept in China

The concept of soft power was first introduced by American scholar Joseph Nye in his 1990s book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. After the book was translated into Chinese, the concept of soft power quickly entered the public discourse, resonating strongly within political and academic circles, with the Chinese swiftly adopting a critical perspective on it.

The Chinese academic community generally perceives the introduction of soft power theory as a correction to the reductionist and unilateral focus on economic and military “hard power” by politicians, highlighting its significant theoretical and practical importance. “From an academic standpoint, Joseph Nye’s introduction of the ‘soft power’ concept is undoubtedly a contribution. This concept succinctly encapsulates the ‘soft’ characteristics of the influence associated with ideas, culture, spirit, emotion, institutions, discourse power, and national image. It offers valuable insights into a range of international issues and stands as Nye’s contribution to the field of international political studies” (Zhang, 2023).

While acknowledging the conceptual and theoretical value of soft power, Chinese scholars have articulated critiques of the theory. Principally, they have questioned the motivations behind its introduction. Nye stated, “When I proposed the concept of soft power, I saw it as an academic concept to address the deficiencies in how international relations scholars think about power” (Nye, 2021, p. 204). However, Chinese scholars argue that this new concept was introduced from an American perspective, aimed at serving American hegemonic politics rather than being a purely academic notion. Nye hoped that the US government would value non-coercive measures and effectively use its vast soft power resources to maintain its dominant position in world affairs. Nye mentioned that when a country’s culture includes universal values, and its policies promote values and interests that others share, it increases the probability that others will follow (Nye, 2013, p. 16). However, the Chinese generally perceive “universal values” as distinctly American, a rhetoric used by the USA to export its values and consolidate global supremacy.

Western scholars often limit their understanding of soft power’s role to tactical levels targeting specific entities, without elevating it to a strategic level of general application. Chinese scholars generally believe it is extremely erroneous to use soft power research as a means of advancing hegemonism and power politics. For China, the focus should be on leveraging soft power resources to enhance its comprehensive national strength, spreading its voice internationally, shaping its image, asserting its discourse power, and fostering peaceful, cooperative, and harmonious international relations (Zhang, 2023).

Regarding the applicability of soft power, some Chinese scholars suggest that Nye views soft power as a diplomatic strategy and a tool in international manoeuvring, overlooking its domestic impact. The Chinese government and scholars, considering China’s national context, have placed substantial emphasis on domestic soft power research, arguing that a government and ruling party

should maintain internal soft power to consistently earn public support and thereby secure long-term governance. Furthermore, many Chinese academics believe Nye should more systematically elucidate the relationship between soft and hard power and how they can mutually transform. Although Nye states that being tough is not always smart (Nye, 2013, p. 5), he does not explore the transformation between the two in any depth. Evaluations of hard power resources, if detached from considerations of cultural soft power and dialectical thinking, can lead to “material fallacies” and even contradictory conclusions (Zhang, 2023, p. 197). For example, in China’s 5,000-year history, there are countless instances of the few defeating the many and the weak overcoming the strong. Victory does not depend solely on the side with greater hard power; the choice of strategy and tactics, leadership and coordination capabilities, morale and determination, teamwork, and adaptability, as elements of soft power, are sometimes crucial determinants of success.

3. China’s Localised Interpretation of the “Soft Power” Concept

Following the dissemination of the “soft power” concept in China, scholars have localised the concept based on the country’s social and cultural context. An examination of the academic achievements related to soft power research in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database shows that Chinese scholars generally respect Nye’s definition and understanding of soft power while emphasising its localisation, modernisation, and systematisation within the Chinese context. From both theoretical and practical perspectives, determining the sources of China’s soft power remains a critical task. Nye posits that national soft power primarily derives from three sources: culture, political values, and foreign policy. This insightful judgement has inspired many scholars to examine the elements of soft power sources within their national context.

3.1. Evolving Cultural Strategies: Traditional Assets in Modern Frameworks

The Chinese broadly regard their rich traditional culture as the nation’s greatest soft power asset. China’s cultural resources are diverse, with some of the most esteemed examples being historical and cultural heritage accumulated over 5,000 years. In addition to global cultural icons such as the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Terracotta Army, and the giant panda, Chinese native arts (such as ink painting, calligraphy, seal carving, traditional operas, Tai Chi, and music), a wide variety of culinary traditions (such as the “eight major cuisines”), traditional crafts (such as ceramics, lacquerware, jade carving, textiles, embroidery, paper-cutting, dyeing, and bamboo weaving), festive customs (such as the Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, and Double Ninth Festival), literature and philosophy (such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Journey to the West*, *The Analects*, and *Tao Te Ching*), the Chinese language, and traditional medicine, all serve as vital sources of China’s soft power.

China has made significant efforts in the promotion of its culture. In 2004, drawing on the experiences and models of several language education institutions such as the British Council, the Goethe-Institut, Alliance Française, Japan Foundation, Instituto Cervantes, and Instituto Camões, China began establishing Confucius Institutes in collaboration with domestic and international organisations. As nonprofit educational institutions, Confucius Institutes play a critical role in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps between China and other countries. In a sense, they have reshaped the world's perception of China by allowing traditional culture and modern development to coexist, thereby presenting a more vibrant image of China. However, the government-led nature of the Confucius Institutes has sparked concerns about their academic independence in some countries, leading to the closure of several institutes and necessitating a transformation of the Confucius Institute model. In 2020, the Confucius Institute brand came under the management of the newly established Chinese International Education Foundation, marking a transition towards a more civilian and branded development stage. Post-restructuring, Confucius Institutes have adjusted their operational models to reinforce a “localised development strategy”. The approach, whereby host countries take the lead with support from China, is intended to enhance local recognition and support for Chinese language education, laying a foundational public sentiment for the overseas development of the Institutes. Additionally, the presence of Chinese communities around the world has contributed to Chinese elements such as traditional festivals, tea culture, and cuisine having a noticeable presence in host countries.

3.2. Ancient Wisdom for Modern Influence:

Chinese Philosophical Foundations of Soft Power

The Chinese have always placed great importance on history, often seeking answers and drawing strength from historical texts, which is a crucial reason for the enduring continuity of Chinese civilisation over five millennia. In ancient Chinese philosophy, many thoughts and statements of past philosophers have profound connections to the modern concept of “soft power” (Salát, 2010, pp. 102–106). While “soft power” is a contemporary concept in international relations theory, the wisdom found in ancient Chinese philosophy, particularly regarding cultural influence, moral suasion, and governance, offers significant insights for modern soft power. Confucius, the founder of Confucian thought,² emphasised concepts like *ren* (benevolence), *li* (ritual), and *de* (virtue), advocating for governance and influence through moral education and cultural impact. Confucius stated, “If distant peoples do not submit, then cultivate virtue to attract them”,³ reflecting the idea

² Confucianism is a philosophical and ethical system founded by Kongzi (Confucius) in the 5th century BCE that emphasises morality, social harmony, and proper conduct in relationships. It stresses the importance of virtuous character and education. Confucianism advocates for ethical leadership and governance based on moral integrity, aiming to create a well-ordered society. Its influence extends beyond China, shaping cultural and social norms across East Asia. Today, it remains relevant in discussions of ethics and governance.

³ 孔子曰：“远人不服，则修文德以来之。” This quotation is from the Ji Shi chapter of the *Analects* (论语·季氏将伐颛臾). It means that if people from afar do not come to adhere voluntarily, one should enhance culture and morality to attract them. This saying is often included in middle-school Chinese language textbooks and is known by almost every Chinese person.

that a nation should lead by example. Similarly, Mencius said, “Those who make others submit by force do not win their hearts; when the force is exhausted, their submission ends. But those who win others over with virtue make people sincerely and joyfully submit.”⁴ This also emphasises leadership through moral authority. Mencius also noted, “Those who follow the path of virtue will find abundant support, while those who stray from it will have scant backing.”⁵ Furthermore, as is well-known to all Chinese, “The benevolent have no enemies.”⁶ Taoism,⁷ traditionally attributed to Laozi, advocates for *wuwei* (non-action), highlighting the power of softness and calmness over force, which resonates with the non-coercive influence found in soft power. The *Tao Te Ching* (*Daodejing*) says “Softness and weakness overcome hardness and strength”,⁸ illustrating how gentle power can overcome the strong. It further advises, “A great country is like the lowland towards which all streams flow”,⁹ implying that great powers should be humble and inclusive. Mozi, the founder of Mohism,¹⁰ promoted “universal love and non-aggression”,¹¹ advocating for altruistic love for all and rejection of offensive war. Han Feizi, the greatest representative of Legalism,¹² emphasised the combination of soft and hard power in governance, suggesting that wise rulers use both sanctions and moral

⁴ 孟子曰：“以力服人者，非心服也，力不赡也；以德服人者，中心悦而诚服也。” The quotation is from the Gongsun Chou chapter of the *Mencius* (孟子·公孙丑上). It means that using force to conquer others does not truly win their trust; rather, it is through moral persuasion that one can win people's genuine submission.

⁵ “得道者多助，失道者寡助。” The quotation is from the Gongsun Chou chapter of the *Mencius* (孟子·公孙丑上).

⁶ “仁者无敌。” From the Liang Hui Wang chapter of the *Mencius* (孟子·梁惠王上). It is a well-known adage familiar to every Chinese person, implying that a ruler who practises benevolence will inevitably earn the support of the people; when everyone is united in purpose, they are invincible in the world.

⁷ Taoism is an ancient Chinese spiritual and philosophical tradition that promotes living in accordance with the Tao, the fundamental principle of the universe. It emphasises harmony with nature, simplicity, and the spontaneity of life. Central to Taoism are ideas such as non-action (*wuwei*) and the interplay of *yin* and *yang*, encouraging followers to seek balance and inner peace.

⁸ “柔弱胜刚强”，from *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 78.

⁹ “大邦者下流，天下之交，天下之牝。” From *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 61.

¹⁰ Mohism, founded by the philosopher Mozi in the 5th century BCE, is a Chinese philosophical school that emphasises universal love, meritocracy, and pragmatic governance. Mohists advocate for non-aggression and utilitarian principles, arguing that actions should promote the greatest benefit for society. Mohism offers a significant critique of Confucianism by challenging its focus on hierarchical relationships and the prioritisation of family loyalty. Mohists argue that the Confucian emphasis on filial piety can lead to nepotism and neglect of broader social responsibilities. Instead, they advocate for universal love and impartiality, suggesting that moral actions should be grounded in their societal benefits rather than familial ties. This perspective promotes the idea that individuals should prioritise the welfare of the community as a whole, fostering greater social harmony. Mohism has had a lasting impact on Chinese thought and ethics.

¹¹ “兼爱非攻”: the main ideas of Mohism.

¹² Legalism is a Chinese philosophical school that emerged during the Warring States period, primarily associated with the thinker Han Feizi. It advocates for a strong, centralised state governed by strict laws and harsh punishments to maintain order and control. Legalists believe that human nature is inherently self-interested, necessitating a system of rewards and punishments to guide behaviour. Unlike Confucianism, which focuses on moral virtue, Legalism prioritises pragmatic governance and the authority of the ruler to achieve stability and social harmony.

conduct.¹³ Even the military strategies in *The Art of War* of Sun Tzu (Sunzi)¹⁴ encompass wisdom relevant to soft power, such as “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting; the next best is to defeat them through diplomacy; the next is to engage in battle; and the worst is to attack fortified cities.”¹⁵ The pinnacle of Sun Tzu’s strategy is embodied in “subduing the enemy without fighting”,¹⁶ using one’s reputation to eliminate the possibility of warfare. Ancient Chinese philosophy encompasses numerous schools of thought, each with its unique characteristics. The core ideas of Chinese sages align closely with the modern concept of soft power – achieving influence through the appeal of culture, morality, and values. These philosophical traditions interacted and blended with one another, collectively forming the heart of traditional Chinese culture. They not only provided wisdom for governance in ancient China but also continue to shape the thinking of generations of Chinese people. The political values and diplomatic policies of contemporary China, which advocate for peaceful coexistence, win-win cooperation, the responsibility of major powers, and global harmony, are deeply rooted in China’s ancient philosophy.

3.3. From Hard Power to Soft Influence: The Dual Role of China’s Economy

In light of China’s achievements in the economic sphere, numerous scholars have shown keen interest in exploring the relationship between economic power and soft power. Joseph S. Nye Jr. argues that economic power can be transformed into both hard and soft forms of power, where economic sanctions represent hard power, while the attraction of wealth constitutes soft power (Nye, 2006, pp. 3–5). Some Chinese scholars contend that “economic strength” is a form of hard power, whereas “economic sanctions”, as the formulation and implementation of punitive economic policies and strategies, belong to a process of intellectual creation and thus represent a form of “soft” power. Even countries with relatively weaker economic strength can leverage certain unique characteristics of their economic resources to impose sanctions on adversaries, compelling them to alter their policies, which also constitutes a form of soft power (Zhang, 2023, pp. 196–197). Other scholars have explored whether “economic achievements” and “economic models” can serve as resources for soft power. If an economic model and its outcomes can attract global attention and

¹³ “A wise ruler controls his ministers using only two handles. These two handles are punishment and favor/virtue. 明主之所导制其臣者，二柄而已矣。二柄者，刑德也。” From the Two Handles chapter of the *Han Feizi* (韩非子·二柄).

¹⁴ *The Art of War* (孙子兵法). The Sun Tzu School, originating from the teachings of Sun Tzu, is centred on military strategy and philosophy. It emphasises the importance of careful planning, knowledge of both oneself and the enemy, and the effective use of resources in warfare. The school advocates for strategic flexibility and the idea that the highest form of leadership is to achieve victory with minimal conflict, prioritising diplomacy and psychological tactics over brute force. The principles of the Sun Tzu School have influenced not only military thought but also business strategies and competitive practices in various fields.

¹⁵ “上兵伐谋，其次伐交，其次伐兵，其下攻城。” The quotation is from the Offensive Strategy (谋攻篇) chapter of *The Art of War*. This statement emphasises the importance of strategy and diplomacy, and minimises direct conflict, reflecting the wisdom of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*.

¹⁶ “不战而屈人之兵”: This reflects the idea of achieving victory through superior strategy, diplomacy, or psychological influence, rather than direct military confrontation. The original text is: “是故百战百胜，非善之善者也；不战而屈人之兵，善之善者也。 Therefore, winning every battle is not the ultimate excellence; the highest excellence lies in subduing the enemy’s forces without fighting.” The meaning is that achieving victory through warfare is not the most skilful approach; the most skilful strategy is to compel the enemy to submit without engaging in battle. This reflects Sun Tzu’s emphasis on strategy, wisdom, and minimising conflict.

draw more countries into one’s vision or platform for economic cooperation, they should indeed be considered soft power resources. Sceptics may argue that international cooperation is driven by self-interest rather than attraction. To this, Nye responds that cooperation exists on a spectrum, and the degree of cooperation is influenced by attraction or repulsion (Nye, 2013, p. 39). For instance, China’s global cooperative initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), embodies soft power elements such as the concept of win-win cooperation, the attractiveness of its development model, and the principles of multilateralism and global governance. Many Western countries have joined the BRI, engaging in infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and financial cooperation to achieve economic complementarity and mutual development with China. Under the BRI, what motivates other countries to cooperate with China is not “transaction”, let alone “sanctions” or “coercion”, but rather the anticipation of economic cooperation outcomes – an effect of attraction. The benefits derived from such bilateral economic cooperation can enhance the hard power of participating nations. This dynamic is akin to the scenario in Chinese schools where academically average but motivated students seek to befriend top-performing classmates. The top performers attract more friends because their willingness to share study methods, class notes, and problem-solving approaches helps average students improve their grades – an attraction rooted in hard power that should be categorised as soft power.

Chinese scholars have made significant contributions to the study of the constitutive elements of soft power, yet their work has also attracted criticism. For instance, American journalist Joshua Kurlantzick remarked that soft power has taken on a different meaning. For the Chinese, soft power encompasses everything outside the military and security domains, not only including popular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic diplomatic tools such as aid and investment (Barr, 2013, p. 12). Additionally, a US Congressional research report suggested that China is expanding its sources of soft power: “China’s increasing use of soft power in Southeast Asia—through culture, diplomacy, foreign aid, trade, and investment, among other non-military means—has posed a new challenge to U.S. foreign policy” (Barr, 2013, p. 13). Although the research of Chinese scholars reflects diverse perspectives, each with its strengths and inevitable limitations, it signifies that the study of China’s cultural soft power has moved beyond the “imitative phase” of merely replicating Western frameworks or confining itself to introducing Nye’s ideas. Instead, it has entered a distinct phase characterised by Chinese-specific research, laying a solid foundation for theoretical innovation in the study of cultural soft power (Zhang, 2023, p. 200).

4. The Emergence of Cultural Soft Power as a National Strategy

4.1. Culture: A Catalyst for National Power Transformation

Wang Huning, a member of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo Standing Committee, is one of the first Chinese scholars to systematically explore the concept of soft power. In the early 1990s, he published several articles on the subject. As the Director of the International Politics Department at Fudan University, Wang pointed out in 1993 that "a critical aspect of discussing national power or strength is to pay attention to the positive role of culture" (Wang, 1993, pp. 91–96). However, the recognition of cultural power in China predates the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Mao Zedong, one of the principal founders and leaders of the CPC, the People's Liberation Army, and the PRC, articulated profound insights into the significance of a new culture in pushing forward China's modern social development, viewing it as a revolutionary force. He explained that "Since the emergence of the capitalist economy in China (...) it has represented a new economic system in contrast to the feudal economy. Simultaneously, the new political forces that have arisen and developed alongside this capitalist economy are the political forces of the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie, and the proletariat. Reflecting and serving these new economic and political forces in the realm of ideology is what constitutes the new culture" (Mao, 1991, p. 662). He emphasised that "The new political, economic, and cultural forces are all revolutionary forces of China" (Mao, 1991, p. 695). Here, he has already elevated culture to the status of a fundamental element of national strength, alongside military power, economic power, and political organisational capacity. The term "culture" in this context should be understood to encompass both ideological culture and the tangible cultural initiatives that are actively being pursued (Li & Zhao, 2024, p. 86). Mao's understanding of culture has evolved from being confined to the realm of ideology to recognising it as a form of power. He realised that all fundamental elements of national strength must include culture, marking the germination of the CPC's thought on cultural soft power. This also laid the ideological foundation for the Party's later recognition that "culture is an integral part of comprehensive national power" (Li & Zhao, 2024, p. 86).

In 2007, the CPC officially introduced the concept of cultural soft power into its policy agenda, marking its elevation to a national strategic level. The 17th National Congress report by the CPC highlighted the increasing importance of culture as a source of national cohesion and competitiveness. It called for the enhancement of national cultural creativity and the improvement of cultural soft power to better safeguard the people's cultural rights and enrich societal life (Hu, 2007).¹⁷ Subsequently, then-President Hu Jintao frequently referenced cultural soft power, which he categorised into three areas:

¹⁷ The original text reads: "In the present era, culture has increasingly become a vital source of national cohesion and creativity, as well as a significant factor in the competition of comprehensive national strength. Enriching the spiritual and cultural life of the people has become an increasingly fervent aspiration in our country. We must adhere to the direction of advanced socialist culture, usher in a new upsurge in socialist cultural development, stimulate the cultural creativity of the entire nation, enhance the nation's cultural soft power, ensure better protection of the people's basic cultural rights and interests, make social and cultural life more diverse and vibrant, and elevate the spirit and morale of the people."

traditional Chinese culture, the fruits of Marxism and its adaptation to Chinese contexts, and other valuable cultural heritage (Pan, 2013, p. 69). The 18th National Congress report further emphasised this notion, stating that culture is the lifeblood of the nation and the spiritual home of the people, essential for national rejuvenation and cultural prosperity (Hu, 2012).¹⁸ Chinese President Xi Jinping has consistently stressed the importance of enhancing cultural soft power, linking it to the country's "Two Centenary Goals"¹⁹ and the strategic initiative to strengthen cultural confidence²⁰ and build a Strong Socialist Culture Nation.²¹

4.2. Strategic Elevation of Cultural Soft Power

The official Chinese documents notably use the term "cultural soft power" instead of merely "soft power", reflecting a context-specific approach rooted in China's national conditions. From the Chinese perspective, culture is not just one of the three sources of soft power alongside political values and foreign policy; it is the fundamental basis for all soft power endeavours. Culture, as a multifaceted concept, encompasses shared values, beliefs, customs, norms, arts, languages, and technologies formed throughout human history. It includes not only philosophical and literary traditions but also material creations such as fashion, crafts, and architecture. Culture helps individuals and groups form self-identity and a sense of belonging, and fosters social cohesion through shared values and norms. Thus, culture necessarily permeates all aspects and elements of soft power. The CPC views cultural soft power as the inherent positive influence and strength of a nation's cultural spirit, primarily manifest in safeguarding national interests and promoting state development (Li & Zhao, 2024, p. 85). According to Chinese academic circles, the national spirit and the spirit of the times among the Chinese people are considered significant sources of China's cultural soft power. The Chinese government has acknowledged this perspective. Former President Jiang Zemin articulated that "Whether a nation possesses a high-spirited national ethos is an important measure of its comprehensive national strength" (Central Committee of the CPC Literature Research Office, 2002, p. 395). He summarised "the most precious spiritual wealth of the Chinese nation as wholehearted patriotism, relentless self-improvement, a willingness to contribute, and unwavering perseverance"

¹⁸ The original text reads: "Culture is the lifeblood of a nation and the spiritual home of its people. To comprehensively build a moderately prosperous society and realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, it is imperative to promote the great development and flourishing of socialist culture, initiate a new upsurge in socialist cultural construction, enhance the nation's cultural soft power, and leverage the role of culture in guiding social trends, educating the people, serving society, and driving development."

¹⁹ The "Two Centenary Goals" are key national objectives set by the Communist Party of China. The first goal is to build a "moderately prosperous society in all respects" by 2021, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CPC. The second goal is to build China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of PRC. These goals reflect China's long-term vision for development and national rejuvenation.

²⁰ Cultural confidence is China's belief in the value and strength of its own culture, rooted in its 5,000-year history, revolutionary traditions, and socialist values. It emphasises preserving Chinese cultural identity while embracing global exchanges and innovation.

²¹ This goal aims to enhance China's cultural soft power by promoting cultural innovation, protecting traditional culture, and integrating socialist core values into society. It seeks to create a culturally vibrant nation that enriches people's lives and contributes to global cultural diversity.

(Policy Research Office of the CPC Central Committee, 1999, pp. 181–182). This emphasis on spiritual values underscores their integral role in shaping China’s cultural influence and national identity, resonating deeply with both domestic and international perceptions of Chinese cultural strength. As Xi Jinping stated, the core and supreme level embodying a nation’s comprehensive strength is cultural soft power, as it concerns the cohesion of the spirit of a nation (Xi, 2014).²² This statement signifies that China has elevated its understanding of cultural soft power to the core level of comprehensive national strength. One of the significant advantages of China’s unique political system is the continuity of its policies. Xi’s elaboration on cultural soft power resonates well with the assertion Mao made in *On New Democracy*: one of the Party’s crucial historical tasks is to transform “a China dominated by old culture, hence backward and ignorant, into a China dominated by new culture, thus civilized and advanced” (Mao, 1991, p. 662).

4.3. Party Soft Power: Sustaining Governance through Cultural Influence

The concept of cultural soft power as a national strategy is unique in that it focuses both on itself and on the world. For the Chinese government, tapping into soft power resources serves a dual purpose: on one hand, it aims to create a more favourable international environment and enhance the country’s comprehensive national strength; on the other hand, it helps strengthen the cohesion and national spirit of the Chinese people – this represents another dimension of soft power, known as internal soft power. The CPC is the largest Marxist ruling party in the world. As of 31 December 2023, the CPC had a membership of 99.185 million (The Central People’s Government, 2024). While its large organisational scale demonstrates its power, the Party faces unique challenges. For the CPC, which has been the ruling party for 75 consecutive years, ensuring long-term governance is one of its most significant challenges and a critical focus of academic research in China. The notion of party soft power has emerged as a crucial metric for assessing the strength of political parties. According to some scholars, the CPC’s cohesion, appeal, innovative capacity, and legitimacy are key factors in overcoming challenges unique to large ruling parties. Enhancing the party’s soft power requires sustained efforts; it demands continuous self-reform and improvement, as well as active engagement in responding to the needs and expectations of the populace to reinforce its legitimacy and public support. Strengthening internal soft power is seen as essential for garnering public support and achieving sustainable governance (Guo & Wang, 2024, pp. 2–3).

