Constructivism and the study of international political economy in China

Qingxin K. Wang & Mark Blyth

To cite this article: Qingxin K. Wang & Mark Blyth (2013) Constructivism and the study of international political economy in China, Review of International Political Economy, 20:6, 1276-1299, DOI: 10.1080/09692290.2013.791336

To link to this article:  http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2013.791336

Published online: 25 Jun 2013.
Constructivism and the study of international political economy in China

Qingxin K. Wang\textsuperscript{1} and Mark Blyth\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1}School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China
\textsuperscript{2}Department of Political Science, Brown University, Providence, United States

ABSTRACT

This paper surveys constructivist scholarship in the study of international political economy (IPE) in China. Chinese scholars in the field of IPE have until recently rarely used constructivism as an approach to study IPE for two reasons. The first, like Western IPE, is the short history of constructivism as a theoretical perspective. The second, unlike Western IPE, stems from the long-standing dominance of Marxism, China’s official state ideology, in the academic field. In China, Marxism’s materialist core shapes the basic research questions of IPE. Unsurprisingly then, constructivist analysis is quite alien to the dominant intellectual discourse in China. Nonetheless, of late, more Chinese scholars have begun to apply constructivist analysis. This paper surveys these developments and is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of how Chinese Marxist scholars approach the major issues of IPE as they relate to China. The second section provides an overview of the work of liberal-minded Chinese scholars who work on major IPE issues, another counterpoint to the Marxist school. The third section, which is the major focus of this paper, examines how Chinese scholars have applied the constructivist concepts to study major IPE issues in the Chinese context.

KEYWORDS

China; constructivism; IPE; Marxism; American IPE; Chinese IPE.

INTRODUCTION

This paper surveys constructivist scholarship in the study of international political economy (IPE) in China. Unlike the studies of international security, Chinese scholars in the field of IPE have rarely used constructivism as a theoretical tool to study the international political economy. The reasons
for this are twofold and surprisingly resonant with those identified by Abdelal, Blyth and Parsons (2010). The first reason is the short history of constructivism as a theoretical perspective for the study of international relations. The second, and perhaps more important, reason for the paucity of constructivist IPE in China stems from the long-standing dominance of Marxism, China’s official state ideology, in the academic field. The basic research questions of IPE, such as the relationship between the state and the market, between economic development and distributive justice in international trade and financial relations, have long been the traditional domains of Marxist analysis. Marxism’s materialist core shapes its analysis. Thus, when Chinese scholars were first exposed to neo-Marxist theories such as dependency theory and world system theory, they were very receptive to them because they appeared to be natural complements to the intellectual tradition in which Chinese scholars were trained. In contrast, the nature and concepts of constructivist language are quite alien to the dominant intellectual discourse in China.

This is not to say that constructivism has found no market in the study of IPE in China at all. Gradually, more attention has been paid to the Western literature on constructivist IPE analysis, and more scholars have begun to apply constructivist concepts in their analysis of Chinese IPE issues. This paper surveys these developments and is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of how traditional Marxist Chinese scholars approach the major issues of IPE as they relate to China. The second section provides an overview of the work of liberal-minded Chinese scholars who work on major IPE issues, another counterpoint to the Marxist school. The third section, which is the major focus of this paper, examines how Chinese scholars have applied the constructivist concepts to the study of major IPE issues in the Chinese context.

**MARXIST APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF IPE IN CHINA**

Drawing on Lenin’s theory of imperialism and neo-Marxist theories such as dependency theory and world system theory, the majority of Chinese scholars working on issues of IPE share the following views about the nature of the current international political economy. The international political economy is characterized by the international capitalist mode of production with a clear division of labour between the advanced core and the underdeveloped periphery. The United States and its allies form the core and the great majority of the developing countries constitute the periphery. The capitalist world system is exploitative and is constituted by international conflicts and economic and social contradictions (Ru, 2009: 25–30; Zhou, 2008: 1–9). These inherent class contradictions and national conflicts cannot be resolved easily. Capitalism will, therefore, eventually
perish and socialism will eventually triumph, although it may take many years and there will be ups and downs on the road to socialist victory (Hu, 2000).

