Workshop Report

Strategic Power without Normative Intentions: A New Paradigm in International Relations? The Case of China

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Workshop organized by:
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Introduction

Foreign policy as conceived and shaped by Chinese actors is a challenge, for conventional epistemological tools frustrate our attempts to formulate hypotheses on China’s modus operandi in the international arena. Henry Kissinger, a staunch Realist, in his 2011 book ‘On China’, focused his work on the concept of “perception” by assuming that it is important to understand, above all, that the Chinese see the world differently from us, mentioning the idea of a Chinese World Order. Fresh social science perspectives on Chinese society and politics may be key to find an adequate understanding.

Although many observers assume that China has yet to be considered a game changer in the international society, its conduct in foreign policy introduces new elements, practices and understandings to the range of actions countries can adopt to interact in the international arena. While these new registers may not represent a turning point in contemporary history, they add significantly to the framework of international cooperation and contribute to the emergence of new narratives running counter to the liberal ones promoted by Western democracies.

The strategic power that the Chinese government currently projects claims no normative intention, in the sense the term “normative” is understood in the West. Chinese power, instead, asserts a moral and ethical stance derived from the Chinese classical tradition by which Chinese power projection carries no missionary intent – if with “missionary” we mean to co-opt others to believe and live by a certain vision/ideology. Its ethics and moral rely on a broad acceptance by the populations of a political model (one-Party system and autocratic governance), a cultural model (Confucianism and other classical thoughts), a social model (where the population accepts the Party policies without questioning the Party legitimacy), without raising any question on the “rightness” of the proposed – in a top-down fashion - model. Confucian values like “benevolence”, “obedience” and above all, “harmony”, have been emphasized domestically to reintroduce a special kind of morality in a society that seems to have lost a sense of direction. The harmonious Confucian universe is based on a pyramidal society where everyone has moral duties towards those at the higher levels. It is a reasoning that perfectly fits with the income gap that has widened along with the Chinese entry in the global economic circles and with its related economic growth, in order to avoid social tension and violent class conflicts. It is an implicit way to explain to the majority of Chinese people that the world is actually often unjust, but it is how we behave, how we accept it that makes it harmonious. Therefore, Confucian harmony is the total opposite from
the ideological uniformity the West fights for. Chinese people today are asked to follow “harmony amid diversity”, and to abide by a collective mind-set and broad social consuetudinary norms, inevitably creating a tension with Western individualist thoughts and with the efforts to promote and defend human rights and democracy.

On the international level, “mutual understanding,” “win-win cooperation”, “harmonious world,” and other such concepts that purport “non-judgmental inclusion” (translation introduced by Clifford Geertz of Weber’s "wertfrei") are important elements of the Chinese narrative to promote a different modus operandi among nations. The strategy rests on a vision of economic development and intense trade cooperation mutually benefiting all the involved parties. The new emerging modus operandi in Chinese foreign policy invokes a small number of principles:

- Friendly contacts with foreign actors
- Investments which follow agreements and deals sustained by mutual interests
- Joint finalization of projects together with foreign actors, with an important benefit for Chinese operators

The main idea of this practice lies in the belief that providing investments in exchange of alignment with a certain ideology is disrespectful of the foreign leaderships.

Aims of the workshop

The workshop was intended as a platform for scholars and operators to reflect upon the role of China in the international arena and on the possible variations to what academics and practitioners know as foreign policy practices China’s new modus operandi can trigger and promote. The workshop covered the following main issues:

- Considering the Chinese modus operandi
- Is diversity in international practices and identities better protected?
- Are Chinese investments really based on a win-win principle?
- What does all this mean for world policy and the international society?
Opening Remarks

The opening remarks have been delivered by Markus Böckenförde, Käte Hamburger Kolleg/ Centre for Global Cooperation Research (KHK/GCR21); Helmut Demes, Institute of East Asian Studies (IN-EAST); Alessandra Cappelletti, Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University (XJTLU); Martin Wolf (KHK/GCR21). After a brief presentation of the institutions involved, the workshop concept has been explained by Alessandra Cappelletti and Martin Wolf, who clarified the interdisciplinarity of the workshop and the interconnected interpretations of current research issues about China, from political to social sciences, from cultural studies to contemporary art.