²² The original text reads: “The most fundamental and highest level of a nation’s comprehensive strength is ultimately reflected in its cultural soft power, which is vital for gathering the spirit and vitality of a nation.”

5. China’s Regionally Differentiated Soft Power Strategies: a Multidimensional Comparative Analysis

China’s soft power practices exhibit systematic variations across major global regions. These differences are rooted in the cultural-historical traditions and developmental stages of each region, while also reflecting the regional priorities of China’s diplomatic strategy. Comparative analysis reveals that China has adopted differentiated implementation strategies in Africa, Asia, and Europe, constructing corresponding soft power dissemination pathways based on regional characteristics.

5.1. Africa: Development-Oriented Soft Power Model

China and Africa share a profound traditional friendship and robust cooperative relations. Since the 1950s–1960s, the cooperative relationship established during their anti-colonial struggles laid important foundations for contemporary China-Africa interactions. “The principles of sincere friendship, equality and mutual benefit, solidarity and cooperation, and common development have become the driving force behind the enduring vitality of China-Africa relations” (The Central People’s Government of PRC, 2006). Currently, China’s soft power construction in Africa primarily relies on a development cooperation framework, demonstrating continuous engagement in infrastructure construction, medical assistance, and security cooperation with the following characteristics:

- In infrastructure connectivity, bilateral cooperation has achieved remarkable results. According to data from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2025), since the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China has participated in building nearly 100,000 km of roads and over 10,000 km of railway networks in Africa. Between 2021 and 2024 alone, Chinese enterprises’ investment projects in Africa created more than 1.1 million jobs, maintaining China’s position as Africa’s largest trading partner for 16 consecutive years.
- In medical cooperation, China has worked to build social trust. Since 1963, China has dispatched over 21,000 medical personnel to 48 African countries, providing free healthcare services to 260 million patients (National Health Commission, 2023). Meanwhile, Chinese medical teams have implemented systematic training programmes to strengthen local healthcare capacity and improve medical infrastructure in recipient countries. This “development-oriented assistance” model has effectively enhanced China’s image in Africa.
- In the security domain, China’s participation in UN peacekeeping operations in Africa has also enhanced its soft power projection. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China’s deployment of peacekeeping personnel to conflict zones such as Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and South Sudan demonstrates not only its commitment to multilateral security principles but also exemplifies a distinctive Chinese approach to “practices-based soft power” construction. This model emphasises tangible contributions over rhetorical diplomacy as the primary means of achieving international legitimacy.

The *Gallup 2024 Global Leadership Rating Report* shows that 58% of African respondents consider China the most influential country in Africa, slightly higher than the USA (56%), Germany (54%), and Russia (42%) (China Youth Network, 2024). In aggregate terms, China's soft power projection in Africa remains robust. However, empirical evidence suggests that the Western-dominated "debt-trap" discourse has introduced measurable friction into China-Africa relations, reflecting evolving African societal reassessments of bilateral cooperation frameworks.

5.2. Southeast Asia: Cultural Affinity Amid Security Concerns

The reception of China's soft power in Southeast Asia exhibits distinct dual characteristics. Culturally, leveraging geographical and ethnic affinities, Southeast Asian countries maintain close connections with China across multiple dimensions, including language, customs, and dietary habits, facilitating deep cultural exchanges. According to Media Partners Asia's survey results, by 2023, Chinese television dramas accounted for 20% of viewership on streaming platforms in five Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. Moreover, the popularity of Chinese dramas has influenced audience consumption behaviour, with many viewers beginning to learn Chinese and even travelling to filming locations featured in the shows (SOHU, 2023).

Economically, China is committed to win-win cooperation with Southeast Asian nations. In 2024, China-ASEAN trade volume reached CNY 6.99tn, and ASEAN has remained China's largest trading partner for five consecutive years, while China has maintained its position as ASEAN's top trading partner for 16 years (Ministry of Commerce of China, 2025). From the opening of the China-Laos Railway in 2021 to the commencement of Cambodia's Funan Techo Canal project in 2024 and the China-Vietnam railway agreement, logistics and personnel mobility costs have been substantially reduced. This contributes to enhancing local populations' positive perceptions of China.

As Southeast Asian nations actively engage with the developmental opportunities offered by China, they also face anxieties related to the asymmetries in power dynamics with China. This dual perception underscores the tension within China's soft power architecture, notably the "capability-affinity" dynamic. The pivotal challenge in advancing China's soft power lies in its ability to convert its substantial scale advantages into a trustworthy provision of public goods.

5.3. Europe: Soft Power Construction Under a Differentiated Strategy

As a pivotal actor in the global landscape, Europe remains a critical region for China in enhancing its international image and cultural appeal. Since the end of the Cold War, alongside the deepening of EU integration and the trend towards multipolarity, China's soft power development in Europe has evolved from a spontaneous to a deliberate approach, transitioning from singular to systematic efforts. Compared to Africa and Southeast Asia, China's soft power initiatives in Europe face a more complex environment.

First, Europe's historical and cultural diversity has shaped distinct identities across nations and subregions, necessitating a targeted "cluster strategy" tailored to regional specificities. Second, the

EU, as a normative power founded on shared values, exhibits significant differences in core values with China – a cognitive gap that increases the adaptation costs for China's soft power strategies. Third, Sino-European interactions unfold within the framework of great-power dynamics, where fluctuations in EU-US and China-US relations can substantially influence China-Europe relations.

China's soft power efforts in Europe encounter the challenge of dispersed focal points, requiring a differentiated, multi-tiered strategic approach. For instance, tailored strategies should be designed for key actors such as France and Germany (the EU's decision-making engines), Central European defenders of institutional autonomy, Nordic models of sustainable governance, southern Europe's potential-growth states, and China-sceptic factions. China should continue reshaping its economic image, prioritising sectors like climate technology, green transition, digital infrastructure, advanced manufacturing integration, agricultural technology, and biomedicine to create demonstrative effects.

In recent years, China has actively promoted the BRI, with Chinese enterprises transforming infrastructure advantages into geo-economic appeal through investments in Europe, turning "connectivity" from a concept into tangible benefits for European citizens. In technology, high-quality products from companies like Huawei, Xiaomi, and BYD have gained popularity among younger demographics, gradually shifting perceptions from "Made in China" to "China's quality". Beyond hardware, digital cultural industries – epitomised by platforms such as TikTok and Xiaohongshu – have emerged as new forces in China's soft power. TikTok's UGC-based model (user-generated content) provides global youth with multidimensional channels to engage with China: through digital revitalisation of traditional culture (e.g., the Hanfu²³ challenge with millions of global participants), multifaceted portrayals of contemporary China (e.g., "tech-assisted agriculture" videos amassing billions of views), and visualised narratives of regional development (e.g., a sharp growth in Xinjiang tourism content). These efforts are reshaping the power dynamics of global information flows. With the growth of social media, various local organisations and individuals have joined efforts to amplify China's voice, using emotive storytelling to convey authentic narratives about China. As China continues to open up, many foreign bloggers who are fluent in Chinese and familiar with China actively share short videos about China on foreign social media platforms, gradually becoming opinion leaders on Chinese-related topics among specific online communities. These friendly cultural ambassadors convey the most authentic image of China to the world through daily, engaging, natural, and persuasive means. Additionally, China's 240-hour transit visa exemption for nationals of 40 European countries has significantly facilitated European society's understanding of modern China.

²³ Hanfu is the traditional attire of China's Han ethnic group, originating over 3,000 years ago. Its elegant cross-collar robes and wide sleeves reflect classical Chinese aesthetics and Confucian values of harmony between humans and nature.

6. Conclusions

Amid profound adjustments in the global order, China's soft power development has entered a new phase of theoretical innovation and practical breakthroughs. According to the UK-based *Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index 2025* report, China has risen to second place globally, surpassing the UK for the first time while trailing behind the United States (Brand Finance, 2025). This enhancement of China's global influence reflects the growing international recognition of its distinctive approach that synthesises civilisational heritage with modern developmental wisdom. However, the current international environment remains complex and volatile, with major powers engaged in intense technological and economic competition. Against the backdrop of conflicts, technological rivalries, and value differences, global perceptions of China have become more diverse and uncertain.

Currently, China's soft power development faces three dialectical tensions: the integrative challenges between traditional cultural resources and modern communication systems, the asymmetric development between economic influence and value recognition, and the structural contradictions between Western-centrism and Global South aspirations. Looking ahead, China needs to build a more resilient soft power paradigm based on its current development model, focusing on cultural promotion, technological innovation, and strategic diplomacy. This includes, for example, promoting the creative transformation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence to demonstrate their unique mediating value in addressing major-power competition dilemmas; gaining more discourse power in emerging fields such as climate governance and artificial intelligence (AI) ethics; and overcoming "value barriers" through civilisational dialogue. Achieving these goals requires China to maintain strategic focus while advancing conceptual innovation through higher-standard institutional openness, ultimately facilitating a paradigm shift from "influence competition" to "solution provision". For China, the ultimate test of soft power development lies in whether it can transcend the East-West competition binary and construct genuinely inclusive multilateral platforms for problem-solving in an increasingly fragmented world.

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DUAN SHUANGXI

Historical Evolution and
Innovative Development
Pathways of Chinese
Higher Education

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION AND INNOVATIVE DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS OF CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION

DUAN SHUANGXI¹

Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Chinese higher education from the imperial examination system to modern research universities. Since the late 19th century, the sector has evolved from Western model emulation to engineering-focused education, and now towards world-class universities. These shifts have addressed national development needs and demonstrated global competence. Despite challenges like resource imbalance and quality concerns during expansion, China is pursuing educational modernisation through reforms that enhance institutional autonomy and internationalisation. With the *Outline for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024–2035)*, the sector faces the dual challenges of an ageing population and declining student numbers. China is focusing on modernisation, optimising resources, enhancing global collaboration, and using artificial intelligence to advance educational governance.

Keywords: Chinese higher education, historical evolution, educational reform, modernisation, internationalisation, artificial intelligence, demographic challenges

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1. Introduction

On 19 January 2025, the Chinese government released the *Outline for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024–2035)*, which aims to achieve the transition to an “education powerhouse” in two phases (Chinese Government, 2025a). The first phase targets 2027, with goals to enhance the accessibility and quality of education, enabling the public to benefit more from educational opportunities, improving the quality of self-directed talent cultivation, fostering top-notch innovative talents, and aligning the structure of educational provision more closely with the demands of high-quality economic, social, and demographic development. The second phase aims to realise the vision of an education powerhouse by 2035, establishing a high-quality education system: the accessibility and quality of basic education will rank among the world’s best, a learning society will be fully formed, public satisfaction with education will significantly rise, the capacity of education to serve national strategies will markedly improve, and the modernisation of education will be comprehensively achieved. The *Report on the Work of the Government (2025)*, delivered by the Chinese government, emphasises that “efforts must be closely aligned with national needs and public concerns to advance educational reform and development, accelerating the transition from a country with a large education system to one with a strong education system” (Chinese Government, 2025b).

The Chinese government’s plan for building a strong education nation sets clear requirements for all levels and types of education. It emphasises strengthening and optimising basic education; accelerating the construction of a modern vocational education system; cultivating master craftsmen, skilled artisans, and highly skilled talents; and building a learning society. Furthermore, it particularly highlights the development of world-class universities and disciplines with Chinese characteristics, improving mechanisms for discovering and nurturing top innovative talents, and enhancing the efficiency of transforming scientific and technological achievements in higher education institutions.

Higher education in China plays a critical role in constructing an independent knowledge system, cultivating talent, advancing scientific research, and facilitating the transformation of research outcomes into practical applications. It is undoubtedly a decisive factor in China’s ambition to become a “global leader in education”. According to the QS World University Rankings 2025, five Chinese universities are ranked among the top 100 globally, with Peking University and Tsinghua University securing the 17th and 25th positions, respectively (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025). In 2019, China’s gross enrollment rate in higher education reached 51.6% (China’s Ministry of Education, 2021a), surpassing the 50% threshold for the first time and marking the transition of Chinese higher education into a stage of massification (China’s Ministry of Education, 2022). Over the past few decades, Chinese higher education has achieved remarkable progress in terms of scale, quality, and international influence, emerging as a critical engine driving both China’s and the global economy.

Since the late 19th century, Chinese higher education has transformed dramatically. Within decades, it shifted from Western emulation to indigenous innovation and expanded from elite to mass education – an unprecedented achievement for a nation comprising one-quarter of humanity. However, the rapid expansion of scale and intensifying international competition have also brought

about numerous challenges. This article provides an overview of the historical development of Chinese higher education, explores new trends in the post-COVID-19 era, and examines the major issues facing its future development.

2. Historical Evolution of Chinese Higher Education

The development of higher education in China can be divided into several key phases, each characterised by distinct historical contexts and developmental features.

2.1. Foundations: From Imperial Examination to Western Model Transplantation (pre-1949)

The earliest forms of education and talent selection in China were rooted in private academies (*sisbu* 私塾) and the imperial examination system (*keju* 科举). The *sisbu* served as the primary institution for early childhood education and the cultivation of national talent, while the *keju* system was the principal mechanism for selecting government officials during feudal times, “regulating politics, culture, ideology, education, and the economy” (Zhang, 2021, p. 38). Following the First Opium War in 1840, demands for governmental reform grew. During the late Qing Dynasty,² the Self-Strengthening Movement (*Yangwu Yundong* 洋务运动) sought to revitalise the nation by adopting Western technology and education. In 1895, the Tianjin Western Studies School (predecessor of Tianjin University) was established as China’s first modern university. In 1898, the Imperial University of Peking (predecessor of Peking University) was founded as the first national comprehensive university. In 1905, after over 1,300 years of operation, the *keju* system was forcibly abolished by the Qing government under mounting pressures to modernise, marking the abrupt end of China’s traditional meritocratic selection mechanism and the compulsory establishment of a modern school system. After the collapse of the *keju* system, higher education in China primarily emulated Western models, particularly those of Japan, Germany, and the United States, with a focus on practical disciplines such as engineering, medicine, and law.

In 1912, the Republic of China³ government promulgated the University Act (大学令), establishing the modern university system. During the 1920s and 1930s, renowned universities such as Tsinghua University, Zhejiang University, and Fudan University were established or expanded. The Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) that triggered the fall of the North China Plain to Japanese forces, compelled Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Nankai University to evacuate their Beijing and Tianjin campuses, ultimately relocating to Kunming in southwestern China, where they merged to form the National Southwestern Associated University (NSAU). This university was

² The Qing dynasty (1636–1912), China’s final imperial era, combined Manchu rule with Confucian administration, presiding over both territorial expansion and eventual modernisation challenges.

³ The Republic of China (ROC) (1912–1949), commonly referred to as *Min’guo* (民国), was the official state designation and era name for China following the collapse of the Qing dynasty until the establishment of the People’s Republic of China.

temporarily established under the pressures of wartime circumstances. Despite operating under harsh conditions for less than nine years, NSAU produced 175 academicians, eight pioneers of China’s Two Bombs, One Satellite project,⁴ two Nobel laureates, and nine national leaders (Chen, 2024, p. 1). “NSAU’s legacy of patriotism, democratic revolution, scientific education, and academic freedom continues to influence China’s contemporary education system and national spirit” (Yu & Li, 2023, p. 93). Its philosophy of “general education”⁵ and the spirit of academic freedom remain exemplary models for Chinese higher education to this day.

2.2. The Emergence and Dominance of Engineering Education (1949–1990s)

“At the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, there were 205 higher education institutions nationwide, with a gross enrollment rate of only 0.26% and fewer than 120,000 students, including just 30,000 engineering students. With 80% of China’s 400 million population being illiterate and an average education level of 1.6 years, the country urgently needed talent for industrialization” (Guo, 1999, p. 9). Due to the urgent need for talent to support industrialisation in China at the time, a nationwide restructuring of higher education institutions was implemented in 1952, modelled after the Soviet system, with a focus on developing engineering colleges. Many comprehensive universities were dismantled or reorganised, and prominent engineering institutions such as Harbin Institute of Technology and Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics emerged. During this period, higher education emphasised practicality and service to economic construction, with liberal arts and basic sciences receiving less attention (Chen, 1999, p. 35).

Following the initiation of Reform and Opening Up⁶ in 1978, Chinese higher education entered a phase of recovery and rapid development. The college entrance examination (*gaokao* 高考), suspended for a decade, was reinstated in 1977, marking the revival of higher education. During the 1980s, universities began to reintroduce comprehensive academic disciplines, with renewed emphasis on liberal arts and basic sciences. This period saw the diversification of higher education, increased alignment with international academic standards, and a shift in talent cultivation goals from technical expertise to comprehensive capabilities.

⁴ The Two Bombs, One Satellite project refers to China’s coordinated national initiatives during the 1960s to develop nuclear weapons (including both atomic and hydrogen bombs), ballistic missiles, and artificial satellites. In 1999, during the 50th anniversary celebrations of the founding of the PRC, 23 principal contributors were awarded state honors for their pivotal roles in this foundational defence-science programme.

⁵ General education (*tongshi jiaoyu* 通识教育), refers to China’s distinctive interdisciplinary curriculum framework. Unlike Western liberal arts models emphasising critical individualism, it mainly contains traditional Chinese cultural literacy, classical texts, social virtues, and foundational scientific literacy.

⁶ Reform and Opening Up refers to the series of economic and political reforms initiated by China in 1978 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. These reforms aimed to transition the country from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented economy while opening up to foreign investment and global markets. This period is marked by significant economic growth and increased integration into the global economy.

From the founding of the PRC in 1949 to the end of the 20th century, “the primary features of the higher education management system were centralized authority and government-operated institutions. The administrative approach of ‘centralized and unified management by the central government’ dominated, with government oversight extending to both internal and external activities of universities. The relationship between the government and universities was one of ‘institutional isomorphism’, where universities were closely aligned with government interests, and a ‘strong control’ management orientation was evident. Due to the high degree of centralization, universities effectively became subordinate entities of the government, lacking sufficient autonomy and vitality in their operations” (Ge et al., 2025, pp. 13–15).

2.3. Enrollment Expansion and Systemic Reforms (Late 1990s to Early 21st Century)

The late 20th century marked a significant turning point in the history of Chinese higher education, characterised by two major developments.

First, in 1998, the Chinese government enacted the Higher Education Law of the PRC, which, for the first time, formally recognised the autonomy of universities as independent legal entities in their operations (China’s Ministry of Education, 1998). This law also delineated the boundaries of government authority over universities, explicitly granting them autonomy in seven key areas: (i) student admissions; (ii) the establishment and adjustment of academic disciplines and programmes; (iii) teaching and curriculum design; (iv) scientific research, technological development, and social services; (v) international scientific and cultural exchanges; (vi) internal organisational structure, faculty appointment and evaluation, and the adjustment of salaries and benefits; and (vii) the management and use of institutional assets (China’s Ministry of Education, 1998). This legislation, to a certain extent, safeguarded the autonomy of universities in their operations.

Second, to meet the growing demand for skilled talent to support economic development and alleviate employment pressures, China initiated a large-scale expansion of higher education enrollment. In 1999, the Ministry of Education launched the College Enrollment Expansion Policy, significantly increasing the number of undergraduate and graduate admissions (Online Training Academy for Officials of Agencies Directly Under the Ministry of Education, 2011). This policy was part of the *Action Plan for Revitalizing Education in the 21st Century*, which aimed to advance educational reform and development, enhance national innovation capabilities, and implement the strategy of revitalising the nation through science and education. The plan set a target of achieving a gross enrollment rate of 15% by 2010, marking the transition of Chinese higher education into a massification phase. In 1998, there were 1,022 higher education institutions in China, with 3.41 million undergraduate and college students enrolled (China’s Ministry of Education, 1999a). By 2010, three years after the expansion policy was implemented, the total enrollment in higher education reached 31.05 million, with a gross enrollment rate of 26.5% (China’s Ministry of Education, 2012). While the rapid expansion significantly increased access to higher education, it also led to challenges such as declining teaching quality and uneven distribution of educational

resources (Zhang, 2003, pp. 386–391). By 2008, the Ministry of Education of China acknowledged that the expansion had been overly rapid and began to control the pace of enrollment growth.

With the ongoing development of the market economy, the implementation of government institutional reforms, and the expansion of higher education enrollment, the Chinese government decided to make further significant adjustments to the higher education management system. The government progressively streamlined administrative processes and delegated more authority to universities, shifting towards a service-oriented governance model. Universities were granted the status of independent legal entities, and the roles and responsibilities of the government, universities, and society were clarified through legal frameworks. These measures aimed to standardise university operations and government management practices in accordance with the law. Although the Chinese government has introduced a series of laws and regulations to define the relationship between the state and universities, the reform of government-university relations has not been a central focus. While some progress has been made, substantial measures to address deeper issues remain limited (Ge et al., 2025, p. 14). In this round of reforms, while adjustments to the institutional framework of university operations have achieved some success, they have deviated from the original goals of management system reform (Zhou, 2022, p. 23).

2.4. The Pursuit of Excellence: 211, 985, and the Double First-Class Initiatives (Early 21st Century to the Present)

To enhance the international competitiveness of Chinese higher education, the government launched two major initiatives successively: the 211 Project and the 985 Project. The 211 Project, initiated in 1995, aimed to develop approximately 100 universities into world-class institutions by the early 21st century. The name “211” derives from the goal of building 100 top universities in the 21st century. Currently, 116 universities have been included in this project, receiving significant state support and funding due to their national prominence and influence. In 1998, the 985 Project was launched as an extension of the 211 Project to create world-class universities. The name “985” refers to the date of its announcement, May 1998. This project focused on supporting a select group of universities to achieve global excellence. Currently, 39 universities are part of the 985 Project, all of which are also members of the 211 Project (China’s Ministry of Education, 1999b). To this day, 211 and 985 universities remain prestigious brands in Chinese higher education, with graduates enjoying significant advantages in the job market and broader society.

In 2015, China launched the Double First-Class initiative to further elevate the overall quality of its higher education system. This initiative, outlined in the *Overall Plan for Promoting World-Class Universities and Disciplines*, aims to develop world-class universities and disciplines through a dynamic and competitive process (State Council of China, 2015). Unlike the 211 and 985 projects, the Double First-Class initiative emphasises discipline-specific excellence and employs a performance-based evaluation system. Universities and disciplines that fail to meet standards may be warned or removed from the list, fostering a culture of competition and innovation. The first phase of the initiative, announced in 2017, included 140 universities, comprising 42 world-class universities

and 98 world-class discipline-focused institutions, with a total of 465 disciplines designated for development. This initiative represents a strategic shift towards fostering excellence in specific disciplines while maintaining a focus on institutional competitiveness.

In 2012, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) identified “further deepening comprehensive reforms in the education sector” as one of the specific tasks for China’s educational reform and development. In addressing the shortcomings in government work, the report highlighted that “social conflicts have significantly increased, with numerous issues affecting the immediate interests of the public, such as education, employment, social security, healthcare, housing, ecological environment, food and drug safety, workplace safety, public security, and law enforcement. Some people still face difficulties in their daily lives” (Hu, 2012). To address these issues, it is necessary to expand the pathways for solutions by leveraging the characteristics of the times and China’s unique strengths.

The historical trajectory of Chinese higher education has laid a critical foundation for its current modernisation efforts. The legacy of the imperial examination system (*keju* 科举) persists in contemporary emphasis on merit-based selection, exemplified by the gaokao system’s role in maintaining social mobility despite massification. Meanwhile, the Soviet-inspired specialisation of the 1950s, while criticised for fragmenting disciplines, enabled China to rapidly industrialise – a strategy now reimagined through interdisciplinary programmes in Double First-Class universities to address complex global challenges like climate change and artificial intelligence (AI) ethics.

Notably, the tension between centralised governance and institutional autonomy – a theme since the 1952 Soviet model adoption – remains pivotal. Recent reforms under the *Outline for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024–2035)* aim to resolve this by hybridising historical lessons: retaining state-led strategic planning while adopting Western-inspired market mechanisms (Chinese Government, 2025a). This synthesis reflects China’s unique approach to educational modernisation – neither fully replicating Western neoliberalism nor reverting to rigid centralisation, but rather evolving a “third way” that prioritises national rejuvenation through adaptive governance (Jia & Luo, 2016).