Given this basic understanding of IPE, the post-war international order centred on the United States is seen as having been built after the resolution of the major class and national conflicts evident in World War I and World War II (Fang, 2009: 153–9). American hegemony is based on its military supremacy and the US dollar. The transnational bourgeois alliance it has brokered with declining core states mitigated the inherent contradictions of capitalism, delaying its inevitable destruction. This explains the major setback of world socialism marked by the collapse of the former Soviet Union (Xing, 2009: 227–34). American hegemony and the US-centric World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) are thus indispensable institutions only in the sense that they reinforce the stability of the world capitalist system (Fang, 2009: 153–9).

However, serious conflicts and contradictions continue to exist in the post-war international order due to the widening economic inequality between the core and the periphery, awakening national consciousness in the periphery, and in the internal social conflicts within the core countries. Since the late 1960s, the American economy has entered the downside of the Kondratieff cycle, with no sign of getting out of the long-term trend of recession, despite its short-term expansion in the late 1990s (Li, 2006). This is no mere rhetorical posturing. As Li Shenming, Vice-President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences suggested in 2009, the series of international financial crises witnessed during the 1970s and 1990s were manifestations of the inherent contradictions of the world capitalist system centred on the US. The recent world financial crisis represented a further major setback for the world capitalist system (Li, 2009: 33–41).

While China and Russia have been integrated into the world capitalist system in recent years, there remain cultural, economic and political differences between China and Russia on the one hand, and the United States and its allies on the other. There is a possibility that China and Russia may form an anti-systemic alliance to challenge the Western dominance in the world capitalist system (Li, 1993: 443–9; Li, 2000). However, rather than totally rejecting the international capitalist system, China should nonetheless take advantage of the opportunities afforded to be integrated into the world economic system while minimizing the risks of being too dependent on the core. China should seek to transform the system where the opportunity arises (Wang Zhengyi, 2006: 270–1). Consequently, according to these scholars, it is important to uphold the traditional notion of state sovereignty and China’s own independent national identity in the existing international economic system (Wang Hui, 2011).

For such scholars, the notion of a ‘collective interest’ of something neutral called ‘the international community’ is suspected of being little more
than a euphemism for the American-centric Western world. The essence of US-centred globalization is, therefore, the universalization of the international capitalist mode of production to the benefit of the industrialized Western countries. To put it bluntly, globalization is Westernization and/or Americanization in all dimensions (Wang Hui, 2010).

Economically, globalization is manifest in the growing expansion of Western multinational corporations on the global scale and American dominance of the international economic order through the US dollar and its veto power in the World Bank and the IMF. Politically, globalization is manifest in the spread of Western political values such as democracy and human rights clothed as universal values. Culturally, globalization is manifest in the spread of Hollywood movies and the English language (Dan, 2006: 262–4). China’s rise (and what former *Time* magazine reporter Joshua Ramo calls the Beijing Consensus) may pose a potent challenge to the Western capitalist model of economic development epitomized by the Washington Consensus.

For example, Wang Hui, a well-known member of the so-called new leftist group, argues that China’s economic model may be applicable to the economic development of other third world countries. He believes that the Chinese model has two important and distinct dimensions that have made Chinese economic development successful. First, China has a strong and autonomous state insulated from both social forces and the pressure of international capital. As such, it is less vulnerable to the political manipulation of the economy so prevalent in third world countries. This legacy of economic planning has enabled the government to develop a strategic vision for China’s economic development (Wang Hui, 2010: 24–8). Second, China has not formed any alliance relationships with other countries since 1978. This gives China the flexibility to maintain a good relationship with the West for market access and technology, while keeping good relationships with third world countries. China’s strong state and national independence have enabled it to negotiate with international capital and the Western countries for economic dealing from a strong position, which has allowed China to avoid the economic mishaps so prevalent in many third world countries (Wang Hui, 2010: 29–35).