Workshop Contents

After the keynote speech by Kerry Brown, King’s College London, on Chinese Leaders’ Decision Making Mechanism on Foreign Policy, the first panel titled ‘Insights on China’s Modus Operandi: (Part I) Chinese Diplomacy’, chaired by Flemming Christiansen, saw the contribution of Gerardo Bracho, Mexican Diplomat posted at the OECD and Senior Associate Fellow at KHK/GCR21, on ‘China’s Evolving Self-identity in the Aid Effectiveness Agenda’. Carsten Boyer Thøgersen, Copenhagen Business School, talked about ‘Chinese Economic Diplomacy and Soft Power towards Europe’, while Alessandra Cappelletti, Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University, delivered a speech on ‘Positioning Xinjiang between China and Central Asia: Notes on the Belt and Road Initiative and China’s Ambitions towards its Western Neighbours’.

The second panel titled ‘Insights on China’s Modus Operandi: (PART II) Global Political Economy’, chaired by Li Yuan, saw the speech of Paul Cammack, University of Manchester, on ‘As Easy as ABC? The AIIB and China’s Peaceful Road to Global Dominance’, and Yu Jie, London School of Economics, ‘Challenges and Outcomes of China’s Reform Process: What Have We Learned from the Last Five Years and Possible Scenarios from the Future’, and was followed by the 28th Käte Hamburger Lecture by Jeffrey Wasserstrom, University of California Irvine, on ‘China, the Global Order, and Two Ages of Rising Powers: Comparing and Contrasting the World of 1900 and the World of Today’. Discussed by Flemming Christiansen (Political Sociology of China, Institute of East Asian Studies (IN-EAST) and Yu Jie (Head of China Foresight, Dahrendorf Senior Research Associate, LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science), the Lecture was chaired by Alessandra Cappelletti.

Panel III, ‘A Major Foreign Policy Action: (PART I) Eastern Power Overseas’, chaired by Paul Cammack, was enriched by the contributions by Katarzyna Golik,
Polish Academy of Sciences, on the ‘China-CEE Cooperation Initiative: Recent Dynamics’ and by Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby, De La Salle University, Manila; Joint- Fellow, KHK/GCR21 and IN-EAST – on ‘How to Change the Game of Security Cooperation: The Case of the ASEAN- China Strategic Partnership’.

During Panel IV - Making the world understand China: Chinese Culture as Smart Power, chaired by Carsten Boyer Thogersen – the workshop participants had the chance to delve into the concept of culture as a channel to promote ideas and projects: Marta Tomczak, Polish Academy of Sciences, talked about ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Appropriation and Chinese Foreign Affairs’, while Martin Wolf, KHK/GCR21 investigated the issue of ‘Contemporary Art as Soft Power and Foreign Cultural Relations: A Co-evolution with Chinese Characteristics’. A deeper insight on art project intersecting international relations dynamics was provided by Francesca Jordan, Curator, Deutsch-Chinesischer Kulturaustausch für Kunst und Design e.V. (DCKD), Düsseldorf. She presented an art project during her presentation titled ‘Blue Container on the New Silk Road: A Major BRI Cultural and Economic Exchange Project Launches in Duisburg’.

Katarzyna Golik, Polish Academy of Sciences, chaired the fifth and last panel of the workshop ‘A Major Foreign Policy Action: (PART II) The Belt and Road Initiative and Technological Projection’. The last panel has been characterized by theoretical insights and more applied aspects of theoretical issues. Gerald Chan, University of Auckland, Senior Joint-Fellow, KHK/GCR21 and IN-EAST, talked about ‘Geo-Developmentalism: How to Theorize China’s Belt and Road Initiative?’, Sam Geall, Chatham House, delved into environmental issues talking about ‘Can China Assume a Leadership Position on Climate Change?’ and Brett Neilson, Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University, investigated the ‘Belt and Road: State Transformation and Large Technical Systems’.

During the wrap-up, there was the occasion to discuss on the possibility for China to be a model for other countries and on its different modus operandi as a major actor in the international arena.

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