3. Challenges and Innovative Approaches in the Development of Chinese Higher Education

Chinese higher education has achieved remarkable progress in terms of scale expansion, quality improvement, internationalisation, research innovation, and social services. However, as evidenced by various phenomena, the current governance system and capabilities of higher education in China still face numerous shortcomings and constraints. Achieving the goal of becoming a global leader in education cannot be accomplished overnight. Exploring the real-world challenges in education and seeking solutions is a shared concern within China’s educational community.

3.1. Expansion and Systemic Homogenisation in Mass Higher Education

In 2023, the total number of students enrolled in higher education in China reached 47.63 million, including 10.42 million undergraduates, 1.3 million master’s and doctoral students, and 207,490 faculty members across 3,074 higher education institutions. The gross enrollment rate for higher education stood at 60.2%.

The massification of higher education in China has played a significant role in both individual development and societal progress. However, this expansion has also led to the phenomenon of “degree devaluation”. Unlike the 1970s and 1980s, when a university degree was seen as a life-changing opportunity, the widespread availability of higher education has made university graduates less competitive in today’s job market. This shift is partly due to changing societal perceptions of the value of a university education and partly a result of the homogenisation of higher education institutions during the rapid expansion phase (Yuan, 2019, pp. 27–28). Overall, Chinese universities tend to exhibit similarities in structure, curriculum design, and development goals, lacking diversity and distinctive characteristics. This phenomenon is partly attributed to standardised government policies and evaluation systems, where excessive government involvement has made it challenging for many institutions to maintain their unique identities and address the specific needs of their students and regions. To address this issue, Ge Daokai, Vice President of the Chinese Association of Higher Education, emphasises the need to modernise the governance system and capabilities of higher education. He argues that this is the fundamental solution to the problem of institutional homogenisation. In recent years, the Chinese government has made significant efforts to advance the modernisation of higher education governance, striving to expand and implement university autonomy and enhance the coordinating authority of provincial governments. These efforts have yielded some positive results. However, “while there has been considerable exploration of higher education governance in both theory and practice, there remains a gap in the implementation of institutional reforms. The primary reason is that the relationship between universities and the government has not yet fully transitioned from a traditional administrative hierarchy to a modern contractual relationship. Some unresolved or inadequately addressed issues persist in the government-university relationship, and the government’s approach to managing universities is still in the process of shifting from a managerial role to a service-oriented one” (Ge, 2025, p. 14). Ge suggests that the goal of improving higher education governance lies in constructing a modern governance system characterised by “macro-level regulation by the government, autonomous operation by universities, and active participation by society”. The government should transition from being a “controller of university development” to a “service provider for university development”, improving institutional designs for multi-stakeholder participation and enhancing societal involvement (Ge, 2025, pp. 14–15). Professor Zuo Chongliang, who has made significant contributions to research on university governance and teacher education, also highlights in his monograph that “higher education governance is a collaborative effort involving multiple stakeholders in the management of higher education or universities, with decentralization and co-governance as its fundamental features” (Zuo, 2019, p. 31). Exploring collaborative governance pathways has become a focal topic in China’s current educational discourse.

3.2. Regional and Institutional Disparities in Resource Allocation

Through national initiatives such as the 211 Project, the 985 Project, and the Double First-Class initiative, the overall quality and international competitiveness of Chinese universities have significantly improved over the past two to three decades (Liu & Pang, 2025). However, disparities in development remain pronounced. One major imbalance lies between universities directly under central government ministries and those under local provincial governments. In China, universities are primarily funded by either the central government or provincial governments. Central ministries-affiliated universities typically receive more resources, including funding, facilities, and policy support, while provincial universities rely on local financial resources, which are often tied to regional economic development. For example, among the 985 Project universities, 32 of the 39 are affiliated with central ministries, while only 7 are provincial institutions. Geographically, there is also a significant gap between the more developed eastern coastal regions and the less developed western and mountainous areas. According to 2021 education statistics, of the 118 central ministries-affiliated universities, 39 are located in Beijing, accounting for 33.1% of the total. After Beijing, Shanghai and Jiangsu each host 10 such universities, while provinces like Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, Jiangxi, Guangxi, Hainan, Guizhou, Tibet, Qinghai, and Xinjiang have none (China's Ministry of Education, 2021b). To address these imbalances, optimising the distribution of higher education resources and coordinating the development of central and provincial universities have become key priorities. The recently released *Outline for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024–2035)* emphasises “supporting joint central-provincial university development, optimizing regional distribution, and allocating additional resources to central and western regions and ethnic minority areas” (Chinese Government, 2025a). Additionally, China is actively promoting the establishment of advanced research institutes in underdeveloped regions such as the central-western and northeastern areas, encouraging collaboration between universities, key industries, and leading enterprises to drive regional development through research and innovation. The support for outstanding and financially disadvantaged students has also been continuously expanding from the Chinese government. The national scholarship and financial aid programmes have raised their funding standards and extended their coverage, while student loan programmes have increased loan limits and reduced interest rates. These measures have benefited over 34 million students.

3.3. Homogeneous Evaluation Systems for Universities and Faculty

The evaluation standards for higher education are uniformly formulated by the state, and the government plays a dominant role in the assessment process. “While the system is designed to incorporate multiple stakeholders – including the government, universities, departments, non-governmental organizations, and international evaluators – the government remains the primary authority, with other entities having limited influence” (Li, 2017, pp. 60–62).

The shortcomings of the evaluation system for university faculty in China can be observed through several popular contemporary phrases. One such phrase is “breaking the five onlys” (*po wu wei* 破五唯), introduced in a 2020 document by China's Ministry of Education (China's Ministry of

Education, 2020). This policy opposes the overreliance on five metrics in faculty evaluation: papers, projects, degrees, titles, and awards. It advocates for a more multidimensional and reasonable evaluation system that aligns with the diverse roles of faculty members, including teaching, research, and social service. Another notable concept is the “up or out” (*fei sheng ji zou* 非升即走) system – a localised adaptation of the tenure-track system originating in the United States. With the ongoing implementation of the Double First-Class initiative, most Chinese universities have adopted a “pre-tenure and tenure” system centred on the “up or out” principle. This system emerged from reforms in university personnel appointments in the 1990s and, after over 30 years of exploration, has expanded from pilot programmes to nationwide implementation. It has established a high-quality faculty appointment and promotion mechanism characterised by flexibility in hiring and dismissal, merit-based advancement, and talent potential maximisation. This system has broken the traditional notions of “iron rice bowls” (lifetime job security), egalitarianism, and free-riding, significantly stimulating the academic potential of faculty and narrowing the gap between Chinese universities and world-class institutions (Tang, 2025, p. 72). However, this reform process has also faced widespread criticism. Scholar Tang Ting argues that the “up or out” system exhibits an irrational trend of “McDonaldization” – a term borrowed from sociology to describe the overemphasis on efficiency, calculability, and predictability. She identifies three crises stemming from this trend: accelerated screening leading to involuntary turnover among early-career academics, quantitative evaluation standards prioritising quantity over quality, and standardised scripts stifling innovation and emotional well-being among young faculty (Tang, 2025, pp. 71–77).

From the perspective of evaluation standards, Chinese universities have yet to fully implement the government's call to “break the five onlys”. Lou Yu, a professor at the China University of Political Science and Law, points out that the promotion criteria for the “up or out” system at most Chinese universities remain research-oriented, failing to align with the trinity of faculty roles: teaching, research, and social service. He advocates for a diversified talent evaluation system that allows individuals to excel in their areas of strength – whether in research, teaching, or social service – ensuring that everyone can maximise their potential in suitable roles (Zhang, 2024, p. 1).

From China's practical experience, the “pre-tenure and tenure” system centred on “up or out” has generally been beneficial for talent discovery and retention. However, it has also exposed several issues that require urgent improvement. The refinement of this mechanism must align with the trinity of faculty roles in Chinese universities while respecting the natural progression of talent development. Providing young faculty with time and space to grow is essential for achieving scientific and sustainable talent development in higher education.

3.4. Innovation Gaps and Internationalisation Challenges

Despite significant progress in research investment and the volume of academic publications, Chinese universities still face shortcomings in original research and breakthroughs in core technologies, with low rates of research commercialisation. According to the 2021 *Nature Index*, China ranks second globally in the number of natural science publications but lags behind countries like the

United States in high-impact research, such as Nobel-Prize-level achievements. In critical fields like semiconductors, high-end manufacturing equipment, and biopharmaceuticals, China remains dependent on foreign technologies. For instance, the lack of independent capabilities in high-end chip development has left companies like Huawei vulnerable to technological embargoes. However, with increased national investment in research and improved incentive mechanisms, this situation is gradually improving.

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has had profound and irreversible impacts on education systems worldwide. During the pandemic, some of the new methods and initiatives developed by China's education sector were retained and have since become a driving force for educational reform, playing a positive role in advancing the modernisation and internationalisation of Chinese education. In the post-pandemic era, online education and hybrid learning models have become normalised, and international cooperation has shifted to online platforms. Chinese universities have significantly increased investments in educational informatisation, accelerating the construction of smart classrooms, virtual laboratories, digital libraries, and online teaching platforms. Simultaneously, hybrid teaching models have been widely integrated into teaching plans and curriculum design, with universities intensifying funding for the exploration and development of online courses and hybrid teaching methods. These measures have indirectly acted as catalysts for enhancing the internationalisation of higher education. Many universities have collaborated with foreign institutions to establish virtual research centres, co-develop online courses, and launch joint training programmes. Additionally, some universities have actively explored the concept of "internationalisation at home", a concept proposed in the late 1990s by Bengt Nilsson, Vice Chancellor of Malmö University in Sweden (Nilsson, 2003). Chinese universities have localised this concept by introducing international curricula and faculty, providing solutions for both domestic Chinese students and international students unable to study in China. Notably, China has remained the largest source of international students globally for many years. After a temporary decline during the pandemic, the number of Chinese students studying abroad rebounded rapidly. In 2019, approximately 703,500 Chinese students went abroad for studies. This number dropped to 450,900 in 2020 but gradually recovered to 661,200 by 2022. There is also a growing diversification in the destinations chosen by Chinese students, with a noticeable trend towards studying in European countries and nations along the Belt and Road Initiative. Despite China's substantial efforts towards educational internationalisation, challenges remain in attracting international students to study in China, internationalising faculty and curricula, and deepening international collaborations. Except for a few globally renowned universities, most institutions lack English-taught programmes suitable for international students. Furthermore, collaborations between Chinese universities and leading international institutions often remain superficial, focusing on student exchanges and short-term visits rather than deep research partnerships or joint degree programmes. To address these issues, the Chinese government has proposed reforms to the national study-abroad system and expanded channels for international student exchanges.

3.5. AI-Driven Disruption and Digital Transformation

In recent years, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), led by large language models, has rapidly transformed the development trajectory of human society and significantly impacted global higher education. In January 2024, Minister of Education Huai Jipeng, in his keynote speech at the 2024 World Digital Education Conference, stated that "China's national digital education strategy will transition from '3C' – Connectivity, Content, and Collaboration – to '3I': Integration, Intelligence, and Internationalization", emphasising the need to "develop digital technologies more intelligently to serve the holistic development of individuals" (Huai, 2024). At the World Digital Education Conference in 2025, China announced that 2025 is the beginning of the "Era of Smart Education" (China's Ministry of Education, 2025). Under the influence of GenAI, the digital transformation of Chinese higher education has accelerated significantly. Trends such as digitisation, networking, intelligentisation, virtualisation, and service-oriented education have given rise to new forms of education, including Internet + Education, MOOCs + Online Education, Service + Education, AI + Education, and Metaverse + Education (Xu & Zhang, 2022, p. 31). In the latest round of curriculum reforms at Chinese universities, many traditional courses have been comprehensively redesigned in terms of teaching formats, content, and methods, incorporating AI elements to enhance quality and efficiency. However, while progress has been made in leveraging AI to empower education, universities are also exploring a new question: How can AI truly enhance students' innovative capabilities and sustainable competence in higher education? In the AI era, the cost of accessing information has drastically decreased, making what one knows less important than how one thinks. In the age of digital intelligence, "universities should actively explore talent cultivation models and smart education methods that focus on enhancing student competencies, establish a comprehensive, multi-dimensional evaluation and certification system, and build a digital-intelligent education governance system to continuously improve students' professional and digital competencies" (Xu & Zhang, 2025, pp. 11–12). In the digital intelligence era, technology is no longer just a tool for production; it has become a core element of social governance and management (Ge, 2025, p. 16). AI is likely to provide innovative ideas and methods for modernising the governance system and capabilities of education.

3.6. The Chinese Model: A Distinct Pathway to Educational Modernisation

China's higher education modernisation defies conventional Western narratives. While Western systems often prioritise institutional autonomy and market-driven competition, China's approach integrates three unique elements:

- Strategic hybridity combines Soviet-style centralised planning (e.g., the 211/985 projects) with selective Western practices (e.g., tenure-track systems), yet subordinating both to the Communist Party's "national rejuvenation" agenda.
- Scale-driven innovation leverages massive enrollment (47.6 million students in 2023) to pilot reforms – such as AI-enabled personalised learning – at a scale unthinkable in smaller systems.

- Geopolitical pedagogical integration positions universities as instruments of “discourse power” construction. This is exemplified by the Confucius Institutes’ global expansion and the Belt and Road scholarship programmes, which simultaneously enhance soft power and address domestic overcapacity in humanities graduates.

Critics argue this model risks homogenisation and stifling academic freedom. However, proponents highlight its effectiveness in aligning education with industrial policy. This suggests a viable alternative to the Western “ivory tower” paradigm, though its long-term sustainability depends on balancing control with creativity.

4. Conclusions

The evolution of Chinese higher education reflects a remarkable journey from the imperial examination system to the development of modern research universities. Beginning with early adaptations of Western models, progressing through phases of engineering-focused expansion, and more recently striving for world-class universities and disciplines, China’s higher education system has undergone significant structural and functional transformations. This developmental trajectory not only addresses the nation’s economic and social needs but also demonstrates its capability to meet globalisation challenges. While rapid growth has introduced challenges such as regional disparities and quality assurance issues, China is actively advancing educational modernisation through various policies and reforms, aiming to enhance the autonomy and internationalisation of higher institutions.

China has entered a new era marked by the release of the *Outline for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024–2035)*, which has generated high expectations across various sectors of Chinese society. From a demographic perspective, 2035 is expected to be a pivotal year for Chinese higher education, as the number of students entering higher education is projected to decline due to an ageing population and falling birth rates (He & Duan, 2023, pp. 42–43). In the context of an increasingly ageing society and shrinking youth population, higher education faces unprecedented challenges and opportunities (Zhang et al., 2025, pp. 1, 10).

In response to these challenges and the country’s circumstances, China will focus on multiple fronts to achieve educational modernisation, aligning with the essence of Chinese-style modernisation. From a reform perspective, China will explore cooperative governance pathways, improve institutional designs for multistakeholder governance, enhance quality and contribution-based evaluation systems, and strengthen dynamic adjustment and multisource investment mechanisms. Additionally, leveraging the era of AI, innovative strategies will be sought to improve educational efficiency and modernise governance systems and capabilities. Furthermore, China will learn from international experiences in addressing demographic changes, driving reforms by optimising university layouts, promoting balanced regional educational resource development, deepening internationalisation strategies, refining lifelong learning systems, and enhancing the cultivation of innovative talents. As “Made in China” transitions to “Created in China”, Chinese higher education is tasked with the crucial mission of cultivating high-quality, innovative talents, a mission that is both significant and challenging.

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RAMACHANDRA BYRAPPA

India, China, and the Global South:
Don't Forget the Trust Factor



INDIA, CHINA, AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH: DON'T FORGET THE TRUST FACTOR

RAMACHANDRA BYRAPPA¹

Abstract

The Global South could be existential for both India and China. For India, it is part of its core identity; for China, it could soon become a fundamental necessity. But China is not alone in wanting to reconfigure its vision of the world. For the past two decades, the focus of the international system has been on the West and on China. In 2022, the parochial notion of a Global South took centre stage. It came to the fore like a shooting star. The timing of this emergence surprised many international experts. It was all the more puzzling because the West was engaged in a proxy war with Russia in Ukraine, and China had reaffirmed its boundless friendship with Russia. The Global South should and must have been a distant concern. After several years of fierce debate and contention, there still isn't even a rough definition of the Global South. Why rush it to the front pages of prestigious journals and conference halls? The answer is simple. The war in Ukraine has shattered many illusions, including those about India, China, and especially the Global South. The two Asian giants' perceptions of and approaches to the Global South could become a defining factor in their own relations, between conflict and cooperation.

Keywords: Trust factor, Global South, Indosphere, Sinosphere

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1. Introduction

The two most populous countries in the world, neighbours with a 3,488 km border, have a significant lack of trust in each other, which poses a challenge not only to their bilateral relations but also to the wider international framework. A key lesson that both India and China should have learnt is that their past acceptance of European imperialism in Asia has been detrimental to their development. Over the past two centuries, both nations have suffered colonisation and degradation, yet neither has sufficiently addressed the imperative of preventing a recurrence of such historical injustices. In this context, China bears a particular responsibility, as it has traditionally failed to recognise India as a stable and meaningful partner. Instead, it has shown an inclination towards Western civilisation and sought to adopt its characteristics, including its arrogance and appetite for dominance. This strategy has hampered China's ability to promote harmony and unity within Asia, driven by a fear of being marginalised by a coalition of diverse nations. This strategic miscalculation has had lasting consequences. At present, this coalition is actively seeking to strengthen its ties with India, not out of a genuine desire for a united Asia, but rather out of fear of China's growing aggressiveness and, in particular, the unpredictability of its intentions and actions.

Being a similar civilisational state, China should be familiar with the fact that India does not compete with anyone, because it always lacked the necessary resources to do so. This is one of the major reasons why trust is a crucial factor in its relations with other countries. In theory, this should help in establishing cooperation with China or any other country, for that matter. First, India has never threatened China's security; we just have to see the military resources at the latter's disposal. For several decades, even the Pentagon, at the head of the greatest military force in the world, has been literally yelling at the US Congress, telling it that China will soon overtake the USA in its defence capabilities. In 2023, the GDP per capita of China was five times that of India. It has access to tax revenues that India can only dream of. In global terms, Chinese industrial capacity is probably 10 times that of India (Rizzi, 2024). In trade, India imported USD100bn worth of goods from the People's Republic of China (PRC), largely in favour of the latter. "While Chinese imports surpassed \$100 billion in FY24, India's exports barely crossed \$16 billion in the last financial year and have remained at that level for a long time" (Barik & Dutta Mishra, 2024). In 2023, trade grew at 8.4% compared to that of 2022 (Ranjan & Donnellon-May, 2024). It is obvious, therefore, that both the Indian elite and the people are mystified as to China's intentions, and more importantly, its unpredictable actions.

In 2020, as India grappled with the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese military forces were amassing along the Indian border in the Pangong Tso region, establishing permanent facilities and preparing for potential conflict. A "violent clash occurred in the Pangong Tso area in May, and tensions escalated sharply with the deadly Galwan Valley clash on June 15, 2020, where 20 Indian soldiers and an unspecified number of Chinese troops died" (Kumar, 2024). Despite being overwhelmed by the pandemic and the looming threat of mass casualties among its population, India was forced to allocate substantial resources to counter the aggression of its formidable neighbour,

which remained largely unaffected by the health crisis (The Economist, 2023b). This situation was reminiscent of the events of 1962 and undermined decades of confidence-building measures (US Institute of Peace, 2020, p. 36). By the time of the 2024 BRICS summit in Kazan, all aspects of cooperation except trade had largely ceased. In their analysis of the discussions between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi, Amit Ranjan and Genevieve Donnellon-May of the Lowy Institute noted: “The Sino–Indian relationship demonstrates that mutual interests, preferences, and interdependence guide the behaviour of states. Indeed, sometimes cooperation is tactical rather than a structural shift in a country’s perception of and relationship with others” (Ranjan & Donnellon-May, 2024). While some semblance of normalcy may be restored, the prospect of renewed trust remains elusive.

The “Middle Kingdom” should wake up to one essential fact. India is no match for China on many accounts, except for one: it can tip the balance in Asia and therefore globally (Rajagopalan, 2017, p. 3). This will be an important issue for leverage in the Global South. Like all other countries from this group, India does not want to take sides but will try to balance things to its advantage. On each and every issue, it will carefully weigh its interests and then decide. This has been the case with the USA, Russia, and the European Union, and this method might not change much when it comes to China. India does not trust China, but this does not mean that it will refuse to consider what China has to offer. For the moment, China is slow in reacting to this posture, probably because it does not want to make further mistakes that would jeopardise the minimum of what has been achieved since the 2024 BRICS summit in Kazan.

In regions outside Asia, particularly in the broader Global South, the circumstances are strikingly analogous. These countries are keenly interested in China’s industrial capabilities and the low-cost technologies it offers. Yet there is considerable reluctance to forge lasting partnerships with China. This reluctance is largely due to concerns that China may have ulterior motives aimed at gradual hegemony, echoing the imperialist tendencies of Western powers in previous centuries. The perception is that China is interested in the Global South for selfish reasons (Liang, 2012, p. 668). A critical flaw in this scenario is the lack of a foundation based on trust and mutual understanding. While China may have many advantages over India in terms of trade and investment in the Global South, one crucial element appears to be diminishing: trust. India enjoys higher levels of trust in the Global South, a sentiment underpinned by several factors, including its extensive historical engagement with these nations. This raises the question: Should this dynamic hamper China’s ability to actively engage with these countries? Not necessarily. The outcome depends on whether China seeks to compete with India or cooperate with it.

The current circumstances are very worrying for China. It faces a Western coalition that wants to limit its development, while at the same time, it is surrounded by an Asia that sees it as a potential adversary. In particular, any action taken by China may not be sufficient to restore the previous balance. It is clear, therefore, that fostering relations with India is crucial for China to overcome its diplomatic, geopolitical, and economic hurdles. One possible way to reinvigorate this partnership could be to openly discuss the possibilities for cooperation in Eurasia (van Kemenade, 2008, p. 125).

Russia has emerged as an important intermediary between China and India due to its considerable influence in the Eurasian context. Eurasia is the region where Indian and Chinese civilisations intersect most profoundly, surpassing the connections found in Southeast Asia. It is also important to remember that both northern China and northern India were historically influenced by the same tribes from the Eurasian steppes for several centuries. The key question after the 2024 BRICS summit in Kazan is whether the key to an India–China partnership begins with a greater conjoined engagement in Eurasia?

2. Aims and Methodology

The aims of the study are several. For some reason, the two giant states and civilisations of Asia, representing about 35% of the world’s population, feel extremely uncomfortable with each other, and the relationship sometimes becomes violent. One of the aims is to see if there is a root cause for the poor quality of the relationship. Another important aim is to see if China’s conflictual relationship with the world’s largest democracy has an impact on its ambitions in the Global South. As far as methodology is concerned, this study explores conceptual knowledge related to these countries to see if there is circumstantial evidence in this regard. The topic is very large and complex, and this study provides a very brief insight into the underlying complexities. It is therefore very limited in scope.

3. Conceptual Appraisal

3.1. The Trust Factor

Trust, like personal relationships, is difficult to build between nations, but remarkably easy to break. The Merriam–Webster dictionary characterises trust as “a firm reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of a person or entity” (merriam-webster.com, 2024). This definition invites an exploration of the multifaceted nature of trust. At its core, trust is intrinsically linked to the notion of confidence. In addition, it is structurally linked to polarisation, which refers to the growing divergence and distance between two entities. The evolution of trust in a partner over time is influenced by the internal institutional and social framework of the partner nation (The Economist, 2024a). Countries observe each other to determine which behaviours are consistent and which are unpredictable, leading to a constant search for reliable patterns of behaviour. In this context, trust can be equated with the ability to anticipate the actions of a partner. Ultimately, this reflects a continuous recalibration of the dynamics of trust. One academic study articulates the concept of trust as follows: “In trusting others, one party, the trustor, makes itself vulnerable by taking a course of action that creates incentives for the other party, the trustee, to exploit it. If there is no vulnerability – some risk of being disappointed in relationships with others – then trust is not necessary. Trustee status is calculative based on the expectation of trustworthiness” (Salgado et al., 2021). Moreover, this trustworthiness introduces the idea of reciprocity, suggesting that the establishment of trust depends on actions and reactions that

honour the perceptions and expectations of both parties involved. Thus, trust encompasses several dimensions, with two main elements: tangible actions and psychological constructs.