**THE RISE OF NEOLIBERAL CHINESE IPE**

Western liberalism, at least in its academic guise, first found its way into China when China began to open up in the late 1970s through international academic exchanges. With such exchanges came exchange of ideas: political liberalism came first and neoliberal institutionalism as a mode of analysis quickly followed. These liberal ideas have provided Chinese scholars with an alternative way of looking at IPE against the dominance of Marxist ideas.
Chinese liberals believe that the world has been transformed because of economic globalization and deepening interdependence through advances in transportation and communication technologies (Wang Yong, 2006: 62–74). This increasing interdependence and globalization have made states more concerned with common international problems that transcend national boundaries, such as global climate change, environmental degradation and terrorism. This legitimates pulling attention away from nationalist (and by association) Marxist solutions. These common problems, it is argued, can only be solved through close international cooperation and coordination (Cai, 1998: 75).

Chinese liberals, like their Western counterparts, see globalization as undermining traditional notions of national sovereignty due to the rapid expansion of international institutions and regimes (Yu Keping, 2008: 63–95). The growth of institutionalized international cooperation also means that there has emerged some semblance of stable international order, and that the realists’ conception of the notion of international anarchy is no longer accurate (Meng, 2008: 234–43). Moreover, in the era of globalization and interdependence, peace and development have become the main themes of international politics, while the use of military force is no longer an effective solution to international conflict since use of force is highly costly both economically and politically. Given all this, growing concern about the common fate of humanity and the need for increasing international cooperation has led to the emergence of a consciousness of the global dimensions of politics among these scholars that is quite different from that of their Marxist colleagues (Yu Zhengliang et al., 2005: 179; Wang Yizhou, 2005).

Nonetheless, and quite unlike some of their Western counterparts, Chinese liberals share a similar understanding with their Marxist cousins about the weaknesses and deficiencies of the existing international system. First, they argue that Western countries adopt double standards in international relations toward allies and the rest of the world. This can be seen most clearly in the US’ acquiescence to Israel’s nuclear development, while vehemently opposing Iran’s nuclear programme (Yang, 2006: 75–95). They maintain that the Western-dominated international system is also unfair and unjust towards third world countries, as is evidenced in the US invasion of Iraq, and that the US’ dollar-centric international financial order is exploitative because it keeps the economies of most countries dependent on the fate of the dollar and the goodwill of US financial policies (Liu, 2008: 294–303). Wall Street’s imprudent financial practices and the lack of effective financial regulation on the part of the US government contributed to the financial crisis of 2008, which played havoc with the economies of many countries (Wang Yizhou, 2007).

Despite these major problems in the international system, Chinese liberals such as Wang Yizhou differ from their Marxist colleagues insofar as they
believe that the existing international system is stable, with no potential challenger or alternative in sight. Moreover, the post-war US-centric international system has made important contributions to promoting international peace and prosperity, as evidenced in UN-sponsored peace-keeping, the prevention of nuclear proliferation, human rights protections, and in GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade)/WTO-sponsored trade liberalization. It has also contributed to technological innovation through the protection of intellectual property rights and the forging of an international academic community through international cooperation and exchange. In short, all these activities and efforts under the auspices of the Western-centric existing international system have contributed to the progress and advancement of more than just the US² (Wang Yizhou, 2007).

What is distinct, however, is how Chinese liberals have developed a particular concern for the importance of the collective interests of the international community. They believe it is very important for China to support the international economic order, as China has been a major beneficiary of that order (Cai and Wu, 2006). As a major stakeholder of the existing international order, China has the responsibility of making reasonable contributions to the maintenance of the current system. Moreover, the liberal reading of globalization means that China’s national interests should not be defined solely based on domestic considerations. Rather, China should reconstruct its national interests on the basis of both national self-interest consideration and the collective international interest (or a notion of China’s international responsibilities) (Wang Yizhou, 2002; Dan, 2006: 257–8).

