Research Note

Constructivism and China's International Engagement: Deng's Era to Xi and Trump

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Abstract

This paper critically examines constructivism in explaining China's rise, which requires Beijing to give certain credits to entering international institutions for its economic purposes. By employing constructivist theory, as proposed by Alexander Wendt, rather than focusing solely on power-driven realism and cooperation-focused liberalism, we can gain a deeper understanding of interstate relations that is grounded in interaction and socialization. Drawing on Qin's thesis, a well-known Chinese constructivist scholar, this paper engages in a discussion of the Chinese "image-building" process to integrate into international society, as well as the image degradation by Trump in the late 2010s.

Keywords: International relations, Constructivism, China's rise

1. Introduction

The rise of China is an undeniable fact. On the one hand, China has become the second-largest economy in the world, ranking only after the United States. On the other hand, thanks to its economic development, Beijing possesses an immense capacity for military forces, which might be a risky factor, causing regional instability. But if the story traces back to the 1970s, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, the whole group of Chinese people were in poverty and living in trembling with fear due to the well-known Cultural Revolution (Walton 2020). Furthermore, within the power circle, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) generally adhered to Lenin's axioms, placing greater emphasis on "war and revolution" and opposing imperialism and capitalism (Qin 2011). In this sense, the general observation was that Beijing was isolated, or even isolated itself, from the existing international society at the time. Following Mao's death in 1976,

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Deng Xiaoping assumed power in 1978, and China embarked on a series of reforms. Then, in international institutions, China's presence began to be more frequently seen (Vogel 2011). In short, the beginning of China's booming growth could only be traced back to roughly the 1980s.

With 30 years of effort, China has achieved its current position. In this paper, the primary focus falls into two cases: first, the reasons and the process that China entered the international society, and second, with Donald Trump being re-elected as the US president, the perception of China of Trump during his first period is studied. In this regard, "perception" arrives as the first keyword. As for why it is crucial in the paper, the explanation is given in the next section. All in all, before proceeding to the section on the applied theoretical framework, the research questions are, in correspondence with the two cases: "How does China perceive the existing international institutions and identify itself to fit in contemporary international society with the scope of constructivism?" and "Why has the good "old image" changed in the eyes of the first Trump administration?"

On the first question, I argue that the underscoring of "process" and the proposition of "interaction and socialization" in the constructivist theory proffers a more proximate insight into the scholarship in observing China's rise internationally. And for the latter, this paper suggests that the constructivist theory of "interaction and socialization" remains applicable in realizing the changes in the interstate relationship of China and the United States.

This paper is composed of the following parts. To begin with, I introduce the basic theoretical framework of the constructivist theory of International Relations (IR). After that, I lay out the background information of the case with respect to the factors that are in the scope of constructivism. Thereafter, there are the two cases' detailed analyses, and, at the end, a conclusion follows to answer the research questions and to reflect the arguments of the paper above.

2. Theoretical Framework: Constructivism

The theory I attempt to apply to my case studies is constructivism, the central pillar will be based on Alexander Wendt's social theory, with Qin's constructivist explanation as a supplement. On the question of the incentive to engage in analyzing the selected international events using this setup, it stems from one important feature of the theory: eclecticism, where realism and liberalism both

fall short (Katzenstein 2008; Jung 2019). This feature consists of two-fold, that is: First, despite the importance of material capability, some other factors are essentially pivotal, such as identity, to have the same material capability play out toward different outcomes, such as why the same tank is used in different ways (Wendt 1999). Second, despite being regarded as more aligned with liberalism, it emphasizes the "process" instead of focusing only on the advantages brought by cooperation. In other words, it illustrates actors' initial motives to establish cooperation and why to remain in such a cooperation, which are absent in liberalism; that is, the "constitutive" factor in effect and has much to do with an actor's identity (Katzenstein 1996; Qin 2011).

2.1 Wendt's Social Theory

According to Alexander Wendt (1999), constructivism is a social theory that aims to grasp interstate relationships by focusing on interactions among actors in the system. The main principle is that nothing is pre-given. This includes the main terminologies when we mention social actors, such as identity, role, or even the structure of society. To obtain, for instance, an actor's identity, interactions are essentially needed, and the same logic applies to the state level (Wendt 1999; Badea 2021).