Identifying trust mechanisms in international relations presents significant challenges, mainly due to the opaque nature of behind-the-scenes interactions. Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel is now being criticised not only for her flawed immigration policy, but also for her key foreign policy stances. A recent article in *The Economist* effectively illustrates this complexity through an analysis of Merkel's tenure as German Chancellor: "Under Mrs Merkel, Germany got cheap energy from Russia, sold expensive cars to China and outsourced its security to America. Today, all those policies look like strategic mistakes. The economy is in a mess. China dominates electric vehicles. Vladimir Putin is threatening Europe, and under Donald Trump, America will no longer be willing to pay full freight for NATO" (The Economist, 2024b). This scenario illustrates the parallels between international and interpersonal relations, where trust can often be unidirectional.

Chancellor Merkel believed that by fostering a consistent framework of relations, she could cultivate a dynamic of trust between Germany and its international partners. Her rationale was that such a mutually beneficial relationship would discourage partners from deviating from established patterns. Over time, she believed, these deeply rooted transactional interactions would foster systemic trust. Interestingly, she was convinced that her approach to building trust could bridge systemic differences. Despite the fundamental differences between China and Germany, she believed that the convergence of transactional advantages, coupled with German technological expertise and access to the vast Chinese market, would be sufficient to overcome these differences and build lasting trust. However, the Chinese used this technology and expertise to enhance their own market attractiveness, ultimately diminishing the attractiveness of nations such as Germany. Trust thus proved to be a myopic concept. It became clear that trust could be confined to specific policy areas or transactions without becoming a systemic phenomenon.

3.2. The Global South

The concept of the Global South emerged as a rapidly formulated idea to redefine global divisions in the context of a new great power confrontation. For Western nations, the term unambiguously refers to the non-white Third World (Brooke-Holland, 2024). The contemporary classification of the world can be understood as comprising the Extended West, the Global South, and the Extended Sinosphere. In terms of geographical units, the Global South mainly consists of developing Asia, Africa, and Latin America. During the Cold War, the Third World served as a site of ideological conflict, but it has since evolved into a multifaceted framework (Grovo, 2011, p. 175). For this article, the primary objective of the Global South concept is to strategically marginalise China within the international arena. This implies that the dimensions and delineations of the Global South are integral to the conceptual framework, as it is within this region that the most effective efforts to isolate or limit China's influence are expected to take place. Furthermore, this analysis explores the dynamics of China's influence in relation to a nation such as India, which has a complex history of long-standing influence in the Global South. The potential interactions between these two

entities are likely to provide valuable insights into the nature of their cooperation or conflict. The real "conceptual" Global South will also indicate the level of interest for China.

Despite geostrategic tensions, China remains a dominant global trading nation. In theory, it has influence and leverage around the world, and it has nothing to worry about. But in reality, we're talking about other kinds of influence, other than trade, which are purely transactional. Beyond trade, the situation is very different.

In Asia, the Global South consists mainly of nations that perceive China as a potential adversary, except for countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh. The West is gradually seeking to formalise this antagonism through both implicit and explicit alliances. Raja Mohan, a foreign policy analyst and former member of India's National Security Advisory Board, articulates this perspective: "India, worried about Chinese hegemony, today is teaming up with the United States. Vietnam, whose communist ideology is akin to China's, is building a strategic partnership with the United States to enhance its autonomy vis-à-vis China's behaviour in the region" (Mohan, 2023). In addition, this group of countries includes those struggling under the weight of debt incurred by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It should be noted that India refused to enter into BRI agreements with China because it saw it as a geopolitical instrument, far removed from the economic connectivity perspective presented. This leads to the conclusion that in Asia's Global South, China is seen as adversarial rather than associative.

China faces significant challenges in the Indian Ocean region, which stretches from Southeast Asia to the Middle East and East Africa. This oceanic expanse is not only a geographical entity but also the cradle of Indian civilisation and culture. This long-standing historical context has enabled India, despite its relatively modest economic status, to resist the encroaching influence of major economic powers such as China (US Institute of Peace, 2020, pp. 37–38). The intricate web of diasporas and economic relations, while often operating submerged, is substantial and poses a formidable challenge for China to dismantle. Consequently, for China, the Global South primarily includes certain regions of Africa and South America, where it faces fierce competition from nations such as Russia, Turkey, and the USA. Looking ahead, the emergence of other middle powers could further intensify this competitive landscape. Thus, without forging alliances with other competing nations, China's access to what can be broadly defined as the Global South remains severely limited.

4. China and the Global South

China's engagement with the Global South is a relatively recent development, closely linked to its ongoing tensions with Western powers across various dimensions of global politics. The nation is increasingly concerned about being perceived as the primary supporter of Russia, Iran, and North Korea, all of which are considered pariah states by the Western Bloc. This perception poses a significant challenge for China, which seeks to create a rift between Europe and the USA while expanding its own sphere of influence. For a nation aspiring to hegemonic status, this predicament

is particularly uncomfortable, as isolation contradicts its strategic objectives. Politically, China seeks to project itself as a responsible member of the international community. Recently, however, it has positioned itself as a key supporter of entities that seek to undermine the existing Western-led global order in favour of an alternative framework. In the past, anti-China sentiment was often dismissed as a nuisance with minimal impact on day-to-day diplomatic interactions. As the largest trading nation in history, China is determined to maintain this status. Unfortunately, however, this negative narrative has begun to affect its economic relations, with trade decoupling emerging as a major strategic concern for Western nations. China had anticipated that the West would struggle to achieve decoupling due to its extensive economic interdependence and dominance in critical mineral resources.

China's renewed focus on the Global South is driven by a variety of factors that go beyond mere economic interests. First, it wants to demonstrate its substantial support within international organisations such as the United Nations. Second, China wants to prevent the emergence of a global "South-West" coalition that could lead to increased economic decoupling. Third, it is imperative for China to mitigate the potential threats to its industrial and productive capabilities posed by middle powers in the Global South. Fourth, China is determined to prevent Russia from regaining its historical influence in the Global South, particularly through its alliances with emerging middle powers such as India, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Brazil. Finally, as China's own economic growth shows signs of stagnation (Yifan Xie & Suzuki, 2024), it recognises the importance of engaging with the growth potential of the Global South and seeking to connect with this development without undermining its own economic strength. This requires a strategy of withholding technology transfers while maintaining its market presence. As a result, China is likely to leverage its influence in the Global South by using its investment capabilities and financing locally driven initiatives to counterbalance the efforts of an extended Western Bloc.

5. India and the Global South

India's engagement with the Global South transcends mere economic considerations such as trade, debt, and strong governance. It is fundamentally rooted in a shared historical experience and collective identity. This relationship is not a recent development; rather, it has deep historical roots that extend well beyond 2023. The ties between India and the Global South have been forged over more than a century, originating from the collective struggles against colonialism and the rise of nationalist movements globally. The initiatives of Mahatma Gandhi, which began in South Africa, served as an inspiration for numerous freedom fighters across Asia and Africa. Prominent figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Gokhale, and possibly Subhas Chandra Bose maintained strong connections with nationalist leaders worldwide.

After independence, India, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, sought to prevent the newly liberated nations from succumbing to the ideological pressures of the Cold War power rivalry.

Nehru worked with other leaders who shared similar views to create the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which provided a coherent framework for the development of this diverse collection of countries. This initiative not only helped to reduce the risks associated with Cold War tensions but also facilitated the creation and development of specialised forums such as the G77. The effectiveness of this cooperation stemmed from their collective actions based on discussions and negotiations at NAM summits. At the time, there was a lack of institutions or organisations to oversee the agenda, priorities, and voting processes within the United Nations and other related bodies. Apart from India, few nations had well-trained bureaucracies or extensive global diplomatic services. India readily provided the essential institutional support for this coalition, thereby establishing itself as a pivotal force within the Global South.

India emerged as a paradigm that many countries in the Global South considered worthy of emulation for their own political and institutional development. For many of these countries, India served as an extensive experimental framework. A significant number of these nations shared similarities with India, characterised by their diverse ethnic and linguistic populations, and showed a keen interest in understanding how India had successfully navigated its processes of integration and nation-building. The effectiveness of India's territorial and social cohesion has largely depended on the management of its political framework. After independence, India opted for a democratic approach and pursued peaceful national unification. The potential for escalating dissent, fragmentation, and political turmoil was considerable, but India made a conscious choice to address these challenges. As a result, the nation's progress has been perceived as gradual and painstaking. While some may have seen it as an unfavourable model, India has earned considerable respect and admiration for its unwavering commitment to democratic principles. Throughout this journey, democracy has emerged as a crucial link between India and the wider community of the Global South, fostering relationships not only at the government level but also among the people.

India's achievements can be summed up in one simple phrase: the establishment of systemic trust. More than a century of shared history has fostered a sense of reliability between India and the nations of the Global South. These countries recognise that the Indian framework, born out of anti-colonial struggles and the quest for national independence, has supported similar efforts elsewhere and can be relied upon. They have observed that this framework prioritises a tradition of peace in its international relations. Moreover, the nations of the Global South are engaging with a resilient system that has proven its effectiveness over time. There are no unforeseen challenges in the partnership with India; trust is inherent and provides a foundation for future cooperation. Although India has faced significant poverty for more than 50 years and has primarily provided intangible aid through services, this situation can change.

Western countries will seek to de-risk and reduce their economic interdependence with China to regain their former competitive advantage. Conversely, China is likely to focus on channelling its excess production capacity to the Global South to maintain its industrial output. This dynamic will pose significant challenges for countries in the Global South as they seek to reindustrialise while maintaining their national sovereignty. India has extensive experience in protecting its domestic

industries from external industrial threats. As a result, countries in the Global South can be expected to seek India's guidance and industrial cooperation in combating unfair trade practices. It is possible to envisage South-South initiatives, possibly bolstered by the implicit support of nations such as Japan and the USA, which are interested in promoting India's growth as a strategic ally and leader in the Global South. This scenario suggests that Japan and the USA could remove any barriers to technology transfers to India (The Economist, 2023b). Ultimately, the elements of trust and reliability will further strengthen the relationship between India and the Global South.

6. India, China, and the Global South

As already discussed, the potential for cooperation between India and China is currently minimal and is likely to remain so in the near future. Any predictions about their actions in the Global South remain speculative. This situation depends on various factors, including domestic circumstances and the evolving global geopolitical landscape characterised by great power competition. As highlighted in Section 3, expectations and perceptions have a significant impact on the India-China relationship. From India's perspective, there is a belief that China, for a variety of reasons, is seeking to encircle it militarily and may seek to impede or obstruct its economic progress. Andrew Scobell of the United States Institute for Peace says: "China seeks to maintain a cordial working relationship with India, setting aside contentious issues such as the unresolved border dispute, while playing a long game to advance its interests. For the foreseeable future, Beijing wants to keep New Delhi in a geostrategic South Asian box with a lid on, while China conducts business-as-usual diplomacy and trade with India. Chinese leaders perceive India as an oversized middle power with great power aspirations" (Markey & Scobell, 2023).

Markey and Scobell go on to argue that what fuels the India-China relationship is more than six decades of mistrust and suspicion. They believe this will not disappear overnight. Every time the two countries try to smooth things over, something goes wrong; there are no resilient or durable mechanisms for building trust. For a long time, the confrontation was confined to the Himalayas; it has now spilt over into the Indian Ocean. As they put it, "the arena of confrontation has expanded into the maritime domain", which, they say, shows how far the two countries are from a cooperative mode (Markey & Scobell, 2023). Commenting on the issue, Kumar, an Indian expert, says that recent diplomatic progress may give the false impression that things are moving in the right direction. But he stresses that there can be no hope of improvement until the "trust factor is resolved" (Kumar, 2024).

India sees a significant part of its development taking place in the Global South, particularly rooted in its civilisational links with Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa. Consequently, it perceives external intervention in the Indian Ocean region as a direct threat to its national security. From India's perspective, if China fails to recognise and accommodate India's national security priorities, the likelihood of peaceful coexistence and cooperation in the Global South diminishes considerably. A key challenge lies in China's approach to its relations with India and the wider Global

South. China is pursuing a top-down strategy focused primarily on its own goals, as exemplified by initiatives such as the BRI and the Maritime Silk Road. While these projects aim to enhance China's status as a global power, they overlook the concerns and interests of regional powers such as India. Moreover, China appears to be ignoring the fact that its interactions with India and the trajectory of their bilateral relationship will have a profound impact on its standing with the Global South. It is essential for China to recognise that India serves as a crucial conduit to the Global South. Should the prevailing mistrust and suspicion between India and China persist, there is a tangible risk that this atmosphere will permeate throughout the entire Global South. As a member of this collective, India's experience with other major powers is likely to serve as a benchmark for expectations of similar engagements.

7. India-China, Russia, and the Eurasian Template

India and China, despite their significant global standing, appear to be struggling to build a cooperative and trusting relationship that is both resilient and durable. This situation can be seen as one of the most difficult and mismanaged diplomatic relationships in history. The responsibility for this predicament cannot be attributed to any one individual or administration. A critical element is conspicuously absent from their bilateral interactions, namely, a lack of mutual understanding regarding their positions and challenges. In contrast, other major powers, notably Russia and the USA, have historically pursued strategies and policies aimed at addressing India's concerns and fostering its confidence. Although relations between India and the USA were strained for several decades before the 1990s, both nations have since made concerted efforts to align their interests and cultivate a genuine partnership, culminating in the USA's willingness to share military technology with India with minimal restrictions. However, India's most successful great power relationship has been with Russia, characterised by a high level of proactivity and trust, which serves as the foundation of their partnership. The USA has made commendable efforts to emulate this trust-building process in its dealings with India (The Economist, 2023b).

It is clear that China is unlikely to repeat similar actions in the near future; instead, it must adapt to the prevailing circumstances and seek solutions that could foster an improved relationship with India. One possible approach is to temporarily link the India-China relationship to the broader context of the Russia-India dynamic (The Economist, 2023b). This strategy involves several considerations.

First, China should seek to limit its efforts to recalibrate its relationship with India to the Eurasian region. As already noted, the Global South poses significant challenges to repairing strained relations; therefore, China should seek more stable environments, such as the Eurasian context, to facilitate this process.

Once the India-China relationship has achieved stability in the Eurasian context, it will be imperative for China to take further steps to strengthen this bond. One possible measure could be to provide India with robust assurances of China's commitment to respect India's primacy in the Indian Ocean

region. This could take the form of a bilateral agreement whereby India would ensure the maritime security of Chinese vessels in the Indian Ocean, possibly supported by Chinese logistical resources. In addition, this arrangement could help China navigate its intricate web of relationships within South Asia.

The multifaceted dynamics among South Asian nations complicate China's ability to maintain a neutral stance, and its involvement in the region has been a significant factor in straining relations between the two major Asian powers. It is therefore crucial for China to convey to India, through concrete actions, its intention to refrain from interfering in what are essentially internal South Asian affairs.

China has a vested interest in promoting stability in the increasingly prosperous region of South Asia to ensure a reliable market for its products, especially as its economic ties with Western markets begin to weaken. Fomenting instability for short-term geopolitical gain would ultimately undermine the long-term prospects of this neighbouring region, which has great respect for the Chinese model of development. In doing so, China would significantly increase its influence over a substantial part of the Global South, South Asia and the Indian sphere of civilisation. It would also mean influence over a population of approximately three billion people, which is more than a third of the world's population. It is therefore clear that normalising relations with South Asia is essential for China to establish a stable foothold in the Global South.

8. Conclusions

India undeniably occupies a pivotal and inescapable position within the Global South. For China to cultivate a robust and fruitful relationship with this sphere, it must first mend its fractured relationship with India. Despite its status as the world's largest trading nation, China may find that this alone is insufficient to exert substantial influence over the Global South, given India's intimate involvement in every facet of this sphere. India's importance goes beyond mere symbolism; many nations in the Global South look to it as a paradigm to emulate in their efforts to secure national sovereignty and economic autonomy. China must recognise that India serves as a crucial link in fostering meaningful relations with the countries of the Global South. This understanding should inspire China to pursue a revised strategy in its dealings with India. Historically, the relationship between India and Russia could provide a framework for a renewed partnership. Russia's strategic position in Eurasia could enable China to establish stable cooperation with India in this vital region. Once trust is rebuilt, this foundation could be extended to South Asia, creating a ripple effect that could influence the wider Global South. China has immense potential to become a great power, but this ambition can only be realised through a cooperative relationship with India, which remains an essential model for the Global South.

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DANILO LORENZO DELOS
SANTOS - ZOLTÁN VÖRÖS

The South China Sea Dispute:
The Future of China's Grand
Strategy and ASEAN's
Counterbalancing Narrative

THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE: THE FUTURE OF CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY AND ASEAN'S COUNTERBALANCING NARRATIVE

DANILO LORENZO DELOS SANTOS¹ – ZOLTÁN VÖRÖS²

Abstract

China has met with considerable blowback since its more assertive activity on the South China Sea. The Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam have been the three most vocal nations against China's territorial challenge with its insistence on accepting the nine-dash/eleven-dash line. Being in this predicament has had significant ramifications for how China is perceived, from being a peaceful neighbour to a threat, which negates China's initial projection of its "peaceful rise" as a global actor. The future of its grand strategy hinges on its play of narratives against the counterbalancing tactic being used by its competitors in the South China Sea, which employs hedging, appeasement, and hard balancing. This article views these narrative threads through the lens of middle-power politics and neorealism in parallel with neo-institutionalist dynamics, with further synthesis using comparative foreign policy analysis.

Keywords: South China Sea, West Philippine Sea, China-Philippines relations, China-Taiwan relations, nine-dash line, eleven-dash line, Neorealism

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1. Introduction

The Asian region is now at a point of political flux due to the lingering tensions in the South China Sea between Taiwan, the Philippines, and the other member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and China's more assertive presence and its historical nine-dash/eleven-dash line claims. The nine-dash/eleven-dash lines are nine and eleven lines on maps about the South China Sea representing the claims by the People's Republic of China (PRC; nine lines) and Taiwan (eleven lines) over the Sea and over the geographical formations of the Sea based on their historical narratives. The eleven lines first appeared in 1947, published by the government of the Republic of China. In 1952, the government of the PRC decided to cancel two, making it a U-shaped nine-dash line. Taiwan still uses the eleven-dash line, while in 2023, Beijing started to implement a tenth line as well (Mori, 2023).

At the critical diplomatic junction in the past decade, tensions in the region have spilled over beyond Taiwan/Philippines-China relations to its subsequent allies and neighbours despite its claim of being a benevolent ally to the developing world (Bijian, 2005). With China enjoying two decades of a steady and unrivalled rise to power and economic prominence, the current situation is changing the approach Beijing was primarily using to maintain peaceful relations. Despite its initiatives in pushing for China as the developing world's partner for growth with the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with some one-sided steps and initiatives on the South China Sea (e.g., island buildings and upgrades), questions regarding its true interests have been raised and probed by the international community (Ordinario, 2015). Although China has been reaping the benefits of its development partnership on the African continent, the BRI has been receiving criticism lately from multiple ASEAN states, namely Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Lam, 2020).

With the growing tensions in the region, China's diplomatic expansion faces limitations. China's grand strategy to offload its industrial surplus and creatively package it with loans and infrastructure projects has been received with mixed reactions in Southeast Asia; a worrying gaze from Taiwan and Beijing met with counterbalancing and, in some cases, rejection regarding its BRI projects.

Further complicating the geostrategic question in the regional issue is the increased involvement of great power politics and institutions as a consequence of the growth of China's global activity and relevance. As a long-term ally of the Philippines and Taiwan, the USA re-established its pivot in Asia under the Biden administration, bolstering the confidence of affected countries in the nine-dash/eleven-dash line as the Philippines and Taiwan struggle to uphold their territorial identity against China (Vega, 2024). Meanwhile, diplomatic partnerships are also in a quandary with US involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), alongside Australia, India, and Japan, whose aim is to protect the Indo-Pacific region from coercion and to protect democratic values (Fraser, 2023). Although not highly institutionalised, the emerging actors in the region have drastically altered the strategic diplomatic intent of actors, factoring in various variables necessitating new insights that this research aspires to answer.

Overarching question:

How did strategic ambiguity play a role in China's grand strategy for its expansion in the South China Sea?

Sub-questions:

1. How did China minimise the effects of differing alignments through its foreign policy strategy with contending state parties?
2. What were the significant contrasts of China's diplomatic strategy among affected states in the nine-dash/eleven-dash line?
3. How can regional coalitions such as the Quad and ASEAN play a role in non-military deterrence through Track 2 diplomacy, and what are the critical areas of concern in the strategic alliances in the region?

2. Methodology

We critically analysed foreign policy directions through desk research, secondary sources, and official documents from governments and agencies. We also included other sources of information, such as news articles, online databases, and white papers. We screened the gathered data and articles, triangulated, and critically analysed them to determine thematic trends, emerging arguments, and rebuttals to ensure the objectivity of the research and maintain its analytical integrity.

3. Literature Review

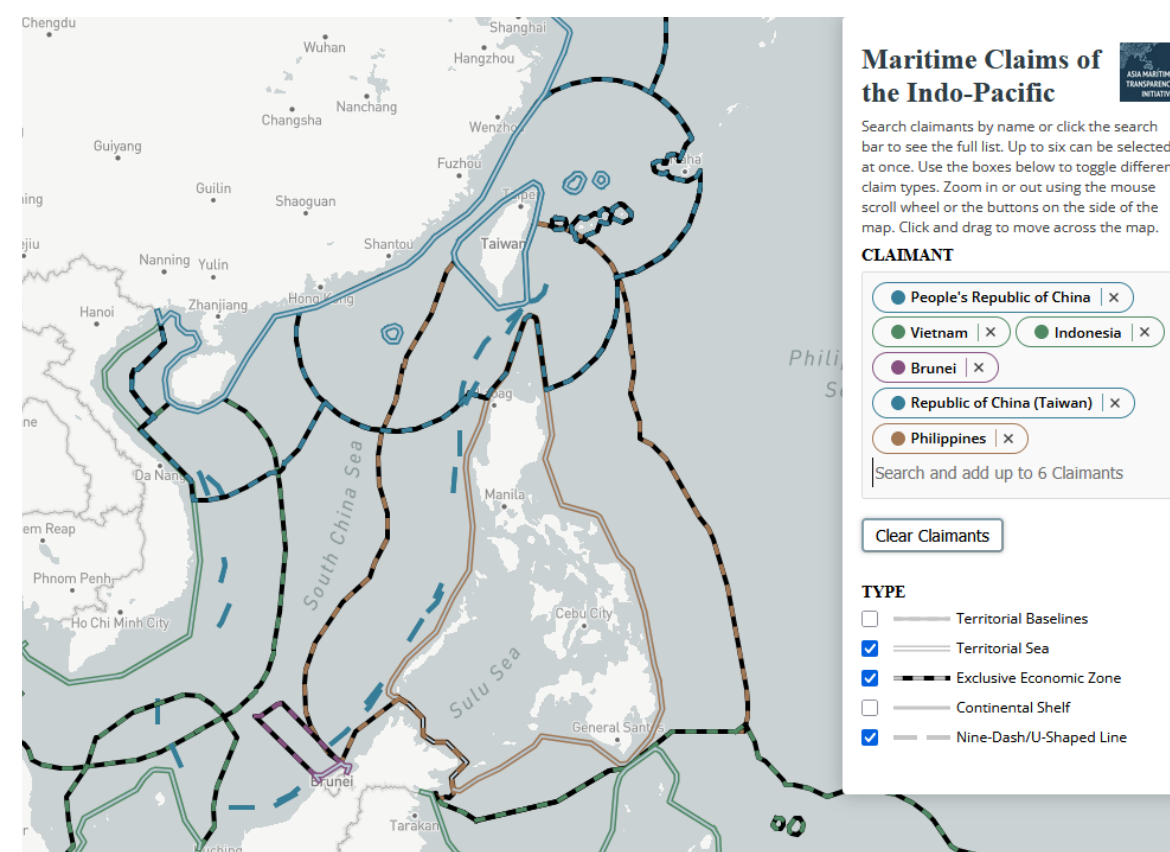
3.1. China's Diplomacy in ASEAN and the Evolution of Its Grand Strategy

China's unprecedented growth from the post-war era to the Cold War and towards the 2000s has been a model of growth that few can emulate. It can only be compared to its East Asia neighbours, Japan and South Korea, with rapid industrialisation and improved quality of life. Throughout its growth, China has been echoing its harmonious rise in stark contrast with its territorial ambitions that have aroused suspicion of its intent due to its presence in the contested waters of the South China Sea. Scepticism from ASEAN member states first rose to mainstream geopolitics in the 1980s with its naval conflict with Vietnam, and in the 1990s with China's construction of structures in Mischief Reef and its involvement in the Spratly Islands against the Philippines (Koga, 2022). As a direct answer to the ongoing assertion of China in the disputed waters, ASEAN adopted the ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea in 1992 as a unified answer and one of the foremost examples of ASEAN unity amid China's expansion.