One further area of disagreement between Chinese liberal IPE scholars and their Marxist counterparts concerns the latter’s claims for the universal applicability of the Chinese model of economic development. Wu Jinglian, a prominent liberal-minded economist in the State Council, argues that the Chinese model of economic development constitutes a distinct and transitory moment in China’s economic modernization, rather than a mature economic model that has transformative implications outside China. While this model was somewhat similar to the East Asian model of the economic developmental state that relies on the state’s intervention to promote export-led growth, the Chinese model of export-led growth is predicated on the Chinese state’s much heavier intervention in the national economy through administrative regulations, by the use of the monopolistic state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the national economy, and by much greater reliance on foreign direct investment (FDI). This heavy reliance on political power to intervene in the marketplace has led to rampant corruption and rent-seeking.

The Chinese model, to the extent that it was a model, Wu argues, worked during the early stages of Chinese economic modernization when labour was cheap and abundant and the international economic environment
REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

was relatively benign. Now the rise of international trade protectionism, as a result of the world financial crisis, has made it necessary for China to expand domestic consumption as an alternative growth engine, which further undermines this model. Other problems such as the absence of the rule of law and the gradual aging of the population have further made the Marxist version of the China model less sustainable. In the eyes of liberal scholars, there is still a lot of work to be done to transform the Chinese system into a genuinely free-market economy and a democratic society based on the rule of law (Wu, 2011: 18–23).

Pushing these arguments further is Yu Keping, a prominent liberal scholar who argues that while the Chinese model of development contains many valuable positive lessons, it also generates some important information from its failures (Yu and Zhuang, 2005: 203–4). In particular, he identifies four negative lessons. First, while economic development is very important, it is necessary to stress the importance of social development, such as building a good social security system, in order to sustain economic development. Second, it is also important to maintain a good balance between efficiency and social justice, rather than a one-sided stress on economic efficiency. Third, while promoting economic reforms, it is also important to promote reforms of government in terms of democratization and good governance. Fourth, the government should bear more responsibility to protect the rights of citizens in order to maintain a harmonious relationship between the government and the people. Chinese liberal IPE, thus, has a normative and critical edge that is not shared by its Western counterpart. This is ironic insofar as liberalism in China is the critical theory of IPE, critical of Marxism.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND CHINESE IPE

Constructivism is a very novel theory of international relations from a Chinese perspective. Constructivism first came to China a decade ago through the writings of Chinese scholars who had studied overseas and especially through the Chinese translation of Alexander Wendt’s Social Theory of International Politics (1999) by Qin Yaqing, an American-trained Chinese international relations (IR) scholar (Qin, 2001). Since that opening, there have been increasing numbers of articles in both security studies and IPE authored from a constructivist perspective by Chinese IR specialists. Gradually, as more and more Western constructivist literature has been introduced into China, graduate students in international relations have been exposed to constructivism in addition to the more traditional Marxist, neo-Marxist and neoliberal theories.

Similar to what has been occurring in Western scholarship, constructivist analysts have gradually started to move their analyses from security studies to the area of international political economy, an area traditionally
dominated by Marxism and liberalism. As we detail below, most Chinese IPE constructivist scholars have focused their analyses on explaining Chinese foreign policy and the associated changes in China’s international identity in the past decades – areas that straddle the borders of security and international political economy. Some of these scholars have analysed the interaction between the international system and China’s domestic political economy. Others have studied the internalization of international ideas and norms and their impact on Chinese foreign policy.

Influenced by Western constructivist scholars, Chinese IPE analysts rely on constructivist concepts such as identity, norms, cognition, images and beliefs to study Chinese foreign policy changes. What might be regarded as the framing question that separates their research from Marxist, realist and liberal scholars is why China has, over the past several decades, changed so dramatically from being a radically revisionist critic to being a (qualified) supporter of that order. Given this macro question, Chinese constructivists have sought great specificity by investigating the mechanisms through which international ideas and norms have been internalized by Chinese scholars and policy-makers. How do the processes and mechanisms of international socialization vary over time? And how have these socialization processes shaped Chinese foreign policy-making? We examine each of these areas in turn.