In Wendt's proposal, three cores champion his theory. To begin with, he asserts the importance of positivism. In this respect, unlike many scholars who advocate the importance of "discourse" and "interpretation," he still believes in pluralistic science in exploring objective reality (Wendt 1999: 39-40). This is what makes Wendt stand out as one of the key figures in post-Cold War IR theoretical scholarship, as he underscores the ideational factors (where most critical theorists stop) in the scientific empirical findings. Second, idealism, the suggestion is that tangible and economic factors certainly play significant roles, while the importance of products of interaction, such as norms and shared understandings, is as important and should not be overlooked (Wendt 1999: 90-138). At last, it is holism. A system or environment consists of multiple actors, and the nature of their interactions is complex. Hence, analysis that focuses on individual actors is insufficient (Wendt 1999: 184-190). I regard holism as the most important core of the three, as not only does it challenge the "self-help" assumption of individuality in realism and bring in the notion of grouping, but it also establishes a solid foundation for the following analysis on interstate

socialization and interaction. Namely, Wendt's theory no longer treats actors as an atomistic behavioral unit.

In addition to that, another defining proposition of Wendt's (1992, 1999) constructivism that paves the way for the emphasis on interstate interaction is the concept of "collective identity." When two actors are interacting, or to a certain extent, agree to stay in interaction, they engage in a certain cognitive recognition of such an interaction. This has to be based on a collective foundation; that is, both actors hold a "collective identity" as individuals who are in such an interaction (Wendt 1992: 412-417). Building on this foundation, there is another pivotal suggestion from Wendt. Since the construction of interstate ties endemically relies on the so-called "process" or the "socialization," the direction in defining interests is barely completely exogenous, which Wendt challenges the thesis of the rationalist theories, in which scholarship can find that the self-interested states are designed as what a theory begins (Wendt 1992: 391-395).

In short, processes of interaction (socialization) dictate the buildup of an actor's identity (the "self" and others), and then such an identity constructs the interests of the actor. In this regard, I will exemplify via the US-Japan Alliance, in which F-15s are equipped. For the US, these deadly fighters are regarded as an offensive weapon, thereby likely to have the setup of long-distance striking ability for bombing Iraq. However, for the Japanese SDF, once the F-15Js satisfy the surveillance aim of its own territory, there might not be anything further. In this instance, there are two actors, consisting of respective identities, and these two identities define what they need (interests), despite having the same material object.

In addition, it is also worth noting that, as mentioned in the introduction, "perception" plays a significant role in both the constructivist theory and the case study. The terminology functions as how an actor perceives others and how an actor is regarded by others, as well as how two actors understand or even misread each other (Uemura 2018). Speculated from Uemura's logic, when an actor faces a new environment, to engage in such an environment or join a new group, the perception of necessity should be in place at the very beginning. Otherwise, there will be no incentive to participate, needless to say, making it challenging to implement changes for participation. Regarding the choices of a

state, it is valid on interests, namely, if China did not perceive joining international institutions as complying with its national interests, what are the reasons to join, as well as the incentives to make the changes for the purpose of joining (Qin 2011)?

2.2 Wendt: "Anarchy Is What States Make of It"

To dig further into detail about how Wendt (1992) defines the reaction between states, extended from the neo-realists' anarchical nature of the international structure, he sums up three types of structure: Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian. In the Hobbesian world, states are the least respectful of one another; violence is common, and material military power is crucial. In contrast, the Lockean structure is characterized by states that are neither friends nor as hostile as in the previous structure. While military capability remains important, the nature of interstate interactions is no longer antagonistic. Lastly, it is the Kantian structure, in which the states pay the highest degree of respect to one another. In such a structure, the states no longer prioritize tangible power. In the analysis, particularly in the first case, I will attempt to reflect on how specific interstate ties comply with the anarchical culture above, particularly the non-Hobbesian ones.

2.3 Case to Be Studied

In the first case, the analysis will be based on how China perceived the existing international society at the time alongside contemporary national interests and, more importantly, how China "socialized" in various international institutions. In the second case, the assessment will switch sides, examining how the US "perceived" China between 2016 and 2020.

All in all, despite the main actor being China, the analytical design focuses on both sides of interaction to correspond to the holistic idea of constructivism; that is, the validity of the analysis is established by taking the whole group into account.

3. Background

Before entering the actual analysis, a brief introduction to China's political economy is provided as the first background, as Beijing's decision to open to international society was driven by its economic interests (Qin 2011).

The overall historical background can be approximately segmented into three time periods: Mao's era, Deng's era (which I include Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao), and Xi's era. After the victory in the Civil War against the KMT, Mao Zedong stepped onto the power peak, launching a series of movements to centralize his power. At the time, China was guided by Mao, adhering to the principle of "revolution and war," with the sincere conviction that the final glory would be in the hands of the communists (Wang & Blyth 2013: 1286). In this respect, China was relatively isolated at the time. After that, as previously indicated, Deng Xiaoping seized power, and the infamous Chinese Economic Reform was initiated in 1978, marking the formal starting point of China's seeking access to international institutions.