China's grand strategy and its relations with ASEAN have gone through evolutions in over four decades, characterised by its use of political, economic, and military capabilities to pursue its national interests (Goldstein, 2020). A "grand strategy" is defined as the central operative strategy of a nation-state to achieve its priorities through the use of its power and function. China's initial grand strategy is described as the attainment of national rejuvenation with the critical milestones of 2020 as a "moderately well-off society" and 2049 as a developed nation, which coincides with the 100th founding anniversary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the PRC (Yunling & Yuzhu, 2017).

While China has shown remarkable progress in achieving its targets, the core ideals of its grand strategy have materialised as a more aggressive form, with its growing militarisation and stance at the expense of its neighbours in the South China Sea, in pursuing its economic goals on one hand and extending its development support through the BRI on the other. Recently, the narrative of the nine-dash/eleven-dash line has restarted the debate on its claims as it impinges on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) which provides the boundaries for governance and legal framework for all claimants as a binding instrument to provide a common understanding

Figure 1: Maritime claims of the Indo-Pacific



Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative Visualization Tool, edited by the authors

among parties such as much contested coverage of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) which has been a point of contention and understanding. In 2014, China's assertion triggered a legal challenge from the Philippines through its filing in the Permanent Court of Arbitration about China's claims in the South China Sea; the court ruled in favour of the Philippines in 2016. Despite this legal milestone for the enforcement of international law, China continued to pursue the imposition of its nine-dash/eleven-dash line claims in the South China Sea, defying the ruling and limiting progress in reaching a consensus.

3.2. ASEAN: From Appeasement to Hard Balancing and Strategic Ambiguity

The history of ASEAN's involvement in the South China Sea issue is considered a litmus test on how regionalism can quell tensions not only with its members but also from an outside threat. Tensions in the disputed territories escalated in the 1990s, peaking during the Mischief Reef Incident, when China started to build infrastructure, and there was a short engagement between vessels of the Philippines and China (Farolan, 2021). The issue was later exacerbated by China's formalisation of its claim in the disputed territory through its interpretation and assertion of "historic rights" (Morada, 2019). In the 2000s, the issue remained tense with no further escalations. Parties maintained cordial relationships with ASEAN and made significant steps towards appeasement with China. They found a working solution, paving the way to the drafting of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.

The declaration marked a much-needed formalisation of agreements through multilateral channels. It was a significant development since the escalation of relations in the 1990s. ASEAN's involvement and efficacy proved necessary, and were bound by a common interest. This made ASEAN's unique characteristic of non-interference, non-military, and consensus-driven diplomatic strategy a novel and unique proposition. While scholars have championed the ASEAN trait, the "ASEAN Way" has also been a topic of intense debate, which could be the region's glaring diplomatic weakness.

Throughout the rising tensions, ASEAN fell into a geostrategic paralysis, with the regional institution tied down by a bureaucratic identity crisis because of its insistence on choosing inaction guided by the ASEAN Way. While it is clear that the issue is largely systemic, varying diplomatic strategies have made ASEAN's unique way of dealing with regional diplomacy a major obstacle. The inability to act on urgent matters, the inability to promote emerging values, and the lacklustre projection of military power contributed to its inefficacy in countering outside threats (Naval, 2024).

Nonetheless, in the past, ASEAN has played a significant role in effectively creating an equal platform for members to be heard as a metaphorical conductor in the region, as seen by its relevance during the Cold War (Yates, 2016). On the other hand, it is also outdated given the current context and its failure for urgent and immediate action, a near-impossible task due to the same values of non-interference and consensus that were part of the regional institution's distinctive norms. This weakness has been exploited as member countries create alliances beyond ASEAN, such as

Cambodia's and Laos's close relations with China, or the Vietnamese approach towards the USA, which creates a rift in the region's consensus-centred decision-making (Turton, 2020).

Because of these diplomatic misalignments, the region is currently facing a lingering strategic conundrum and gambit in the contested waters of the South China Sea. As the region faces China's more active foreign policy and more assertive presence, it is under pressure to create and establish a new balancing strategy away from ASEAN towards a path of military self-reliance, as evidenced in the military expansion in ASEAN amounting to USD43.2bn in 2021 from USD20.3bn in 2000 (Singh, 2023). Albeit not centred on ASEAN, hard institutional balancing, while not as evident in this context, is driven by states through indirect balancing, which is symptomatic of ASEAN's shortcomings in creating a proactive regional security framework (Karim & Chairil, 2016).

China's stance and its special, unique approach towards legal documents, for instance, UNCLOS (Kisvári, 2020, pp. 34–35), have challenged established and agreed-upon territorial boundaries that are not only a direct challenge for ASEAN member states with claims in the disputed waters but also an explicit act of defiance against international law. Despite the Philippines' arbitration win in 2016 imposing UNCLOS, ASEAN remained in stasis, contributing to the region's strategic ambiguity and geostrategic disintegration in terms of common security policies in the South China Sea.

3.3. China's Contrasting Strategy in the South China Sea

The South China Sea conflict has been a point of contention due to the region's overlapping claims, most significantly after the Second World War, when nations started to rewrite borders and diplomatic ties between the actors began to change. Wars and conflicts have been some of the main precursors of the claims, with China and Taiwan claiming parts of various maritime features as their own and China claiming the Paracel Islands, one of the most significant clashes during the Vietnam War in 1974. Other claims are due to the inevitable intersections of territorial borders based on international law, as seen in the case of the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal.

China's actions intensified notably in 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when it expanded its claims through the formation of the Xisha and Nansha administrative districts, which cover the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands, further asserting its territorial claims (Huong, 2020). The announcement brought scrutiny from other claimants, mainly the Philippines and Vietnam, since the Xisha district claims the Paracel Islands and Macclesfield Bank, and the Nansha district covers the Spratly Islands.

Taking advantage of the uncertainties of the pandemic, China seized the opportunity and made significant advances in institutionalising and formalising its claims, making its intention clear. Various incidents were recorded throughout the region (Rising, 2024). These clashes remained apparent in 2024 when China harassed the Philippines in the South China Sea using water cannons and its maritime militia (Magramo, 2024), resulting in injuries and loss of life. Although provocative in nature, China's acts against the Philippines were met with mixed reactions from 2000 onwards due to the shifting diplomatic strategies of incoming presidents from Macapagal-Arroyo, Aquino III,

Table 1: Tension map in the South China Sea

	Spratly Islands	Macclesfield Bank	Pratas Island	Paracel Islands	Scarborough Shoal
Geographic Nature	44 islands in the South China Sea	Sunken atoll east of the Paracel Islands	Largest in the SCS group of islands	13 islands and a chain of maritime features	One island and a chain of maritime features
Importance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security • Marine resources • Minerals • Transport 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security • Marine resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security • Marine resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security • Marine resources • Minerals • Transport • Energy deposits
Administration	Various parts claimed by Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam on overlapping features.	Claimed by both China and Taiwan under different administrative regions.	Claimed by both China and Taiwan under different administrative regions.	Claimed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam under different administrative regions.	Claimed by China, the Philippines, and Taiwan under different administrative regions.
Nations involved	Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam	China and Taiwan	China and Taiwan	China, Taiwan, and Vietnam	China, the Philippines, and Taiwan
Justification of claim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNCLOS • Nine-dash/eleven-dash line 	Nine-dash/eleven-dash line	Nine-dash/eleven-dash line	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vietnam reinstated its claim after the war • Nine-dash/eleven-dash line 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNCLOS • Nine-dash/eleven-dash line

Source: Authors' own.

Duterte, and now Marcos Jr. Both Macapagal-Arroyo and Aquino III successfully used diplomatic hedging through their brand of diplomatic brinkmanship, ensuring the stability of the region culminating with the arbitration win in 2016. However, the momentum for the claim drastically changed under Duterte with his administration's pro-China rhetoric (Philstar.com, 2021). Later, during the last years of the Duterte administration and the transition to Marcos Jr, the Philippines' gamble with China's BRI underperformed and was consequently dropped altogether as tensions in the disputed waters rose even further (Walker, 2023).

These events in the past few years have been described as a small steps strategy from the Chinese side: "These small steps – which are usually accompanied by minor frictions – are aimed at gradually 'occupying' the South China Sea, with Beijing increasingly settling there without breaking off

negotiations or publicly questioning the common goal of adopting a code of conduct. Although its coast guard does not fire cannons at passing Vietnamese or Philippine fishing boats – although it recently deployed a water cannon against the latter – it does subject them to constant harassment" (Mezei, 2023, p. 7).

China's approaches, however, vary widely. It does not employ such methods against every state; economic diplomacy and economic measures are also part of the foreign policy toolkit. The first of these examples is Brunei, which has pledged additional strategic cooperative economic partnerships with China, further exploring Belt and Road construction, trade, and investments in energy and agriculture despite its differences in the disputed territories (Tiezzi, 2018). China's carrot-on-a-stick approach is emphasised with the assumed conditions of such partnerships, noting Xi's emphasis on how Brunei can be an instrumental partner in bringing peace to the South China Sea (Xinhua, 2023). For Brunei, the importance of hedging is apparent with its close ties with the USA since 1984, ensuring US interests were secured in the region during the Cold War, while at the same time having a formidable defence partner to this day (Husseini, 2023). Brunei's hedging role has also been active with its dual involvement in the US Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which was promoted by China.

A curious case is Malaysia, which has been a critical trading partner of China with record highs in 2024 amounting to USD212bn, attributing the growth to close cultural ties and long-standing partnerships (South China Morning Post, 2025). Malaysia sets itself apart from its ASEAN neighbours with its China-leaning foreign policy sliding away from Western influence while still asserting its territorial claims in its EEZ by decoupling the issues from the economic side (Storey, 2024). Furthermore, Malaysia has maintained open relations with China while supporting ASEAN's push for the Code of Conduct (CoC) in hopes of finally reaching an agreement in the disputed territories with all parties, mirroring Malaysia's strategy with its diplomatic balancing with China.

Unlike Malaysia, Vietnam's diplomatic ties with China are more diverse, with its cooperation rooted in political, economic, and defence ties (Nguyen, 2024). Vietnam's blueprint for coexistence through shared interests and common goals, while being challenged in balancing its economic and political ties from defence and security, placed a premium on China's foreign direct investment totalling USD248.3bn for 19,701 projects from 2017 to 2023 (Hiep, 2024). While being a viable long-term and up-trending partnership with China, Vietnam is faced with the dilemma of US pressure to distance itself from China, which will directly impact US support significantly at an inopportune time, given Trump's second stint as President and further divestment from China towards Vietnam and other ASEAN member states. Vietnam's leadership is at the centre of the impasse while it maintains its silent opposition to China's activity in the disputed territories (Borton, 2024).

The last of the beleaguered nations in the South China Sea issue is Taiwan, which shares a common reality with the Philippines; both are intertwined in a constant struggle for resolution and peace. Since 2020, China has also intensified its presence along Taiwan's borders. An obvious signal is China's 1,727 incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in 2022, further increasing to over 3,000 in 2024 (Davidson, 2025). The tense situation between China and Taiwan has significantly

increased the importance of the South China Sea issue, being a potential flashpoint for full-blown military escalation with the Philippines. ASEAN is a critical factor that can sway the balance of power in the region, with the foreseeable and certain ramifications of middle-power fragmentation and its involvement with great power dynamics in China and the US competition in Asia.

3.1. The Present Contribution of Institutions and Their Role in Deterrence

“Track 2 diplomacy is an informal and non-governmental process that aims to build confidence, promote cooperation, and prevent conflicts among states. Though unofficial, it assists government officials in solving state problems or resolving inter-state conflicts through peaceful discussions and constructive dialogues” (Banlaoi, 2021). Track 2 diplomacy, which has been applied for many years, is a second-track diplomatic solution for resolving conflicts and reducing distances between parties. The number of such activities increased in the 1990s in the broader Asia-Pacific region; regional institution-building coincided with the evolving and growing security challenges of the new world order, and there were no great powers or armies capable of independently tackling these challenges (Feng, 2018, pp. 60–61).

This approach has been ASEAN’s key to managing the South China Sea conflict with China for decades. Steps that do not replace but complement regular diplomatic solutions (Wirakara, 2002, p. 31) could even assist in facilitating consultations between the parties, drawing attention to the importance of different diplomatic approaches, without the need for prior governmental relations.

ASEAN, for instance, created events, so-called workshops: “The concept of informal meetings on co-operation and confidence building had two basic objectives. First, to manage the potential conflicts by seeking an area in which everyone could cooperate and secondly, to develop confidence-building measures or processes so that the various claimants would be comfortable with one another, thus providing a conducive atmosphere for the solution of their territorial or jurisdictional disputes” (Wirakara, 2002, p. 36). The first one took place in January 1990 in Bali, the second in Bandung in 1991, the third in Yogyakarta in 1992, the fourth in Surabaya in 1993, and so on until 2002. But for China, the reconciliation was too rapid and too profound (Wirakara, 2002, p. 34) and threatened diplomatic approaches. But, we cannot say these initial approaches were not successful: “In an era of perceived US unilateralism and growing anti-Americanism, Beijing has assiduously cultivated ASEAN through demonstrating remarkable sensitivity towards the region’s concerns, taking pains to soothe nerves and win friends through engagement with various ASEAN countries on a bilateral basis” (Tan, 2007, p. 3). By this time, however, the regional relations had changed, and the growing economy of Beijing had initiated different, more *usual* diplomatic approaches.

ASEAN kept working on such approaches. The creation of the China-Southeast Asia Research Center on the South China Sea (CSARC) back in 2016, with seven think tanks from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and China, is also an outcome of Track 2 Diplomacy. CSARC organises roundtable discussions, panels, dialogues, and symposiums, focusing on the cooperation of non-governmental organisations.

We have observed Track 2 diplomatic steps from the Quad as well, but these confidence-building attempts primarily focused on Southeast Asian actors and not on all parties involved in the South China Sea conflict, including China. Therefore, common interests can be observed between ASEAN and the Quad, but these no longer solely pertain to regional relations; they reflect the interests of external actors and do not provide reliable guarantees for China either. “Both the Quad and ASEAN aim to foster regional peace and stability by addressing non-traditional security challenges like climate change, humanitarian and disaster relief, public health and security, infrastructure development and digital connectivity” (Kalinauskas & Tan, 2024).

4. Analysis and Discussion of Results

4.1. Middle-Power Fragmentation and the Evolution of China’s Grand Strategy

It is argued hereafter that China uses three main components to skew international support towards its own in the South China Sea issue. The three critical dimensions that China uses are seen through the strategic use of time, the division of support, and the ambiguity of strategy. The combination of the strategies has been evident in the South China Sea Dispute and will be a critical discussion point towards how China will evolve its grand strategy in the region.

4.1.1. Strategic Use of Time

China’s claim over the South China Sea is rooted in its insistent belief in historical rights. It has anchored its claims in domestic legislation, as evidenced by its affirmation of the claim over the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands in 1958 during the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis (Fravel, 2011). Moreover, China has opted to use vague language in its core arguments to curve legal parameters and regulations towards self-beneficial interpretations (Mastro, 2021). The intentional vagueness of its stance compounds its intent to delay and dismiss norms that go against its fundamental goals and interests.

Without China’s recognition and support, the strategy renders international conventions and agreements ineffective. This act derails the momentum of other claimants over the disputed territories, as observed in how China has actively disrupted ASEAN’s CoC for over two decades and will be a suboptimal solution in the dispute due to China’s inflexible claims and disapproval of the terms (Yaacob, 2024). Having no clear plan to entice China to give way to negotiations, the CoC will be incapacitated and further set back the deadline until China can consolidate its claims even deeper and further weaken ASEAN’s clout as an arbiter and platform. While buying more time to confuse and frustrate other parties, China is slowly eroding public trust by constantly pressuring regimes to give up their claim by force and intimidation, as seen in the cases of the Philippines and Taiwan, in hopes that both will capitulate and be forced to relinquish their claims through offers of partnerships or cooperation promoting China’s territorial interests.

4.1.2. Division of Support

As mentioned, ASEAN is in a period of recalibration, with its member states facing a common goal yet not finding a common ground to find solutions for a net positive outcome. With China's promise of development partnerships and other community- and confidence-building measures such as the formation of the AIIB and the BRI, ASEAN's member states are divided on how to effectively balance benefits from China and at the same time, assert ASEAN's claim in the South China Sea; however, taking a more forceful stance is impossible because it relies on China. ASEAN's insistence on persisting with its non-interventionist, non-military, and consensus-based solutions has rendered it inefficient and impotent in handling emerging threats and challenges.

The limitations of intergovernmental rule are exposed in this issue with the primary example of the Philippines, where Aquino III has pushed for the CoC and ASEAN's support. This did not result in any substantial conclusion, showing the powerlessness of ASEAN's brand of intergovernmentalism in the issue (de Castro, 2020). China's strategic intent to further push its interests is based on strategic influence-building that has significantly fragmented ASEAN by targeting systemic weaknesses inherent in the organisation. Without a unified plan, the only way for ASEAN to impose its will is through the help of great powers and other middle powers to intervene and signal a more aggressive stance on the matter, such as with the USA, Japan, and Korea, among others, as well as other partnerships such as the Quad.

4.1.3. Ambiguity of Strategy

ASEAN, being the focus of China's claim in the South China Sea, exposed the capacities and limitations of intergovernmental institutions and its inefficacy in the matter. Transcending sovereign state identities, China has been able to impose its own will on the region and on other state actors, despite the arbitration victory of the Philippines and UNCLOS (Tsuruta, 2024).

Citing delays in the agreements and the fragmentation of ASEAN members, China uses these openings and weaknesses to impose its interpretations and norms. Individually, neither ASEAN nor Taiwan is capable of taking on the military might of China; they lack the fundamental collective defence agreements and joint patrols, training, and other capacity-building measures to impose maritime law that, if agreed on, may help in deterrence from an outside threat. Since ASEAN is divided among itself, China's ambiguity sets the right conditions for it to singlehandedly overstep conventions and advance its interests at the expense of others.

4.2. The Future of Deterrence and Non-violent Interventions

The future, or the limitations, of Track 2 diplomacy, were and are visible through the latest steps China has taken. As Feng introduced, the 1990s provided a great opportunity for Track 2 initiatives in the region, but that was a "window of opportunity" (Feng, 2018, p. 61) only to reach the limits of their possibilities. By now, not only have external actors arrived alongside ASEAN to influence regional relations, but the long-successful closeness and intertwining of Tracks 1 and 2 diplomacy

have also become unsustainable (Feng, 2018). Moreover, with the transformation of regional-global relations, grand politics has returned to the region, and regional Track 2 diplomacy has no response to the China-USA regional standoff. The US government "relatively quickly recognized that the ASEAN countries would not openly side with Washington against Beijing, and therefore began to focus on trying to weaken the ties these countries have with China. In this regard, American foreign policy pursues a dual objective: to 'decouple' certain countries in the region from China and to strengthen the ASEAN organization" (Mezei, 2023, p. 7).

Due to the transformation of regional relations, those Track 2 diplomatic tools that originate from institutions generated by major powers – specifically, the Quad, which China perceives as an initiative created against it – cannot be successful and will not be accepted by the Chinese side.

All this could also leave its mark on ASEAN activities: the rapprochement of certain ASEAN member states with extra-regional actors, whether the USA or the other Quad states, could similarly negatively affect the diplomatic steps aimed at restoring trust and maintaining dialogue to resolve regional issues.

5. Conclusions

China's changing foreign policy behaviour will be decisive in the South China Sea disputes in the coming years. The region will likely be a key arena for the ongoing global great-power rivalry. In this race, it may be important for Beijing to be seen as a benevolent neighbour and a supportive partner, as it initially defined itself to the states in the region; otherwise, economic cooperation in Southeast Asia could also be at risk. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that with the increase in Beijing's economic and political significance, the protection of its interests has also become more important, and the presence of external actors in the region, especially in the economically significant South China Sea, could threaten Chinese interests. Therefore, in this regard, other regional actors and international cooperations need to maintain their relationship with China while somewhat disregarding these external great power factors.

This strategic reimagination is not impossible; a quick diplomatic turnaround can be achieved through political will, commitment, and the reassurance of a lasting partnership, which is directly intended to undo the picture of predatory development schemes, assertive behaviour, and erratic diplomatic doublespeak that has led partners to question China's intent. Channels for diplomacy are still present with Track 1 and Track 2; all it needs is China's decision to finally take on a protagonist role in the region for long-term growth rather than playing the antagonist for short-term gains.

While the promise of a more active ASEAN may yield significant developments, the recent divergence of its members from a unified stance on the territorial claims will hold it back, all because of its failure to find a third way beyond pro-China or against it. A more creative response beyond the auspices of the ASEAN dogma will be critical for the claimants to find a common and more impactful path towards a positive diplomatic result for all actors concerned. The existence of

other alignments and having a more compact group through a bilateral or trilateral partnership between the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia is a crucial step in advancing a unified stance. The suggestion of joint patrols, while echoed before, has not been met positively by all parties because of their varying views on the USA as a dependable ally, especially under the Trump administration which is considered unpredictable or even mercurial in its foreign policy stances and is a complete turnaround from Biden's leadership which was more in line with its strategy in Asia that pivoted under the Obama administration. Middle-power politics in this milieu and the ongoing competition between the USA and China have taken the spotlight. ASEAN, as one of the fastest-growing emerging regions, should use the status quo as a referential point to adjust to the shifting trends in diplomacy that are capable of countering the multipolar power struggle inherent in great-power politics. While the ASEAN dogma has been able to advance the region since its inception, the calls for a more proactive stance need to be pushed, focusing on a common defence strategy and economic commitment, and finally breaking from the traditions of unanimity. The only way for ASEAN to solve this conundrum is through proactive consensus-building and changing its systemic inadequacies; failing to do so will risk inevitable obsolescence in the face of an external challenge.

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ÁGOTA RÉVÉSZ

The Image of China
in the German Media
– Changes between
2018 and 2024

THE IMAGE OF CHINA IN THE GERMAN MEDIA – CHANGES BETWEEN 2018 AND 2024

ÁGOTA RÉVÉSZ¹

Abstract

This article examines the transformation of China between 2018 and 2024 in German media representations, focusing on the increasing dominance of the “rivalry frame”. Using quantitative content analysis based on keyword frequency in major German news outlets, the study identifies a significant rise in terms such as “espionage”, “threat”, and “security” in conjunction with China. This trend suggests a shift towards a securitised and adversarial narrative that frames China less as a partner and more as a systemic rival. The study contextualises these developments within broader geopolitical shifts, policy changes (e.g., the EU’s and Germany’s official China strategies), and high-profile events like espionage cases and political visits. It also highlights how German public opinion has grown more distrustful of China in parallel with media narratives. Importantly, the article contrasts this rise in securitised framing with the stagnation or decline in reporting on non-political aspects of China, such as culture or urbanisation. The findings raise critical questions about media responsibility, public discourse, and the potential for de-escalation. It concludes that the framing shift is not accidental, but indicative of a broader narrative realignment driven by both international tensions and domestic political dynamics.

Keywords: Rivalry frame, German media, securitisation, China-Germany relations, media framing

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I. Introduction

There is a perception among China scholars and in the wider China-watching community in Europe that media portrayal of China has shifted to the negative in recent years. This study puts this anecdotal perception to the test. It is largely limited to quantitative analysis with an added description of what happened within the media landscape, and some introduction to the debates that reached the public sphere and served as topics for media coverage. I chose 2018 as a starting point for my analysis to connect my research to two studies that had been published on the same topic – the image of China in the German media – covering the previous period.

