



China and International Norms: Evidence from the Belt and Road Initiative

Mario Esteban & Yue Lin (eds.)

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Blanca Marabini San Martín
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Not too long ago, China was largely perceived as a regional player primarily focused on events in its immediate vicinity. However, within a relatively short span of time, China has evolved into a global actor, solidifying its position among a select group of nations with interests that span the entire globe and the capability to actively pursue them. The remarkable rise in China's influence on the global stage has generated considerable interest in the country's impact on the norms and standards that form the foundation of the existing international order, especially in the wake of the country's foreign policy shift under current President Xi Jinping towards more proactive and assertive stances in a variety of international matters. Xi's key foreign policy initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has demonstrated an ambition not only to enhance worldwide connectivity but also to augment China's normative influence along networks of capital and infrastructure.

Comprehending China's impact on international norms is vital for navigating a complex and interconnected world. It enables nations, organizations, and individuals to adapt to evolving global dynamics, fostering cooperation, managing potential conflicts, and working towards shared goals. Mario Esteban and Yue Lin have edited a volume that provides the reader with a comprehensive overview of Chinese normative influence in a variety of policy areas. To this end, they utilize a theoretical framework that classifies China's attitude towards

international norms into five categories: cooperation, compliance, qualification, infraction, and subversion. The classification of the Chinese approach to each of the policy areas analysed is based on three explanatory variables: the congruence between China's norms and international norms, the degree of implementation of international norms in BRI initiatives, and China's active or passive approach to the creation of norms and standards within the given field.

The theoretical framework used throughout the volume is presented in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, Mario Esteban and Iliana Olivié scrutinize China's engagement with aid norms, focusing on the case studies of Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Their analysis suggests that the Asian powerhouse infringes key aid principles, notably by eschewing the Western approach of politically conditioning aid, in favour of advancing its own national and domestic interests. They also note a discernible shift toward conforming to international standards, often upon the aid recipients' behest.

Juan He reaches a similar conclusion in Chapter 3 regarding distant-water fishing (DWF) along the BRI, arguing that China's approach to DWF is reactive yet pragmatic, as evidenced by its reluctance to sign or ratify crucial international instruments, and the routine exemption of DWF from national fishing regulations, in particular when it comes to combatting Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated fishing.

In Chapter 4, Mario Esteban and Lara Lázaro discuss climate governance, positing that China generally aligns with international norms set by the UNFCCC. However, they emphasize China's persistent self-identification as a developing country, a stance that curtails the obligations stemming from these norms. The BRI is highlighted as further proof of this qualifying stance.

In Chapter 5, Yue Lin tackles corporate social responsibility (CSR), pointing out the dual yet disparate CSR frameworks espoused within China and abroad. The former is characterized by the selective adoption of international CSR norms, resulting in an uneven development across CSR dimensions. While initiatives beyond China's borders exhibit a higher degree of alignment with international norms, implementation largely relies on on-location managers, introducing notable inconsistencies. These differences again place China firmly in the qualification category.

Chapter 6, authored by Claudio Feijóo, Cristina Armuña, and Javier Fernández-Díaz, assesses Chinese engagement with international Edtech standards. Similar to Chapter 5, it concludes that China qualifies said standards by espousing different approaches at the domestic and international levels. To foreign audiences China underscores the importance of openness and collaboration in education, emphasizing joint efforts in science and technology research. Conversely, in addressing domestic audiences, the focus shifts to portraying the nation's culture and history accurately, and to leveraging education for innovation in the pursuit of global leadership. China's approach to Edtech is thus described as qualification with some salient and increasing examples of subversion in favour of domestic objectives.

In Chapter 7, authors Ge Gao and Yuanbo Li critically examine China's involvement in international agricultural cooperation, using Sino-LAC agricultural collaboration as a focal point. They conclude that China qualifies international agricultural cooperation norms, primarily as a result of its pursuit to ensure domestic food security. The analysis reveals moderate congruence with and implementation of international norms domestically, and a focus on bilateral cooperation through the BRI, rather than multilateral initiatives at regional fora.

Finally, in Chapter 8, Miguel Otero-Iglesias addresses the internationalization of the RMB, arguing that China, while not fully accepting the triad composed by free capital flows, floating exchange rates and independent central banks, has largely refrained from adopting a subversive stance towards the principles underpinning the neoliberal economic order, which again amounts to the qualification of international norms. The author also underscores the use of the BRI to bypass neoliberal principles via strategies including currency swap agreements, an interbank payment system, and the digital Yuan. Chapter 9 follows, wherein the book editors succinctly synthesize the insights garnered from the preceding chapters, underscoring the intricate nature of China's approach to various international standards.

The collection of analyses curated by Esteban and Lin provides a valuable starting point to continue the more nuanced analysis of Chinese foreign policy and attitudes. It is evident that China can and will continue to contribute to the evolution of international norms. What remains to be seen is how the international community can engage China in a more constructive manner when it comes to global governance. The theoretical framework that underpins the research in this book holds considerable promise as a way to transcend the constraints imposed by the binary systems of analysis that are often applied to China's foreign policy. Rather than being confined to a rigid categorization as either a status quo power or a revisionist force, the framework allows for a more comprehensive understanding of China's nuanced positions.

To enhance this understanding further, there is an opportunity to integrate this continuum approach with a secondary spectrum framework devised to delve deeper into China's bureaucratic policy-making processes, elucidating the roles played by both state and non-state actors, thus providing an even more complete picture of the thought and processes behind Chinese policymaking. This approach not only facilitates an examination of whether China seeks to alter international norms but also provides insights into the intricate pathways through which such changes might be pursued. By helping to unravel the complexities of China's foreign policy dynamics, this approach becomes a powerful tool for scholars and policymakers aiming to comprehend and navigate the multifaceted landscape of China's global interactions.