Additionally, ideologically, Beijing became more open-minded to liberal thought. Regarding the primary national interests, economic development was prioritized. At the very least, Beijing demonstrated greater sincerity and a willingness to cooperate on the international stage (Qin 2011; Wang & Blyth 2013). Thereafter, after decades of endeavor, Xi Jinping was welcomed to power in 2013. His style exhibits a higher level of assertiveness and a greater desire to dominate, resulting in tensions in multiple areas, including the South China Sea and the Sino-India borders. Therefore, whether to reposition China as a revisionist power has become a popular topic of discussion (Chan 2021).

Furthermore, in the scholarly world, since China's decision to engage in international society, the question of whether China could rise peacefully has been a central concern (Qin 2011). In realist prediction, fulfilling skepticism centered (Mearsheimer, 2010), while some liberalist anticipations seemed to be over-optimistic, claiming China would be democratized (Friedberg 2005). In this regard, I argue that constructivism offers a more compelling explanation, at least for the rise during Deng's era, which will be elaborated upon in the next section.

4. Case Analysis 1: China's Entrance into International Society

In this case, I have reviewed affiliated literature inspired by Uemura (2018) to demonstrate how constructivism can be applied to explain China's behavior on the international stage.

4.1 The Recognition of Liberal International Institutions

The importance of international institutions only came into place when liberalist ideas became significant in Chinese academia. The structural liberalist theory introduces the concept of international society and achieving security through interdependence, as well as the transnational nature of these security issues in a non-traditional sense, thereby emphasizing the importance of international institutions and cooperation in addressing such issues (Qin 2011). Moreover, in the face of economic development, which was China's top national interest at the time, joining the existing international institutions was viewed as one of the most cost-efficient solutions (Qin 2011). Needless to say, if the scholarly claim were valid, the politicians placed more faith in liberal ideas of cooperation, and they would agree that starting up another international order was not just costly but also risky (Ikenberry 1998). Thus, a rather clear mindset among contemporary Chinese policymakers was primarily to prioritize economic development and encourage the nation to engage with existing international institutions. However, despite indicating many positive ideas that China should follow for liberalist notions, it is only the "recognition" of the notions of "peace and development" that the Chinese leaders and policymakers had to have in their minds. In the central part of the argument, what matters more is the "process" of China's entry into the international society. Thus, constructivism will take over from this point.

4.2 Building a Good Image

As mentioned in the previous sections, perception or identity is a shared concept produced through interaction. For China to enter the existing society, it needed to engage in changes that made it "accepted" by the existing members (Qin 2011).

In terms of what identity Beijing wished to show the world, the "two-identity concept" by Shih (2012) suits the explanation. As mentioned in the previous section, when actors are interacting with one another, there will always be perceptions, and these perceptions are mutual. In this regard, to "persuade" the leading states at the time, China had to transform itself into a "role state," making other actors in the system "accept" China's appearance in the system with that image. Just to explain, a role state is a type of state actor that is committed to upholding social expectations by adapting to the norms of its society (Shih 2012; Uemura 2018). This scenario reflects the constructivist theory that when an actor faces a new environment, that actor makes changes to get settled into it. Then, if there is a general expectation of how that actor should

fulfill, he or she, rationally narrating, will get himself or herself adapted to the new environment in the expected direction. In sum, one-handedly deciding to join the international society was not an easy task. On top of the decisions made inside the country, what was outside China should be taken into consideration.

In addition, besides attempting to create a good overall impression on the international society, being constrained to show sincerity and willingness to negotiate is also another path to help set the image of socialization in a new environment. According to Gries's (2005) view, which shows a good correlation with Shih's (2012) socialization concept, Beijing self-constrained heavily in the negotiation of the bombing incident at the Belgrade embassy in 1999, as well as the military aircraft collision two years after. Once the negotiation met the target of "saving face," the Chinese side did not ask for more. Certainly, China could be too weak to do anything meaningful (Gries 2005; Uemura 2018). Yet, at a minimum, Beijing did not choose to respond in a way similar to the 1950s, when Washington invaded the Middle East, Mao tried to stir chaos in the Taiwan Strait (Christensen 1996: 237). This can be interpreted as not just the "good image setup" but also the effort to mitigate the negative impression in the past during Mao's era.