The first study focused on German media coverage of China in the year 2008 and concluded that the way the media depicts China is far from satisfying. Among the problems listed, the authors note the narrow range of topics, the image of China as a monolith, the use of stereotypes and “self-centered, and in some cases ideological, reporting” (Richter & Gebauer, 2011, p. 8). The second study covered the whole period between 2000 and 2019 in German reporting on China and found a turn in media perceptions at around 2016/2017. According to the authors, this was due to factors like the “Made-in-China” strategy, Xi Jinping’s presidential term extension, and, most importantly, to the Chinese purchase of the German robotics company, Kuka (Hufnagel et al., 2023). The latter occasion turned out to be a “phase of awakening and the end of naiveté’ ... among German political and economic actors” (Hufnagel et al., 2023, p. 429). The authors found that “economic issues are the most prominent throughout the 19-year sample period, while other aspects are largely neglected. As expected, the media reflect the predominantly economic nature of Sino-German relations”, where “the partnership frame was gradually replaced by a rivalry frame after 2016/17” (Hufnagel et al., 2023, p. 430). I take the appearance of the rivalry frame as a starting point and enquire into its perceived increase in media reporting.

2. The Rivalry Frame

“A rivalry frame emphasizes the relationship between two adversaries” (Thompson, 2015, p. 7). Indeed, the assumption of a Cold-War-like binary between China and the USA seems to have become a kind of master narrative of the current world order (Dessein, 2025). The rivalry frame entails both a security and a hostility/conflict component, as well as “the absence of a vision of an ultimate end” (Meyer, 1995, p. 179). Its open-endedness is a very important aspect, as it involves projection: “Rivalries are not just a history of conflict [...] but also the expectation of future conflict” (Goertz & Diehl, 2000, p. 226). A focus on future prospects and potential to-dos closely connects international rivalries to national security concerns, as “the primary distinguishing factor of an international rivalry relationship is the threat of violence” (DiCicco & Valeriano, 2018, p. 559). According to Buzan and his co-authors, “[t]he answer to what makes something an international security issue can be found in the traditional military-political understanding of security. In this context, security is about survival” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 21). That is why “it is implicitly assumed,

that when we talk of this issue, we are by definition in the area of urgency” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 28); moreover, “the possibility of designating something as a security issue exists in any sector of social life” (Balzacq et al., 2016, p. 496). Thus, the rivalry frame has implications not merely for the foreign policy of a state, but just as much for its national social and political space as well.

Securitisation is embedded in media practice, especially “when it seems like the natural choice: the referential scheme that the right authorities (even, in many cases, the appropriately official opposition) are saying in a way that makes contextual sense in the newsroom and in the audience” (Vultee, 2010, p. 92). For the current study, I use the concept of framing, as it “consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text” (Entman, 1993, p. 51). Moreover, established frames also have self-reinforcing potential: “Once a term is widely accepted, to use another is to risk that target audiences will perceive the communicator as lacking credibility” (Entman, 1993, p. 55).

The rivalry frame was “officially” adopted in the policy paper of the EU Commission defining China as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival (European Commission, 2019). The somewhat cryptic concept of systemic rivalry is merely explained there as “promoting alternative models of governance” (European Commission, 2019, p. 1), but the document thematises the issue of security in three areas: military capabilities, digital and cybersecurity, and investments.

Just a year earlier, a joint study of two think tanks based in Germany, the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) and the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), saw the urgency not only for transparency and screening mechanisms but also for counteracting political influencing. As they argue, “clandestine political and financial avenues of [Chinese political] influencing in particular will remain opaque in many instances. There is a clear case for funding more investigative journalism and research uncovering influencing channels” (Benner et al., 2018, p. 42). Media is given an operative role in combating the rival: “Researchers, NGOs, and media organisations could cooperate on building a tracking system on Chinese influencing” (Benner et al., 2018, p. 43).

According to Pieke, we can see an “importation of the ‘China Influencing’ debate from Australia, New Zealand and the U.S.,” which “landed in Germany” with the aforementioned Benner et al. study (Pieke, 2020, p. 7). Chubb’s article also places securitisation in Australian media from mid-2017, which he explains with “the overflow of threat perceptions from intelligence services to politicians, to journalists, and ultimately to the public” (Chubb, 2023, p. 34). In the following, I focus on the extent this can be detected in German media.

2.1. The Rivalry Frame Along a Timeline

To track the distribution of this frame in German news media, I made a simple quantitative comparison based on the frequency of the use of certain words associated with China. I chose words that suggest the rivalry frame and recorded the frequency of their occurrence on a time scale between 2018 and 2024. As a reference point, I also added their occurrences in 2008 – the time frame of Richter and Gebauer’s research. The publicly accessible GENIOS databank provided the figures for German-language news media outlets only within Germany, i.e., Austria and Switzerland were not

included. All major mainstream media outlets are represented in the databank: *Der Spiegel*, *Die Welt*, *Die Zeit*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, etc.

The results that this analysis is based on are those of mid-January 2025 – as the database is regularly updated, there might be slight changes at a later date. It must be taken into account that this online tool only displays the number of instances where “China” and another search word appear in the same text, and it gives no further information about the specific content. Therefore, it is possible that the co-occurrence of two search words does not indicate the supposed framing, or indicates no framing at all. To reduce this possibility, I regularly read random articles to double-check.

Based on Entman’s theory that “the presence or absence of certain keywords” is one of the main cues for a certain frame (Entman, 1993, p. 52), I first identified six search words as most characteristic of the rivalry frame. To reduce the possibility of false positive results, in the case of these words, I also searched for their frequencies in the headlines, as vocabulary in headlines is very often suggestive of a particular frame. For the exact results, see Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2. Before identifying search words that support the rivalry frame in a broader context (Table 2) and the neutral control group (Table 3), I selected a random sample of coverage to ensure the words indicate a frame.

Table 1: Frequency of search words suggestive of rivalry occurring with “China”

China and ...	2008	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<i>Espionage in the headline</i>	19	57	105	56	120	28	971	860
Espionage (Spionage)	989	1,529	4,281	2,607	1,503	1,665	8,004	9,043
<i>Threat in the headline</i>	29	87	194	113	134	368	120	285
Threat (Drohung/ Bedrohung)	2,536	7,926	9,396	9,258	8,497	13,012	11,696	15,445
<i>Danger in the headline</i>	183	72	152	196	138	323	134	345
Danger (Gefahr)	9,608	15,651	18,543	28,819	16,969	22,844	20,305	23,428
<i>Risk in the headline</i>	54	90	72	120	99	231	369	235
Risk (Risiko)	7,978	13,144	17,502	26,986	14,525	18,326	20,097	22,179
<i>Security in the headline</i>	133	162	250	733	211	215	649	312
Security (Sicherheit)	13,612	20,337	27,804	34,684	24,496	32,821	35,879	40,139
<i>Rival/rivalry in the headline</i>	19	45	48	80	53	117	184	66
Rival/rivalry (Rivale/Rivalität)	2,050	3,646	4,606	4,194	4,188	5,048	6,987	5,281

First lines (figures in italics) are occurrences in headlines, second lines are occurrences in news articles (headlines and/or body text)

Figure 1: Frequency of search words suggestive of rivalry occurring with “China” in headlines

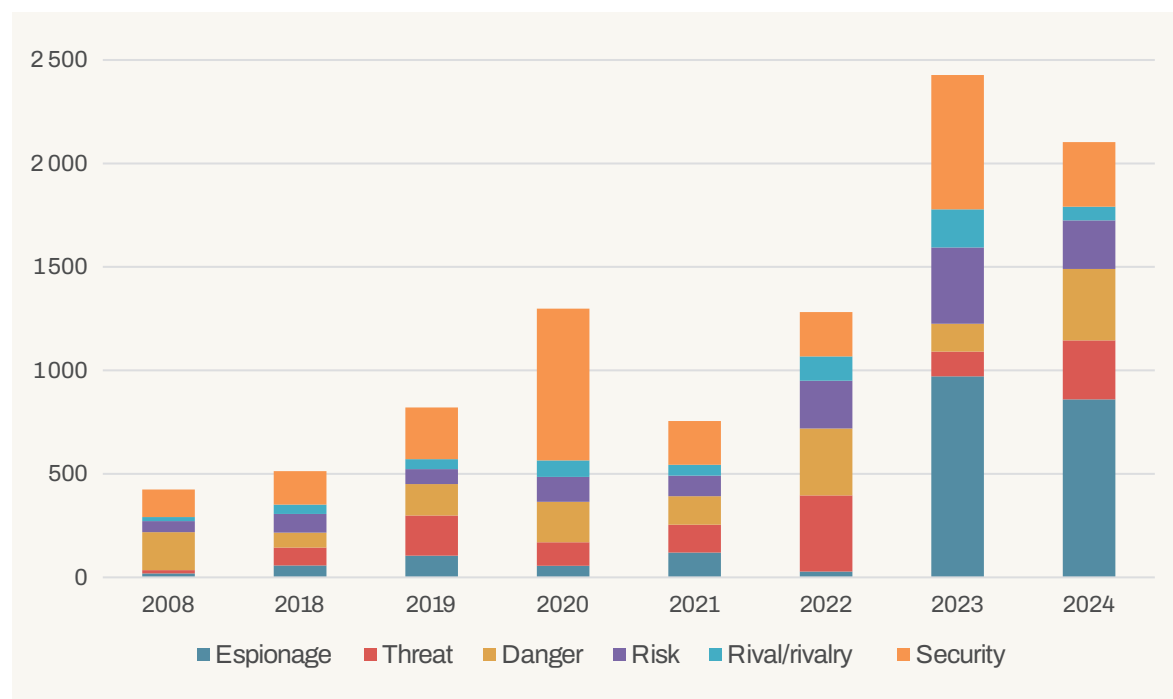
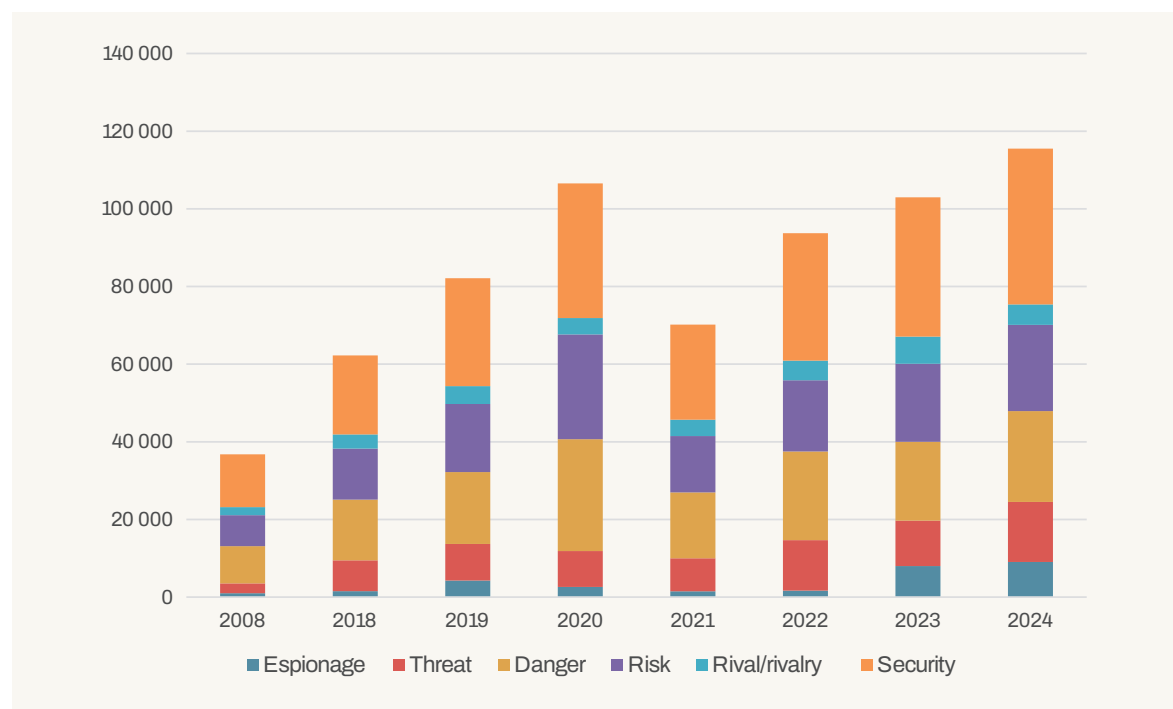


Figure 2: Frequency of search words suggestive of rivalry occurring with “China” in news articles (headlines and/or body text)



As Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, there has been a significant increase in the frequency of all six words that were identified as those that directly indicate a rivalry frame: “espionage”, “threat”, “danger”, “risk”, “rival/rivalry”, and “security” associated with “China”. The smallest change is that of “danger”, whose relatively high 2008 value can be explained by the health-related melamine scandal that year. In the case of “espionage”, there is a nearly 35-fold increase in the headlines (Figure 1) from 2022 to 2023, while “security” peaked twice: in 2020 and in 2023. Although “risk” and “rival/rivalry” did not shoot from almost zero to a dominating position, the frequency of their occurrence also increased significantly, especially if we consider the proportions. Taking a look at Figure 2, we can see that after a drop in 2021, there was again a yearly increase in the frequency of all six search terms in the body text, until in 2024 the figures outdo even the earlier, mainly pandemic-induced peak. “Security” alone turns out to be used more frequently in 2024 (40,139) than all six search words taken together in 2008 (36,773).

Let me provide a timeline of events that gives context to this increase. The 2020 peak in “security” in the headlines coincided with the heyday of the COVID-19 pandemic (viewed as a health security issue) and the imposition of the national security law in Hong Kong, also with global attention on the human rights situation in Xinjiang. At around the same time, Confucius Institutes received considerable media attention with a focus on concerns about espionage and academic freedom. As demonstrated by Seiwert, “It was noticeable that in Germany the articles mentioning Confucius Institutes jumped from zero in 2018 to over 46 per cent of all articles mentioning academic freedom in 2021” (Seiwert, 2025, p. 193). Academic freedom was also thematised in 2020 by the public debate about a chair at Freie Universität Berlin receiving Chinese funding – the only chair of Chinese language teaching methodology in Germany (Missal, 2020).

The issue of potential espionage in/by the Confucius Institutes returned during 2023 and further fuelled the debate on whether Confucius Institutes should be closed down at German universities. It was also in early 2023 that “espionage” was established as a main topic for the academic world by a very detailed US study listing all German higher education and research institutions that had collaborated with high-risk Chinese entities, i.e., those with connections to the military (Stoff, 2023). Simultaneously, the debate around “CSC students” also grew increasingly bitter: whether German academic institutions should receive PhD students arriving with the funding of the China Scholarship Council (CSC) for the whole or a part of their doctoral studies. The fears of unwanted knowledge flow grew to an extent that the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg decided to close its doors to all CSC students. “The reason for it is the risk of scientific espionage”, stood in the headline (Uni Erlangen, 2023). The decision was reinforced by the Federal Minister for Education and Research Bettina Stark-Watzinger, who hailed the decision by Erlangen-Nürnberg and set it as a model for other higher education institutions (Stark-Watzinger, 2023). In the same vein, in an interview she gave in October that year, she stated: “The Communist Party could be hiding behind every Chinese researcher, we have to be clear about that” (Michler, 2023). Fear of espionage was perceived as confirmed by a specific case in April 2024, when three German citizens with contacts to a German university were arrested for leaking innovative technology to the Chinese intelligence agency.

The year 2023 also marked the first visit to China of Annalena Baerbock in her capacity as Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs. The visit received broad media coverage, like the headline and subheading of *Zeit Online*: “Annalena Baerbock increasingly sees China as a rival. ‘More than shocking’ – following her trip to China, the Foreign Minister is disappointed by developments there. The country is increasingly becoming a ‘systemic rival’” (Baerbock, 2023). She was generally hailed by mainstream German media for speaking “no-nonsense” and taking a “hard line” against China.

A mere three months after the visit, in July 2023, the long-awaited *China Strategy* was also published, the result of a major coordination effort of all federal ministries. The policy paper, which used the EU’s three-pronged partner-competitor-rival approach as a basis, received substantial media attention. One of the aims of the paper is “to enable the Federal Government to assert our values and interests more effectively in the complex relationship with China” and “to present means and instruments by which the Federal Government can work with China, without endangering Germany’s free and democratic way of life, our sovereignty and prosperity, as well as our security and partnerships with others” (Federal Foreign Office, 2023, p. 9). Later it states that “systemic rivalry is reflected in the fact that Germany and China have different concepts of the principles governing the international order in important areas” (Federal Foreign Office, 2023, p. 10).

These developments explain the “security” peak in 2023, but we can assume that the domain it refers to differs substantially from that of the first peak: from the predominantly health domain in 2020 (although Huawei was also discussed as a security issue that year) there seems to be a shift to research security (“espionage”) and national/regional security in a broader sense.

2.2. Distribution of Concepts Supportive of the Rivalry Frame

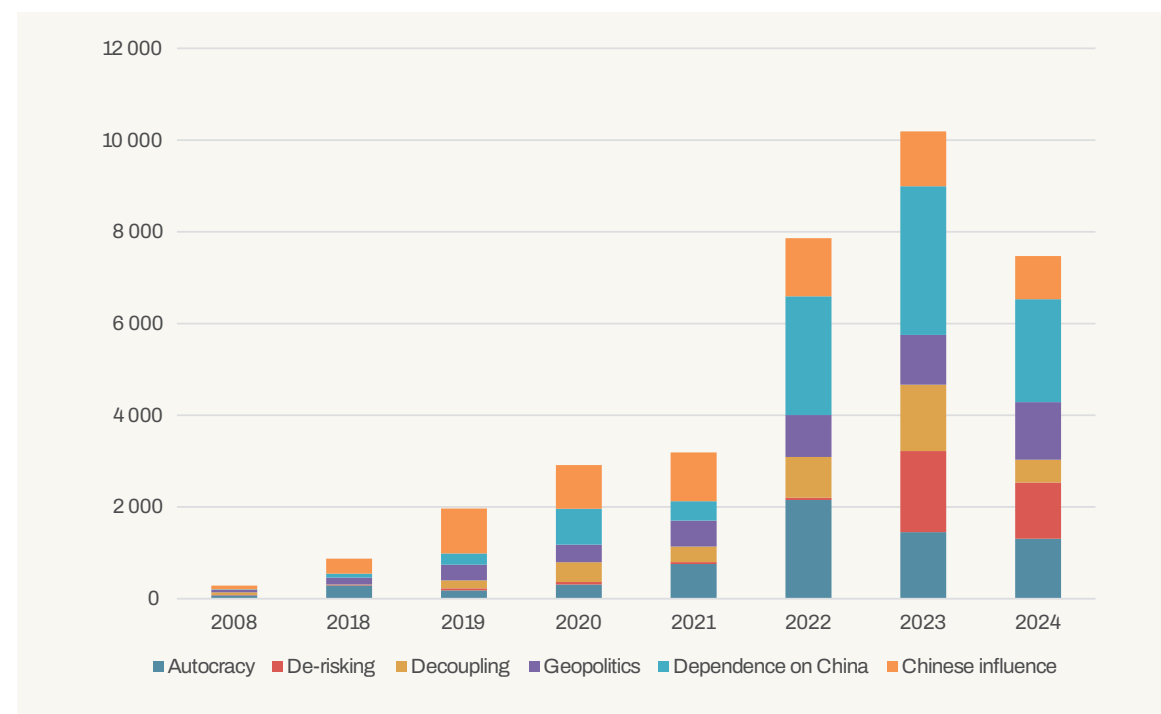
Apart from the vocabulary directly indicating a rivalry frame, I also tracked changes in the frequency of concepts that further support the rivalry frame by placing it in a broader geopolitical context. The values can be found in Table 2 and are visualised in Figure 3. What we can find here is an even higher increase in frequency in the occurrence of the words “autocracy”, “dependence on China”, “Chinese influence”, “geopolitics”, “decoupling”, and “de-risking”. (In the cases of “dependence on China” and “Chinese influence”, I searched for these as compounds to rule out cases where they refer to Russia. For “Chinese influence” also the conjugated forms of the adjective were taken into account, as well as the compounds “Einfluss/Einflussnahme Chinas” and “Chinas Einfluss/Einflussnahme”.)

Let’s take a brief look at these concepts one by one. “Chinese influence” has maintained a steady presence in the media ever since November 2019. In that month, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Berlin, Huawei became a hot topic, and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) first raised the issue of Confucius Institutes in the German parliament. The 2020 book *Hidden Hand* by Hamilton and Ohlberg, the German version of which made it onto the bestseller list of *Der Spiegel*, devotes a whole chapter to “Thought management: CPC influence in Western academia” (Hamilton & Ohlberg, 2020). In his book, published somewhat later, investigative journalist Markus Frenzel claims the existence of a network within Germany that represents Chinese interests, and names several renowned China scholars as members of this network (Frenzel, 2024).

Table 2: Frequency of words supportive of the rivalry frame in a geopolitical context (in headlines and/or body texts together with “China”)

China and ...	2008	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Autocracy (Autokratie)	73	289	179	308	755	2,151	1,451	1,307
Dependence on China (Abhängigkeit von China)	12	88	245	783	420	2,589	3,242	2,242
Chinese influence (ch. Einfluss/Einflussnahme)	83	326	980	953	1,064	1,268	1,197	940
Geopolitics (Geopolitik)	52	148	343	384	567	915	1,086	1,257
Decoupling (De-coupling/Entkopplung)	57	10	174	431	339	886	1,447	496
De-risking (De-risking/Risiko-minimierung/Risiko-minderung)	9	11	46	56	43	52	1,768	1,227

Figure 3: Frequency of words supportive of the rivalry frame in a geopolitical context



“Dependence on China” shows an increase of 186.8 times between 2008 and 2024, and between 2018 and 2024, the increase is also over 25-fold. A higher frequency of this compound can be detected for the first time in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic in connection with pharmaceutical supplies, and then the lockdown of Shanghai and its port, which heavily affected international trade. The “Xinjiang Police Files” published during the China visit of UN Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet in 2022 added an ethical aspect to the question of dependence. As *Deutsche Welle* reported, “An open debate is needed on the economic dependencies of states with such an appalling human rights record” (von Hein, 2022).

“Dependence on China” became central in German public discourse with the issue of the Hamburg port (October–November 2022). After the cabinet decision to allow the Chinese shipping company Cosco to purchase 24.99% of the shares of a Hamburg port terminal, “Foreign Minister Baerbock warned against dependence on China”, because “China’s participation in important parts of the infrastructure has led to dependencies from which it will be difficult to escape” (Baerbock kritisiert, 2022).

Chancellor Scholz’s visit to India in February 2023 was also widely commented on as an attempt “to contain two rivals: Russia and China. ... On the one hand, the German government’s initiative [for closer cooperation with India] aims to help the German economy establish a broader base abroad and free itself from its occasionally heavy dependence on China” (Brössler & Hulverscheidt, 2023). The German government’s *China Strategy* in July 2023 and news reports about it also thematised dependence on China:

China is increasingly pursuing its political objectives through economic means – by creating and leveraging economic dependencies and by granting or withdrawing economic advantages. To enable us to preserve our freedom and sovereignty despite these policies, we must diversify our economic ties. (Federal Foreign Office, 2023, p. 50)

The rivalry frame is extended here into the national security and even the national sovereignty domains, as it is stated that the preservation of “freedom and sovereignty” is contingent on the reduction of dependence on China.

The other concept that shows a similar increase in this period (2022–2024) is “autocracy”. It rose to prominence in early 2022 after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, when China’s behaviour was perceived as the formation of “team autocracy” against “team democracy” (Jakobs, 2022). The “democracies vs autocracies” binary had been present to a certain extent even before, but in 2022 it became decisive in the interpretation of geopolitical processes and has been recurring (although with less frequency) ever since. In 2024, Anne Applebaum was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade after the publication of her monograph *Autocracy, Inc.* (Applebaum, 2024), and the German magazine *Focus* hailed the decision in an article entitled “The ‘axis of autocrats’ is using a perfidious strategy to usurp world power” (Knabe, 2024). The picture lead, i.e., the representative image at the very beginning of the article, depicts Putin, Xi Jinping, and Modi together. This indicates the

very shaky position of India in Germany’s attempt to diversify from autocracies – also the potential difficulties to set up a list of democracies and autocracies, even though there have been attempts to do so (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

The sense of polarisation was further enhanced in August 2022 when the speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, visited Taiwan. The image of Taiwan as a representative of the democratic world versus an autocratic China received broad media coverage. *Frankfurter Rundschau*, for instance, referred to CDU politician Michael Brand as being of the opinion that “despite all the threats, we will not abandon the democracies of this world” (Pehlivan, 2022). Although later the frequency of “autocracy” dwindled somewhat, the sentiment remained, as demonstrated by a column in *Der Spiegel* published with the title and subheading “Our freedom is also being defended in Taiwan ... Why the island plays a key role in the international battle between democracy and authoritarianism” (Müller, 2024). The author postulates a “battle” between two opposing sides on the planet and claims that Germany’s freedom depends on that of Taiwan.

The very concept of “value-based foreign policy” was also based on the democracies vs autocracies binary. As the 2021 coalition agreement of the Scholz government says, “We want to increase Europe’s strategic sovereignty. The aim is multilateral cooperation in the world, especially in close cooperation with those states that share our democratic values” (SPD, 2021, p. 113).

Along with these concepts, “geopolitics” and “decoupling” also received a boost in 2022, even though both had been around throughout the previous years. In 2020, “decoupling” was discussed almost exclusively in November, when it was referred to as something the USA was striving for at a time when China had just signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership with 14 countries in the Asia-Pacific. Two years later, in November 2022, Chancellor Scholz published an article in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)* before his first official visit to China. Here he says, “We don’t want decoupling from China. But what does China want? China’s two-loop economic strategy is aimed at strengthening the domestic Chinese market and reducing dependencies on other countries.” He stresses, “If China is changing, our approach to the country must also change” (Scholz, 2022). Decoupling is rejected here, but policy change is implied.

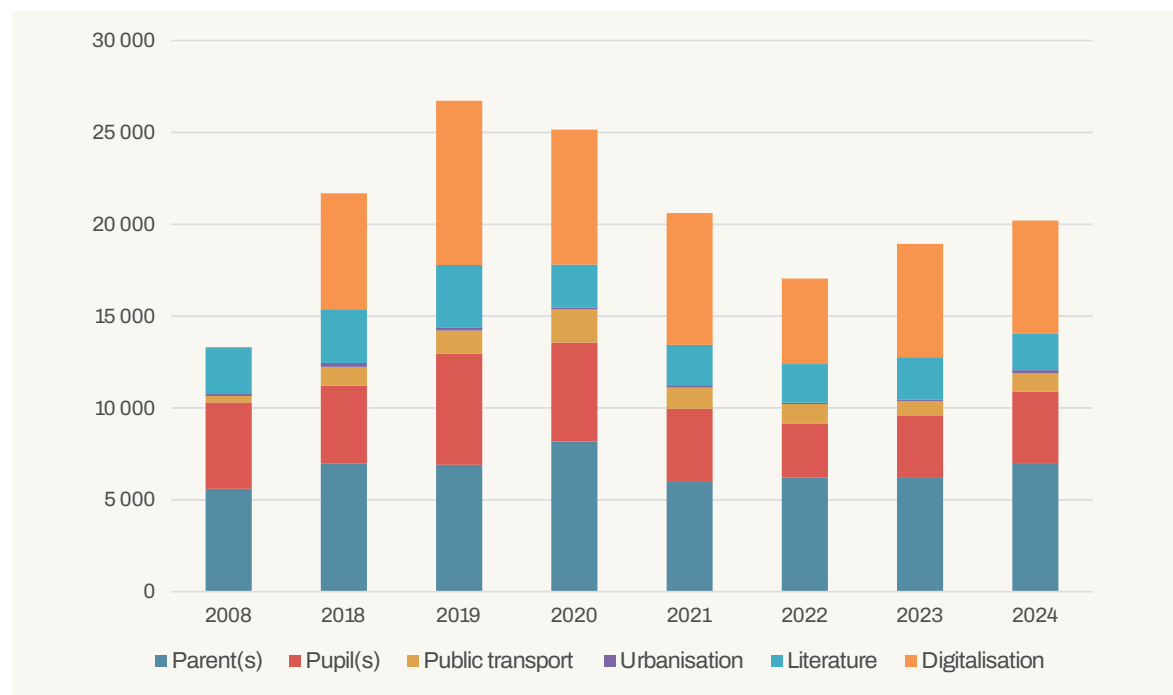
The policy change came soon after, in March 2023, with the speech of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen given at the Berlin think tank MERICS, where she outlined the EU’s de-risking strategy. The novel concept of “de-risking” all of a sudden became a central organising principle for dealings with China, and has also received ample media coverage since then, pulling well ahead of “decoupling” – as the figures demonstrate.

3. Distribution of Words Outside the Rivalry Frame

Having gained all this data, I also wanted to examine whether the increase in the frequency of words indicative or supportive of a rivalry frame was accompanied by a similar increase in reporting about China outside that frame. I set up a control group, i.e., I selected six words that were presumably neutral, and checked their distribution across the same period. Table 3 and Figure 4 show the results for “parent(s)”, “pupil(s)”, “public transport”, “urbanisation”, “literature”, and “digitalisation”.

Table 3: Frequency of neutral words								
China and...	2008	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Parent(s) (Eltern)	5,602	6,994	6,905	8,172	5,967	6,207	6,196	6,999
Pupil(s) (Schüler)	4,695	4,221	6,061	5,392	3,976	2,953	3,365	3,897
Public transport (Nahverkehr)	360	1,027	1,252	1,800	1,160	1,061	819	990
Urbanisation (Urbanisierung)	99	207	171	110	127	61	88	172
Literature (Literatur)	2,505	2,932	3,395	2,331	2,200	2,109	2,301	2,003
Digitalisation (Digitalisierung)	64	6,309	8,944	7,353	7,175	4,655	6,165	6,141

Figure 4: Frequency of neutral words



As Table 3 and Figure 4 demonstrate, there was some growth between 2008 and 2018, especially with “digitalisation” jumping from almost zero occurrences to a matter of significance. Between 2018 and 2024, however, the general trend is rather that of stagnation or even decline. The COVID-19 pandemic might explain the rise in frequency of the word “parent(s)” in 2020, as the health of the older generation(s) in the families was most feared for, but then it again went back to the pre-pandemic level. Even the concepts that stand for massive changes in Chinese society, like “urbanisation” and “digitalisation”, end up with somewhat lower values in 2024 than in 2018. “Literature” apparently lost one-third of its appeal within this time frame.

This is in sharp contrast with the increased frequency rates of concepts associated with the rivalry frame. The proportional difference indicates that German media consumers are more exposed to the image of China as an adversary than to aspects of Chinese culture and society which are unrelated to the geopolitical rivalry. As the “rival China” image has risen to dominance, the perception of China has changed accordingly. The Körber Foundation, which has conducted annual public opinion surveys on international issues for the past eight years, conducted its most recent survey in November 2024. The question “How do you see China’s rising influence?” received a “negative” answer from over 40% of the people in 2018, which rose to over 60% by 2024. To the question “Should German companies reduce their dependency on China, even if it leads to economic loss?” 16% of the respondents answered “yes, definitely” and 44% “rather yes”, adding up to a 60% majority. China is also seen as a “major economic threat” by 56% of the interviewees (The Berlin Pulse Survey, 2024, pp. 22–23). Although growing public distrust of China most probably has other causes as well, the image projected by the media certainly has a role in this development and offers itself as an area for further study.

It must be added, however, that the scarcity of human interest stories or coverage on diverse aspects of life is not a China-specific phenomenon in the media. Journalists themselves have indicated in recent years that they can detect “a fading of the world”. One author asks the question, how is it possible that “in an increasingly networked and digitalized world full of new technical possibilities for communication, the ‘blank spots’ on the map of journalistic reporting are not disappearing, but, on the contrary, are increasing” (Engelhardt, 2022, p. 1). A recent position paper, which announces the foundation of The Global South in the Media network, starts with the preamble:

Leading German-language media report on the countries of the Global South in only around 10% of their articles, even though around 85% of the world’s population live there. Fundamental events with dramatic human and socio-political consequences are largely disregarded or even completely ignored in reporting. (Interdisziplinäre Vortragsreihe Heidelberg, 2024)

While we cannot say that China as a whole is “fading” in German – or more generally European – media, agenda and framing reinforce each other in a way that the image of a “rival China” has acquired a central position and currently overshadows other potential aspects of the country or our relations to it. This supports the thesis that “agenda-setting processes are an integral part of the framing concept”, and the two are in a “complementary, recursive and reciprocal” relationship (Lengauer, 2007, p. 92). The sense of urgency, which characterises topics of national security concern,

gives these topics priority on the agenda, further strengthening the rivalry frame and suppressing other potential frames. This shift in the agenda is also proof that the spike in the use of “rival/rivalry” vocabulary is not just the result of accidental correlation but indicates a narrative shift towards securitisation. It is in line with the foreign policy, especially of the Bündnis 90/Grüne, which is supported by a poll made in 2024 where 41% of the journalists surveyed stated that they were close to the Greens (Journalismus, 2024, p.4).

4. Conclusions

My apparent critique does not serve to claim that concerns about espionage or economic dependence are not justified. They are. The question is rather whether the dominance of the rivalry frame helps solve the issues that businesses or higher education and research institutes face daily. It is somewhat paradoxical that a threat-driven approach, i.e., securitisation of cooperation with Chinese partners, might actually blur the boundary between political control and existing security deficiencies.

In a similar vein, Breslin and Mattlin (2025) argue that “identifying China as a systemic rival, or even threat, is a rather different project than putting in place effective and affordable solutions that do not have considerable negative externalities”, i.e., chilling effects on investment and economic cooperation in general.

Rogelja and Tsimonis in their article on Chinese economic presence (mainly investments) in Europe observe that securitisation narrows the discursive space devoted to specific topics: “the ‘China Threat’ frame advocated by many think tanks, journalists, and politicians risks transforming these issues into a zero-sum game, thereby reducing the political space for negotiation and compromise” (Rogelja & Tsimonis, 2020, p. 132).

The purpose of the present study was to test the perception of “negative reporting” about China in Germany. Based on quantitative investigation complemented with an introduction of related events, it seems that from 2018 to 2024, the rivalry frame or even its sharper “national security” focus became the accepted way of interpreting relations with China in German news media.

As is so often the case with developments of the present or the recent past, it is not possible to state with certainty what their reasons might be. Focusing on the change of perceptions in Europe, Breslin and Mattlin differentiate between underlying reasons and precipitating reasons, the underlying reasons being Western disillusionment, China’s statist authoritarian turn, a shift in relative power balance, and the self-confidence of China’s leaders (Breslin & Mattlin, 2025, p. 202). Analysing US-China relations, Hung argues that the reason behind the change is the shift in attitude of US corporations: they were defending their China trade against US political elites, which created a balance – until Chinese competitors arrived in the US market in the 2010s and made US corporations align with “the foreign policy elite on the side of enmity” (Hung, 2022, p. 64).

Transatlantic relations have been a decisive factor in German foreign policy towards China, and the perceived necessity to take sides has only been strengthened by the Russia-Ukraine war and China’s position on it. A sense of insecurity, the (similarly) confrontational rhetoric of Chinese media, and difficulties in negotiations and cooperation with Chinese partners have much exacerbated the polarisation – and the antagonistic media discourse towards China. The most recent developments, however, especially the increasingly troubled relations between Europe and the USA, might induce some rebalancing in the German politico-media complex.

2024 already saw a slight decrease in the frequency of “rival/rivalry” words in headlines and of words supportive of the rivalry frame. This might be due either to fewer “stories” (compared to, e.g., the *China Strategy* in 2023) or to some relaxation in the relations – it is too early to tell. In a recent podcast, however, Breslin envisages that “we are past peak panic, if you like, and we are into a period of pragmatism” (University of Turku, 2025, at 25:38).

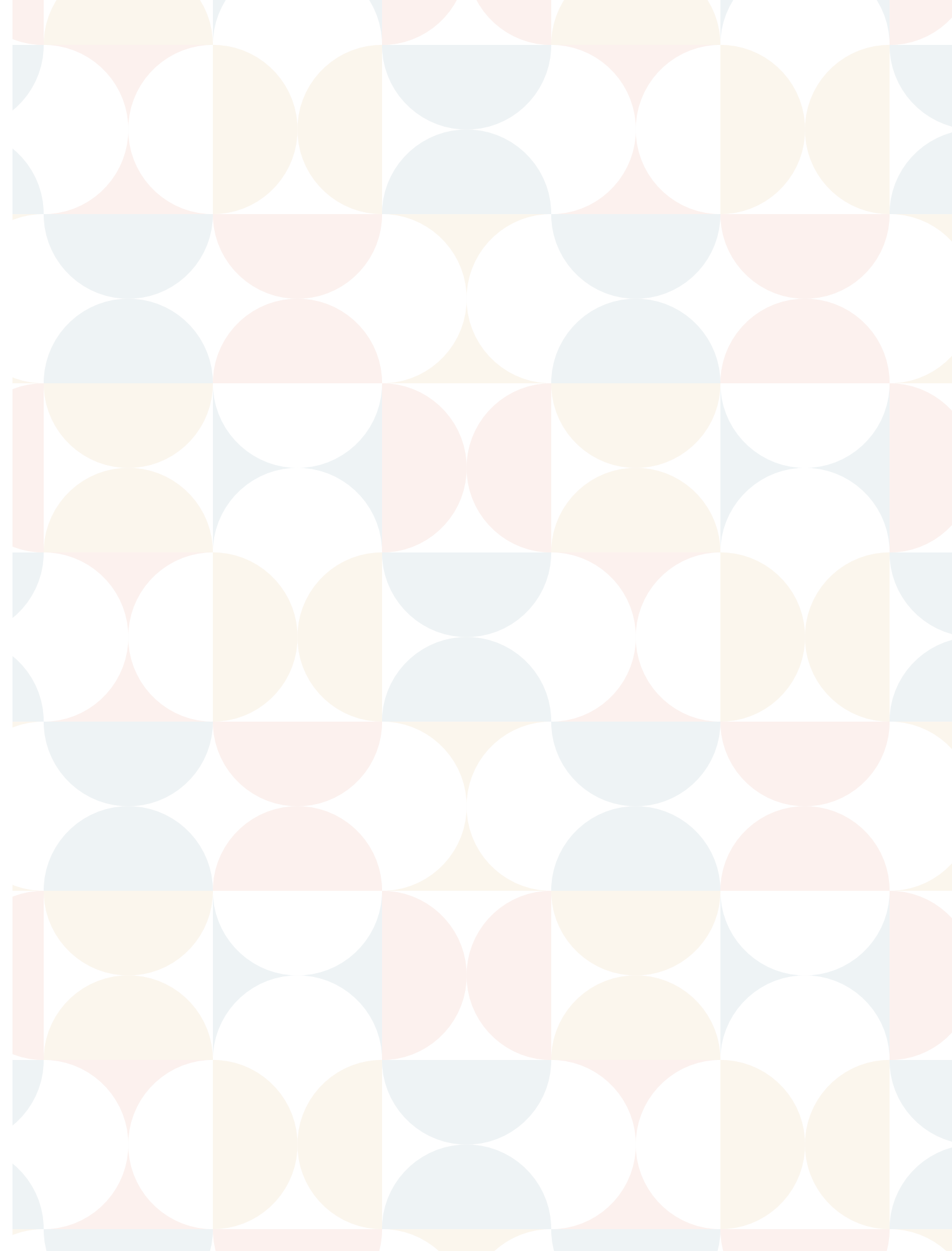
We might well be standing at the threshold of tectonic changes not just in European security architecture, but also in the basic organising principles of global trade, politics, and security as we now know them. This never happens smoothly – indeed, we are living in times of crises. On the one hand, there is little the media can do; on the other, the media also bears responsibility: part of each crisis management strategy is the de-escalation of the discourse.

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II
CONFERENCE
REPORT



CHINA-EUROPE COOPERATION IN THE ERA OF GREAT TRANSFORMATION – INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ORGANISED BY THE EURASIA CENTER OF JOHN VON NEUMANN UNIVERSITY AND FUDAN UNIVERSITY

PÉTER KLEMENSITS¹

The Eurasia Center of John von Neumann University and Fudan University in Shanghai organised a well-attended international conference – China-Europe Cooperation in the Era of Great Transformation – at Café Gerbeaud in Budapest on 20 November 2024 to mark the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Hungary and China and between Europe and China. As one of China’s leading public universities, Fudan University has earned a worldwide reputation in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. The conference was co-organised by the Center for China-Europe Relations and the Fudan-European Centre for China Studies.

Three consecutive panel discussions with distinguished Hungarian and foreign academics, experts, journalists, and current and former diplomats followed the opening speeches. The discussions explored the challenges and opportunities in Europe-China relations, including Hungarian-Chinese ties.

¹ Péter Klemensits, PhD, Senior Research Fellow, Eurasia Center, John von Neumann University, Hungary.

The opening ceremony was attended by András László (Member of the European Parliament and its Delegation for Relations with the People’s Republic of China); Tao Gong (Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the People’s Republic of China); Norbert Csizmadia (President of the Board of Trustees of John von Neumann University); Professor Ding Chun (Director of the Center for European Studies at Fudan University); György Kocziszky (Rector of Budapest Metropolitan University); and Marcell Horváth (Executive Director for International Relations at the Hungarian National Bank).

Levente Horváth, Director of the Eurasia Center, welcomed the participants as host.

In his opening speech, András László recalled that the agreement signed during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in May, which raised the strategic partnership between Hungary and China to an even higher, “all-weather” level, could not have been more aptly named, because “We are witnessing major changes in the Western world and in world politics.” With regard to the European Union’s policy towards China, he warned that Western European elites had become complacent in the post-Cold War era due to the dominance of the USA. They are unable to adapt to the fact that China has become the second-largest economic power in the world and that it is no longer Western companies that are exporting knowledge and investments to China, but vice versa. “For Europe to be a meaningful partner, it must undergo a major transformation itself. Today, it cannot define its own interests and therefore has nothing to build a partnership on,” László said. “We Hungarians are following the changes in the world economy and world politics; we are adapting, and we know what is in Hungary’s interest. We want peace, not war. We want development, not destruction. We want mutually beneficial cooperation and fair competition, not an economic blockade,” he added.

In his speech, Gong Tao noted that next year will mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the European Union. A successful strategic partnership has been built over the past half a century, with ever closer exchanges and a gradual deepening of cooperation. He emphasised that China has always viewed Sino-European relations with a strategic view and a long-term perspective, and regards Europe as an important pole of the multipolar world order. The dialogue between China and EU leaders should be further strengthened in the future, and mutual understanding and trust should be enhanced; this is essential for the success of relations in a changing world with new challenges. The Ambassador stressed that China remains committed to mutually beneficial cooperation and openness, as China sees Europe as a partner, not a rival.

Norbert Csizmadia spoke about the importance of the new Eurasian era and the geopolitical consequences of the changing world order, highlighting the achievements of the Hungarian-Chinese partnership, which is also supported by the cultural cooperation in higher education initiated by the John von Neumann University.

Professor Ding Chun underscored that the event could provide a suitable forum for understanding relations between Europe and China, while the parties have to adapt to the changes in the world.

György Kocziszky praised the development of Hungarian-Chinese relations, noting that the Metropolitan University attaches great importance to cooperation with educational and research institutions in the East Asian country.

In his speech, Marcell Horváth explained that the central bank's activities are adapting to the changing world order, as demonstrated by the annual Eurasia Forum, and that the partnership with China is also economically fruitful.

Panel I, which followed the opening speeches, focused on the challenges of China-Europe political and defence relations and bilateral risk management. Liu Chunrong (Director of the Fudan-European Centre for China Studies); Sándor Mészáros (former Ambassador of Hungary to China); Aleksandar Mitić (Research Fellow at the Center for Belt and Road Studies of the Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade); and Dávid Bencsik (General Manager of Demokrata Publishing and Asset Management CC) took part in the conversation, while Jian Junbo (Deputy Director of the Center for China-Europe Relations at Fudan University) moderated the discussion.

The speakers talked about important recent events, such as the introduction of additional tariffs by the EU on electric cars produced in China and their consequences, the relations between Europe and China in the context of the US presidential election, the opening of Serbia to the East, and the aspirations of Central and Eastern European countries. Bencsik recalled that despite the attacks on the Hungarian government, almost 50 high-ranking delegations with 42 heads of state and government arrived in Budapest for the European Political Community (EPC) meeting at the beginning of November 2024. In his speech, he expressed optimism: “Hungary can be the new Switzerland from a geopolitical point of view” as it is stable, predictable, reliable, and a place where all parties can agree, with investment coming from all directions. Comments also included that the EU should draw on the experience of other international organisations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to work harmoniously with China.

Panel II focused on economic competition and potential cooperation between China and Europe on a bilateral and global level. The panel discussion, chaired by Professor Xu Mingqi (Shanghai Academy of Sciences), featured panellists Professor Ding Chun (Director of the Center for European Studies at Fudan University); Ádám Samu Balázs (Chief of Cabinet of the Deputy Minister of EU Affairs); Mihail Constantinescu (Research Fellow at the Romanian Diplomatic Institute); Zoltán Kiszelly (Director of the Centre for Policy Analysis, Századvég Foundation); and Csaba Moldicz (Head of the Matthias Corvinus College Center for International Economy).

The discussion focused on the EU's economic policy, the negative consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the failed sanctions policy, the Hungarian government's efforts for peace and cooperation, and the development of Romanian-Chinese relations. While the USA emphasises decoupling from China and de-risking has become a slogan in the EU, Hungary is interested in

strengthening connectivity, the participants noted. There was also consensus that the Draghi report² shows the lack of a clear EU strategy and protectionism as a substitute measure, while the lack of access to cheap energy is the root cause of the problem.

Speakers on Panel III – European Integration, Geopolitical Transformation and China-Europe Cooperation in the New International Order – included Professor Zhang Ji (Vice Dean of the School of International and Public Affairs at Fudan University); Sándor Kusai (former Hungarian Ambassador to the People's Republic of China); Gergely Salát (Head of Department of Chinese Studies at Pázmány Péter Catholic University and Senior Research Fellow at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs); and Eric Hendriks (Visiting Fellow at the Danube Institute).

In the discussion moderated by Levente Horváth, all participants, except Kusai, predicted the formation of a multipolar world order; Kusai noted that we are at the beginning of a bipolar era, as the new Cold War between the USA and China has already begun. The parties were pessimistic about the likely policy moves of US President-elect Donald Trump, who said that we should be prepared for a trade war between the USA and China. And as US-European relations are also in flux, this will have a significant impact on EU-China relations.

² The report – *EU Competitiveness: Looking Ahead* – authored by Mario Draghi, explores the state of competitiveness in the EU and proposes strategic recommendations to enhance economic performance amid global challenges. It emphasises the critical roles of innovation, technological advancement, and sustainability, analysing sectors such as digital technology and green energy for potential improvements.

BOOK REVIEWS



DAVID DAOKUI LI: CHINA'S WORLD VIEW: DEMYSTIFYING CHINA TO PREVENT GLOBAL CONFLICT

FERENC BÁNHIDI¹

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David Daokui Li is a prominent Chinese economist. He is currently Mansfield Freeman Professor of Economics at Tsinghua University's School of Economics and Management. Li has had a distinguished academic career, including as a visiting scholar at the Harvard Institute for International Development (HIID), adjunct professor at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and research fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. In 2004, he returned to China to teach at Tsinghua University and has been active in public service, including as a member of the Monetary Council of the Central Bank of China.

The purpose of his book, published in 2024, is perhaps best illustrated by a famous Confucian saying: "The superior man seeks harmony but not uniformity; the petty man seeks uniformity but not harmony." A wise person embraces diversity and differing opinions while maintaining harmony, whereas a narrow-minded person demands conformity but still creates conflict. In today's language, people can live together peacefully, even if they have different views, values, or backgrounds, as long as they respect and understand each other. Writing in English for a Western readership, Li wants to help the reader understand and accept the way the Chinese political and economic system works, the way the Chinese decision-makers and the Chinese people think, and the values they hold. In doing so, he believes he can help dispel misunderstandings that portray China as a threat to the Western world.