4.3 Superficial Socialization

Based on the logic above, the perceptions of international society can be different between states. From the US perspective, as a major supporter of liberal international institutions, Washington may recognize that becoming a liberal democracy is a benefit or a must-occur process after soaking in the tub of liberal institutions (Friedberg 2005). On the other hand, throughout the years of participating in international society, China has not pursued any form of change in its regime type, nor has there been any hint of alteration. This situation is only explainable by the belief in self-identity, that is, Beijing identifies itself as a socialist country, and after socializing with other democracies in the international institutions, no change should be made because that is the fundamental identity of China.

In this regard, it is sensible to check to what extent China has socialized. According to He and Feng (2015), by examining foreign policies since Deng, they submitted a conclusion that the degree of China's socialization in international institutions has only reached the level of "superficial socialization." This indicates

that Beijing has passed the "adaptation" stage but has not yet reached the level of "fundamental socialization" (Uemura 2018). This circumstance might induce suspicion over the constructivist theory of how we can define whether China has completely socialized in international society. Nonetheless, I do not regard this as a triggering point to falsify the constructivism argument. The reason is simple: in Wendt's social theory, he emphasizes "interaction" as a resort for an actor to position oneself, as well as for other actors to figure out the perception and identity of other actors (Wendt 1999). Thus, there is no necessity for any universality of value ever to exist. Indeed, there are norms, interests, and shared understandings, but nothing is fixed. Therefore, I still argue that, despite only reaching the "superficial" level, Beijing's socialization into international society during Deng's era is in line with the constructivist narrative.

Anything that stimulates policy adaptation can only happen when an actor faces something new, reasonably, a new environment for China. It might be an environment that an actor is forced to enter, or it can be the one that an actor chooses to enter proactively. The actor, on their own, makes changes corresponding to that environment to help adapt to it. This aligns closely with the constructivist theory of socialization. Despite not mentioning in detail whether or not there are still differences among actors in the same environment, logically, actors are not going to be entirely the same, identical, as not all the students are the same.

In addition to mentioning the importance of "interaction and socialization," it is also valuable to state that since China had decided to "adapt" to the new environment, the theater's nature of anarchy was shifted from Hobbesian-like to roughly Lockean, which also posits Wendt's thesis in suggesting interstate relations.

4.4 Interaction with ASEAN

So far, I have touched upon the general picture of how China socialized into international society. The analysis can be extended deeper to a more refined level, thereby exemplifying China's interaction with one regional organization, ASEAN.

Once China decided to open the door to the outside world, apart from the well-known leading actors, such as the US, Beijing was destined to create

dialogue with other countries and regional firms. On this occasion, the norm is heavily highlighted. When an actor enters a new environment, they start to adapt to it. During this operation, understanding and attempting to comply with local norms is a crucial part to consider. As for the prominence of the norms, it is regarded as the realization of the behavioral benchmark. The notion of norms reemphasizes the important constructivist context of interaction as it is based on the "shared understanding" mentioned previously (Jepperson, Wendt & Katzenstein 1996).

In the relationship between China and ASEAN, even though China intended to establish the dialogue that was in its hands, it was never a unilaterally creatable scenario (Han 2017). ASEAN had its own working style, characterized by a set of principles, known as norms. Logically, without understanding those norms, there would barely be a chance for a newcomer to find common ground with the organization (Uemura 2018). Therefore, China had to engage in interaction, that is, to "socialize" within ASEAN in order to create a relationship.

This back-and-forth process appeared to prompt China to recognize that, once Beijing decided to engage in dialogue with ASEAN, it needed to understand the member states and their characteristics, as well as the existing norms (Ba 2016). Meanwhile, the ten states in the regional pact would also make efforts to understand China. As we can observe in this part, the interstate relationship is built on mutual engagement. China always has its ideal way of interaction, such as how economic ties are established and how disputes are settled, while ASEAN holds its position. Then, after continuous interaction and constant endeavor, shared understandings are developed. Thereafter, clear images in the eyes of both sides can be seen, and China and ASEAN are aware that there will certainly be a way to address this relationship. Most importantly, for the Chinese side, this is based on Beijing's realization of the existing norms in the first place (Uemura 2018).

In the first case, it is evident that how interstate relations are created depends heavily on how the state perceives itself and others. This situation aligns with Wendt's three cultures theory, not yet Kantian but certainly in the approximation of Lockean, which suggests that not every kind of tie is directly linked to tangible material capabilities. Instead, it is more about how states engage in the relationship. On this foundation, interaction is significant as it acts as a means to

have actors understand the structure, identity, perception, as well as norms and interests. In addition, by delving deeper into constructivism, I also argue that interaction provides an opportunity for an actor to gain a deeper understanding of their self-identity. At last, interaction also provides an opportunity for an actor to gain a deeper understanding of how to behave effectively in a specific group.

5. Case Analysis 2: China's Degraded Image to the US

As stated in the introduction, the good "old image" does not indicate that China has never been seen as a negative character. However, at least until the Obama administration, Beijing was a counterpart being positioned as a partner to cooperate with (Badea 2021).

5.1 China's Assertiveness

Now, China is the second largest economy in terms of total GDP, and, on paper, it never falls short in terms of military power, being the only two "major powers in the region" (Lowy Institute n.d.). These are all the assets that Beijing can utilize to assert itself and act progressively in its foreign policies.

On the other hand, especially during the Trump administration, China's assertiveness was often perceived as a potential factor that might degrade the US hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region, and the real economic influence was viewed as a tool that actually undermined Washington's status as a unipole. Therefore, China was positioned as a threat, explicitly securitized as such (Shah 2023).

5.2 Changes in the Perceptions

During this exchange, the observation consists of two parts, and they happen in the same environment. First, it represents a shift in China's overall image. If we consider the "image-building" in the previous section to be true, then surely, the US perception of China might have undergone a drastic shift after Xi claimed power. In addition, if we place the focus on the identity of Beijing, its self-perception has also changed. During the economic reform period, China paid significant attention to "peace and development" (Qin 2011). In order to obtain the ticket to the current international institutions, Beijing adopted a lower posture "in exchange"; this was unequivocally reasonable. Some might argue that it was also important for Washington to link up with China in the face of the Soviets (Chang 1986). Yet, interstate interaction is a mutual process. While China entered the global society to achieve its goals, the US also saw the positive side

of containing China, simultaneously. If China were to retain the same identity as under Mao's leadership, the US would hardly have chosen to align with it.

Returning to the main discussion, the key thesis in this section is that Beijing has altered its self-perception from an actor in need to one that is able to play a more assertive role, at least economically in the region; predictably, the image in America's eyes will undergo an alteration. This point aligns with Wendt's proposal on the underscoring of process, which posits that the nature of interaction is fundamentally a process that is continually changing (Wendt 1999). Moreover, these changes are not necessarily passive. For instance, a student, after years of learning math, is not likely to regard himself as the same person at the beginning. In other words, alongside the changes in capability as well as a different man in charge, China might self-perceive as a different sort of actor in the region.

Nonetheless, when building up these arguments, an important question to raise is: "What is China's root image or the most original identity?" This can be tricky to answer, whereas it does not bother the constructivist propositions. To be simple, when an actor faces a new environment that is perceived to be beneficial to him, he makes changes to adapt to it. That was what China did during the economic reform. There was little to do with what country China fundamentally was, as an actor can always have its own exogenous identity (Wendt 1999: 96). There is always a chance that a naughty student pretends to be lovable and does well in a class. In my argument, China could have been such a student in the past, and with a different national leader as well as a different self-perceived role out of improvement in capabilities, it might look like a different one. Last but not least, regardless of how China perceives itself, Trump might view China in a different, but "skeptical" way, thereby defining Beijing as a revisionist power (Badea 2021).

6. Conclusion

As a relatively innovative discipline in international relations, constructivism has emerged as an approach to avoid overly critical and material-dominated verdicts, such as realist scenarios, which are often dominated by tangible power. Constructivist theories, in a rather process-oriented fashion, emphasize the importance of interaction, as well as the following products, including identity, mutual perception, norms, and shared understanding. In this approach to

understanding interstate relations, it is not only helpful to grasp the overall structure of an environment, but also advisable to learn how an actor operates within a specific society.

In the first case, by placing China as the leading actor in the analysis, constructivism explains, first, how China realized what it needed, second, how Beijing perceived the importance of international society, and finally, how China operated to enter a new environment. Additionally, the interaction between ASEAN is also mentioned to indicate the significance of norms. In the second case, how China lost out on the "old good image" under the leadership of Xi is narrated by stating the function of mutual perception. In this case, the analysis was raised to the level between the two superpowers.

To conclude, despite the top two prominent theories, realism and liberalism, still holding their positions, this paper argues that international relations, by nature, are just a macro-level of socialization. Therefore, the impact and understanding of constructivists cannot be overlooked. Moreover, if there is any occasion that realism and liberalism fall short in explaining, the answer might fall into the hands of constructivists.

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