¹ Ferenc Bánhidi, Research Fellow, Modern East Asia Research Group, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary.

China as Power Number Two

In the introduction, Li recalls an occasion when, in 2011, in a public debate, he had to defend the claim that "the twenty-first century will be China's century" against the late Professor Henry Kissinger. At the time, according to the debate's audience, he failed to do so, but he decided he would one day write a book on the subject regardless. In the years since the debate, Li has participated in many prestigious international forums and media appearances. Drawing on his experiences, he felt it was timely to publish his book in 2024 in what could be called the new Cold War climate.

When China's gross domestic product (GDP) surpassed Japan's for the first time in 2009, making China the world's second economic superpower behind the USA, it came as something of a shock to the global public. According to Li, this shock can be attributed to three factors. The first is that it has been achieved by the economy of a country whose political institutions are fundamentally different from those of Western democracies; as they don't fit familiar theoretical schemes, their functioning is, therefore, difficult to understand for most Western experts. The second is the size of the country, its population, and its internal market, and the mass of its mobilisable resources, which is frightening for the public in developed countries. The third is that this change of position occurred during the global financial crisis, when the confidence of the elites in developed countries was at its lowest, and the optimism and faith in the future that characterised the turn of the century had not returned. The loss of self-confidence inevitably led to scapegoating, to the claim that China had circumvented the rules of international trade and cooperation to achieve its breakthroughs at the expense of other countries. These accusations characterised US President Donald Trump's first term, but the situation did not improve under President Biden's administration. The US delegations wanted to negotiate from a position of strength, which the Chinese side could not accept.

The Chinese Political System and Its Institutions

In the following chapters, Li details the basic principles of Chinese policymakers' thinking, the functioning of the leading political organisations, the Communist Party, and the central and local governments; a separate chapter is included on corruption, a weakness of the political system.

Li first analyses the historical consciousness of Chinese political thought, a feature that differentiates it from all other civilisations. On 10 November 2008, he attended a major political meeting where, in front of 300 people, Premier Wen Jiabao announced a package of economic measures that Chinese experts had drawn up to tackle the global financial crisis. Indeed, the resounding success of this programme has made China an influential player in the world economy, one that cannot be ignored. The typically cautious Chinese political leadership, which favoured a deliberate approach, decided to take a risk, aware of its historical responsibility; its success determined China's economic development for years to come.

The Chinese approach to history is also characterised by what they call “cyclical thinking”. The most significant period in Chinese thinking today is the so-called century of humiliation from 1840 to 1949, when China went from being the world’s largest economy to a poor, backward country, and foreign conquerors separated Hong Kong and Taiwan from the mainland. According to Li, two important things follow this: (i) economic, military, and cultural modernisation is not an option for the Chinese political leadership, but an obligation – otherwise, the country would lose its identity; and (ii) neither the Chinese political leadership nor society would accept a solution that would lead to the independence of the breakaway territories from the mainland.

As regards the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the most important institution in the Chinese political system, Li is clear: the party plays a decisive and comprehensive role in the country’s governance. It has an organisational presence and control, from the smallest village and economic enterprise to all levels of government, right up to the centre of political power. Historical examples demonstrate another feature of party rule. Throughout its nearly 100-year history, the party has managed to adapt to changes in its environment, providing pragmatic responses to the challenges it faces. And it continues to operate in the best traditions of the traditional Chinese system of government in an organised, efficient, and meritocratic manner, taking into account experience and achievements in appointing leaders.

The party’s leading role in the central government is also decisive. The most important decisions are made in the Standing Committee of the party’s politburo, where each member is responsible for a specific branch of the government system, including the legislative bodies, the State Council, and the judiciary. Li makes it clear that in China, there is no system of separation or counterbalance over the branches of power, as there is in Western democracies.

Perhaps the most interesting and unique feature of the Chinese political system is how the local governments operate. This is the dynamic nature of the Chinese government system, despite a rigid organisational framework and the lack of democratic elections. In practice, the party secretary in charge of a territory has a very broad mandate, directing the work of local administrative, legislative, and judicial bodies. In practice, they can provide an almost one-stop shop for business. At the same time, the top leaders at each local government compete with each other since their promotion in the party hierarchy depends on their performance in developing the local economy and meeting the socio-political objectives set by the political leadership at the top.

According to Li, this competition has both positive and negative effects. The positive effects are mainly in economic competition between territorial units. Party secretaries often behave like the CEOs of the holding companies of all the economic entities operating in their territories. They use their broad powers of intervention to help the “members of the holding” operate by offering tax breaks, development and training subsidies, and preferential land-use rights, and by trying to attract large national companies to their territory. The regional political leaders are essentially business and investment oriented, but a significant negative effect exists. In their decisions, they often put business interests above the public interest, neglecting the opinions of the local population or environmental concerns. A more serious form of entanglement with local businesses is corruption, which has

gradually become one of the most serious problems since the 1990s and has been left unaddressed for many years.

In the chapter on corruption, Li highlights three points. The number of corruption cases in daily life, such as in police or administrative matters, is negligible. In contrast, corruption for business or political benefit is more widespread. Reducing corruption has been a priority of the new political leadership that took office in 2012 with Xi Jinping at the helm. Economic corruption takes many different forms. It can be used to bypass a regulation in force, to influence a government decision-maker, or to obtain land or mining rights. For years, corruption has also affected many government investment projects, the most famous case being that of a minister responsible for the high-speed rail network who signed purchasing contracts with his circle of friends. Li concludes that Chinese corruption is “effective” by international standards, where it only takes one or two decision-makers to achieve the desired result, but its destructive effect is also stronger.

The most common case of political corruption is when the responsible leader accepts money from a subordinate in exchange for a promotion. This practice was pursued by two top military commanders who worked for years on a fixed price for each position. Political corruption has caused extreme damage to the party’s prestige, because it was in stark contrast to its proclaimed principles of “serving the people” and a merit-based appointment system. The rigorous anti-corruption campaign launched at the end of 2012 was very popular among a wide section of society, but, as Li acknowledges, it hurt economic growth by reducing the risk-taking of political leaders.

The Chinese Economic System and Its Institutions

Li begins the chapter on the role of government in the economy with a claim – one that has been a central point of criticism from Western experts – that government interventions are present in all segments of the Chinese economy and therefore have a pervasive impact on its functioning. This is explained by two philosophical approaches based on historical traditions. In the concept of an all-responsible government, each unit acts as a kind of “grievance agency” with the task of remedying people’s concerns. The other idea is based on the belief that the good of society takes priority over an individual’s welfare.

Referring to Western critiques, Li thoroughly analyses the positive and negative effects of pervasive government interventions. On the one hand, he points out that this system has been behind decades of success in the development of the Chinese economy, which makes it easy to deny that there is any deep problem with it. On the other hand, he acknowledges its drawbacks, noting that centrally subsidised industries have often developed overcapacities that proved unsustainable in the long run.

Another major theme of Western criticism is the significant role of state-owned enterprises in the functioning of the economic system. Li gives four reasons for the importance of state-owned enterprises. The first is the historical legacy. In the 1950s, the entire urban industrial enterprise sector was nationalised. In the 1990s, smaller, often loss-making, industrial firms were privatised or liquidated, but large, mostly profitable firms were retained. The second is the system of public

finance. In negative phases of economic cycles, when the budget needs to be borrowed, public assets serve as collateral for these loans. The third is to support the implementation of large public projects. During the Beijing Olympics, the participation of large state-owned companies significantly reduced costs. Finally, the fourth reason, Li acknowledges, is that there are ideological reasons for keeping the public sector as a cornerstone of the socialist political system.

The chapter on private enterprises begins with Li's assessment that this sector is behind the dynamic development of the Chinese economy and now accounts for 75% of production and 90% of urban employment. The chapter focuses on three themes: (i) a historical overview of the sector's development since 1978, (ii) a discussion of the obstacles that entrepreneurs face in the Chinese political system, and finally, (iii) a presentation of the policy debates that have taken place in China over the past five years that affect the private sector.

By reviewing the history of the last 40 years, Li brings his topic closer to his Western readers by providing concrete examples from different generations of entrepreneurs. In the early stages of the reform, in the 1980s, successful entrepreneurs came from the ranks of village and small-town party secretaries. Far from the ideological control of the political centres, they were able to mobilise the resources of the local population, creating the local enterprises that in the 1980s constituted the most dynamic sector of the whole economy. The successful entrepreneurs of the 1990s were former government officials who had moved into the private sector and who were able to use their previous connections to find niches in the unregulated market, creating, for example, the large private property development companies that are still in operation today. The success stories of the post-millennium period were those of entrepreneurs who adapted Western business models to domestic market conditions and set up companies that still dominate the digital markets today.

As for the policy obstacles entrepreneurs face, Li mentions two barriers. In traditional Chinese political thinking, entrepreneurship has always been surrounded by prejudices and never adequately valued. Partly as a result of this perception, the second barrier is that the government has never accepted the private sector as an equal partner, often discriminating against it compared to the public sector.

This chapter's third theme illustrates entrepreneurs' precarious position in the Chinese political system. At the end of 2020, the political leadership perceived that private business leaders were interfering in the political process, trying to influence policy decisions. In response, the government launched a campaign to address "the disorderly expansion of private capital" and the "control of monopolies" of large digital firms. The severe sanctions that followed significantly slowed down the companies' development. Only in early 2023 did the government start to stimulate private sector development again.

The following four chapters on the functioning of the social policy subsystems contain little new information on the substance. With regard to education, Li criticises its excessive examination orientation. On the use of the Chinese internet, he notes that it is much richer in content than the outside world gives it credit for. On the environment, he notes that there is complete unity of its

priority between Chinese society, the government, and the international community. On population policy, he says that the one-child family model introduced in 1980 has required considerable social sacrifice on the part of the generations of parents concerned and that the social repercussions of this policy in the form of an ageing population will remain a serious social problem in the long term and will have to be resolved.

Concluding Chapters

After a generous overview of China's political and economic system, Li concludes with four chapters in which he answers the four questions that most concern Western readers today: (i) whether China will continue to catch up with the developed world, (ii) whether there is a Chinese model of development, (iii) what is China's world view, and (iv) what can China contribute to world development.

To answer the first question, Li begins by refuting two frequently cited patterns. China today is not comparable to the former Soviet Union because it is a dynamic market economy in which innovation is the main driver of growth, and because, aware of its own limitations, it has never sought world domination. Similarly, the model of Japan in the 1990s does not fit China. On the one hand, because it is still much less developed than Japan at the time, and on the other, because it has a much larger domestic market. China has social problems to solve, such as severe income inequality and the aspiration of the middle class to a greater role in society. On the whole, however, Li believes that the current Chinese political leadership enjoys the full support of the population and has the information and skills to ensure that the present development is sustainable.

The chapter on the existence of the Chinese model begins with a surprising statement. The majority of Chinese researchers are reluctant to answer this question because they would like to avoid the impression that Chinese development is seen as a model for other countries. In domestic professional debates on the existence of the model, Li argues that two distinctive camps can be distinguished among Chinese researchers. The first, the majority camp, believes that the only meaningful model of social governance in the world is Western liberal democracy, based on universal values such as individual freedoms and social equality. The other, minority, camp believes that China should operate a system based strictly on Chinese tradition and culture, i.e., on "Chinese characteristics". Researchers in this camp also stress that the "modernisation solutions" that have worked in China should be offered to other countries for use. Li considers himself a moderate researcher who has a good relationship with both camps and tries to "learn" from both their arguments.

Regardless of whether it is seen as a model for other countries, Li believes that the three main "characteristics" of the current Chinese system of governance are well identified: (i) an all-responsible government, an operation where the welfare of the people is an overarching consideration in governance; (ii) the internal discipline of the dominant party where the rules of party discipline are not enforced by an external body independent of the party, but are the responsibility of a separate but internal Central Commission for Discipline Inspection; and (iii) respect-based diplomacy, which defines the purpose of this activity in terms of gaining and maintaining China's respect in international relations.

In the following chapter, Li summarises China’s “world view” in eight key points:.

- *Governing China is like students taking exams* reflects the Chinese political leadership’s desire to ensure the stability of the polity through all its decisions.
- *Homework first* reflects the intention to give priority to internal affairs in governance.
- *Historical conservatism* means respect for history and historical claims.
- *Respect first diplomacy* expresses the purpose of foreign policy.
- *Don’t export the Chinese model* is the view, which has been in the majority among Chinese political leaders and academics since 2012, that it is not only to be avoided, but it is also impossible to export the Chinese system of governance.
- *Home sweet home* is an indication of the ties that bind most people born in China to their homeland. Even if they study or work abroad for long periods, they still have a longing to return home at some point.
- *The business of diplomacy is business* reflects the Chinese leadership’s desire to prioritise the development of economic ties in international cooperation.
- *China should work with the United States (...) with principles* reflects a commitment that cooperation between the two countries is only possible while standing firm for China’s own long-term interests.

The final chapter summarises the implications that “China’s worldview” may have for the future development of its international relations. Li puts it in one sentence: “China’s rise is good for the world, especially for ordinary people.” He refutes the inevitability of a hot, even a cold, war. He argues that these views are based on the lessons of the development history of the Western world, and that China’s rise has not and does not seek to follow this path. In Li’s view, China’s rise will create public goods for the whole world, such as faster progress in science, better management of wars and conflicts, and a common fight against climate change.

The book is both easy and difficult for the average reader to read. Li presents his views clearly and understandably, with many practical examples to illustrate his points. He relies on his decades of teaching practice, but also on the experience of the international forums he has attended as an invited speaker or guest over the last 20 years. At the same time, understanding and accepting his arguments requires an open mind and acceptance of a way of thinking and a political economic system that often differs in principle from the one the reader may be used to.

DAVID MORRIS: A NEW ERA OF RISK: WHY WE NEED A NEW, SUSTAINABLE INTERNATIONALISM TO MANAGE THE RISE OF CHINA

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One of the most pressing global questions of the past one or two decades has been how the world should respond to the rise of China. It is no surprise that this issue has inspired countless books and even more shorter writings; almost everyone who contemplates the great questions of our time has offered their own perspective on how the rise of China should be handled. The rise of the East Asian superpower has indeed brought enormous changes: it ended the unipolar order, but rather than restoring the bipolar Cold War system, it created a situation without historical precedent. The most defining feature of this new reality is that, while it exhibits many classic elements of great power competition, it is also characterised by deep interdependencies between the rising power and almost every other global actor, dependencies that did not exist in previous world orders. These complex and often tangled interconnections make the situation highly complicated, opaque, and difficult to manage.

The China Problem

Over time, Western literature on “What to do about China?” has grown increasingly pessimistic. In the post-Cold War euphoria of the 1990s, many believed that China would eventually integrate into what is commonly referred to as the liberal, rules-based international order. There was also a long-standing illusion that, at the same time, China’s internal political system would gradually evolve to resemble liberal democracies.

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By the early 2010s, however, some had already begun to view China as a potential threat. By the end of that decade, the dominant narrative in Western discourse was that revisionist China had become the primary challenger to the global order that had been so comfortable for the Western world. By the 2020s, it had become increasingly rare to find analyses that did not depict China’s rise as a fundamental problem or even an existential threat.

In politics, this shift has been accompanied by trade wars, technology embargoes, and a broader program aimed at containing China, whether explicitly named as such or not. These efforts are often framed using terms like “decoupling” or “de-risking”. However, the reality is that the China issue cannot be resolved through trade measures, and decoupling or de-risking is largely unfeasible. The deeply embedded interdependencies in the global system mean that dismantling existing networks would be damaging for all parties involved. Moreover, a powerful China is here to stay for the foreseeable future, and any rational policymaker should base their decisions on this reality.

Risk Management and New Internationalism

David Morris’s book, *A New Era of Risk*, addresses this complex issue. His life experience not only qualifies him but also uniquely positions him to propose an approach that could facilitate the development of a sustainable *modus vivendi* with China. Morris is a former Australian and multilateral diplomat and adviser to businesses, think tanks, and the United Nations. After decades of professional engagement with China, he completed a PhD in 2024 at Corvinus University of Budapest. He is the founder and president of 1EarthVillage, a forum for de-polarising dialogues, based in Australia. He has spent most of his professional life engaging in negotiations, consultations, and diplomatic efforts to find compromises and avoid conflicts, and this approach is clearly reflected in his book. His book’s most important contribution is the application of risk management tools to the China question. His central argument is that instead of illusions and/or hysteria, the challenges posed by China’s rise should be treated as manageable risks and addressed accordingly.

Risk management has a well-developed methodology in the business world. Companies typically do not seek to avoid risks altogether, as doing so would mean missing out on enormous opportunities and, over time, would lead to stagnation or decline. Instead, they aim to keep risks within manageable limits. Successful economic actors do not view the world in black and white; rather, they assess risks realistically on a case-by-case basis, take steps to minimise them, and prepare for potential damage control if adverse outcomes materialise. Morris advocates extending this approach to decision-making regarding China. However, he goes beyond merely proposing a problem-solving technique; he calls for the creation of a new system, which he terms “sustainable internationalism”. He defines it as follows: “A sustainable internationalism would mean an approach to international relations that does not collapse into conflict, that would provide the basis for realist competition between nations but also necessary international cooperation against collective challenges such as climate change. A new, sustainable internationalism would need to tolerate and indeed be committed to diversity, rather than an idealist expectation that one world view can prevail over all others, indeed instead of a chauvinistic view that one world view should prevail.” In the present context, Morris’s suggestion is a very brave one.

A New Era of Risk

“The sky is changing. Nobody really knows how the international order, business environment and everyday life will evolve after the seismic disruptions underway in the 2020s. Risk has become the new normal.” These opening lines of the Preface set the tone for the entire book. In his lengthy introduction, Morris presents his personal life story, explaining how the ideas in the book took shape and what experiences led him to stand among the few who, instead of embracing the currently fashionable trend of confrontation, advocate for accepting China’s rise and finding ways to coexist peacefully, balancing competition with cooperation.

In Chapter 1 (Why we need a new, sustainable internationalism), Morris begins by outlining the need for a new global framework to manage risks associated with China’s growing influence. He critiques the prevailing narrative that portrays China as an inevitable threat, arguing that such an approach could escalate tensions and lead to unnecessary conflict. Instead, he suggests that international actors – including states, businesses, and institutions – must find ways to navigate interdependence through pragmatic risk management rather than ideological confrontation. It is worth noting that most of the book was already completed before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine further intensified international tensions, and by the time Donald Trump was re-elected – bringing new uncertainties to the global system – the book was already in print. This means that the situation has since worsened, making Morris’s message even more relevant.

Chapter 2 (A new era of risk – How the rise of China changes everything) examines the key disruptions shaping the modern world, including the shift from US global dominance to a multipolar system, rising protectionism, and the acceleration of climate change. Morris argues that China’s growing economic and technological influence challenges the old world order but does not necessarily mean inevitable conflict. He also highlights the risks posed by the US-China rivalry, particularly in technology, trade, and military strategy. He critiques the trend of escalating sanctions and economic decoupling, warning that such actions could destabilise global markets. Instead, he suggests that managing risks through strategic engagement and institutional cooperation could lead to a more balanced global order. In the opinion of this review’s author, it is regrettable that the world is heading in the opposite direction.

The next chapter (Chapter 3: China and the new risks of interdependence) explores the complexities of economic interdependence with China. Morris discusses the paradox where countries that rely on China for trade and investment also fear its political influence. The chapter analyses the risks of economic dependence, such as supply chain vulnerabilities and political coercion, while also acknowledging the opportunities China provides for global development. He argues that international actors must adopt a nuanced approach, one that hedges against over-dependence on China while avoiding unnecessary hostility. He critiques the simplistic “China threat” narrative and calls for a more evidence-based risk assessment.

Case Studies

In the following chapters, Morris moves to a lower level of abstraction and presents specific Chinese projects along with their impacts. The first among these is the Belt and Road Initiative (Chapter 4: Risks and opportunities on the Belt and Road), China’s grand vision for the Afro-Eurasian supercontinent that purportedly aims at enhancing connectivity. He acknowledges the economic benefits of BRI projects but highlights the political and financial risks associated with them, including debt sustainability, governance issues, and geopolitical tensions. Through case studies of BRI projects, Morris illustrates how some countries have benefited while others have struggled with challenges such as environmental concerns and local opposition. He suggests that improved governance, transparency, and multilateral cooperation could mitigate these risks.

Three very concrete case studies follow. Out of the many available options, Morris selected three topics that represent three crucial areas – finance, technology, and infrastructure – each with varying degrees of success. These cases effectively illustrate the diversity of projects involving Chinese participation and highlight that there is no universal “recipe” for their success or failure, nor is their fate predetermined. Some initiatives will succeed, while others will fail, and their outcomes will ultimately depend on specific circumstances. Generalisations are neither possible nor useful.

The first case study (Chapter 5: New international institutions – The case of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank [AIIB]) focuses on China’s efforts to reshape global financial institutions, analysing the story of the AIIB. Morris argues that the AIIB represents an attempt to address infrastructure financing gaps in the developing world while also positioning China as a global leader in economic governance. While some Western analysts view the AIIB as a challenge to US-led financial institutions, Morris suggests that it could serve as a model for a more inclusive and cooperative international financial system. He notes that the AIIB has adopted best practices in governance and environmental sustainability, making it a credible alternative to traditional multilateral lenders.

In the next case study (Chapter 6: New technologies – The case of Huawei), Morris examines the global controversy surrounding Huawei and China’s technological rise. He discusses the fears surrounding China’s dominance in 5G and digital infrastructure, particularly concerns about cybersecurity, espionage, and technological dependence. Rather than outright bans, he argues for a risk management approach that includes stronger cybersecurity frameworks, transparent regulatory standards, and international cooperation on digital governance. He warns that a complete decoupling of technology ecosystems could fragment the global economy and hinder innovation.

In Chapter 7 (Failing state – Belt and Road risks in Myanmar), the last of the case studies, Morris illustrates the complex risks involved in China’s overseas investments. Myanmar’s political instability, ethnic conflicts, and weak governance have made BRI projects particularly challenging. He examines the Kyaukphyu deep-water port project, highlighting the concerns over Chinese control, local opposition, and environmental risks. He argues that China’s experience in Myanmar demonstrates the limits of its influence and underscores the need for responsible investment strategies.

Sobriety Above All

Following the case studies, Morris focuses on more general questions. Chapter 8 (A new great game in Eurasia?) analyses the geopolitical competition in Eurasia, where China, Russia, and Western powers are vying for influence. He examines the shifting dynamics of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the BRI, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). He argues that while China is increasing its economic influence in Central Asia, it is unlikely to replace Russia as the dominant power. He also suggests that regional actors are using China's rise to their advantage by balancing multiple external relationships rather than aligning with one major power.

The main points of the book are put forward in Chapter 9 (Towards a new, sustainable internationalism). In this final chapter, Morris outlines his vision for a new international framework that balances competition and cooperation. He argues for an approach that (i) acknowledges global interdependence rather than promoting economic decoupling, (ii) promotes pragmatic risk management over ideological confrontation, (iii) strengthens multilateral institutions to address shared challenges such as climate change and technological governance, and (iv) encourages regional cooperation rather than imposing a rigid US-China binary framework on global politics. He concludes that while China's rise poses risks, it also presents opportunities for reshaping international cooperation. A balanced, strategic approach – rather than fear-driven policies – will be key to managing global stability in the coming decades.

A New Era of Risk presents a compelling argument for moving beyond simplistic narratives about China's rise. Rather than seeing China as an existential threat or an inevitable hegemon, Morris urges policymakers, businesses, and international organisations to adopt a nuanced approach that emphasises risk management, institutional cooperation, and sustainable internationalism. While Morris may be labelled an idealist, his analysis, grounded in case studies and empirical observation, provides valuable insights for navigating the complexities of a changing world order.

Reading the book is a very refreshing experience. In recent times, experts, politicians, and opinion leaders have often presented an overly simplistic view of US-China competition, frequently portraying it as a struggle between the forces of good and evil. There seems to be an unspoken assumption that China is not a legitimate actor in the international order and that this order must be defended against it. Morris takes a completely different approach, and if his book were to be described in a single word, it would be “sobriety”. A significant part of the international discourse appears to have forgotten how to think rationally and to assess various phenomena in their proper context. However, if we wish to avoid major conflicts, we must find a way to coexist in the manner Morris proposes.

INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

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