Foreign policy, identity and the formation of a collective international identity

As noted above, Qin Yaqing was the Chinese translator of Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics*. It is little wonder then that he was heavily influenced by Wendt’s analysis and took this into his own scholarship. He argues in a Wendtian manner that states’ international behaviours are mainly determined by a state’s international identity, rather than by any fixed material interest.\(^4\) In an article that examines changes in China’s identity, strategic culture and security interests, Qin conceived of three types of state identity in relation to any existing international order: the status quo state, the isolationist state and the revisionist state. The status quo state is content with the existing international order, is closely identified with that order and supports that order. The isolationist state is estranged from the existing international order and takes little part in any of its activities. The revisionist state is unhappy about the existing international order and seeks to revise the status quo order.

Drawing on Wendt’s work on the formation of state identity, Qin hypothesizes three mechanisms through which the status quo state can develop a positive identification within the existing international order.\(^5\) First, a status quo state can develop a positive identification through physical coercion by the dominant player in the world order. Second, a status quo state
can develop a positive identification with the existing order through the realization that its economic interests are closely linked to the international community or the dominant state. Third, a status quo state can develop a positive identification with the international order through socialization into the common ideologies, values and beliefs of the international community, and this can further its institutionalization in domestic politics. Qin argues that this third mechanism leads to the most stable identity change. Qin then applies these three mechanisms to analyse how China’s identity has changed over time.

Qin argues that China’s international identity has undergone three significant shifts since 1949. Before the 1970s, China was a revisionist state that sought to revolutionize the existing world order. During the 1970s, China became an isolationist state. Since the 1980s, however, China has been a status quo state, supporting the existing world order, while becoming increasingly integrated into that order, which culminated in China’s WTO accession in 2001. In explaining China’s identity change, Qin emphasizes, first, how it was in China’s own national interest to support the existing world order because the world order was seen to be able to help China to promote national economic development, which has been the domestic policy priority since the late 1970s. Second, through increasing interaction with other states, China has become socialized into the international rules and norms of the existing world order, and China has willingly complied with these rules and norms. Consequently, China has become a major stakeholder in the international community (Qin, 2003).

In a study based upon a similar constructivist understanding of state identity formation, Qin Yaqing also argues that Chinese foreign policy after the Cold War has been driven by what he calls ‘new internationalism’. This new internationalism is different from the old internationalism, which was driven mainly by Marxist ideology in the 1950s and 1960s. The new internationalism’s goal is to adapt China to a new world order, characterized by peace and development, after the Cold War. This occurs through participation in international institutions and by supporting the international order in the belief that international institutions have helped to foster international cooperation and further strengthen the rise of international society (Qin and Zhu, 2005: 21–4).

As a direct beneficiary of the existing international order, China’s integration into the world economy has contributed significantly to China’s rapid economic growth in recent years. Furthermore, since globalization and international interdependence have made states’ interests more intertwined with each other, compliance with international norms promotes responsible behaviour in the international arena by maximizing cooperation and reducing competition. In a further twist on constructivist arguments pioneered in the context of the EU, Qin argues that the experience of European integration has shown the Chinese leadership that the peaceful
transformation of the international order can only come from the recognition that states’ sovereignty is not absolute and that finding an institutional balance between national interests and regional integration is paramount. Such regional integration depends on the sense of a common destiny or the formation of a collective regional identity (Qin and Zhu, 2005: 24–7).

**Identity formation, cultural change and American hegemony**

Alexander Wendt’s theory of identity formation and Thomas Berger’s study of identity and cultural change in Japan have together inspired Wang Qingxin Ken to examine the effect of US hegemony on post-war Japanese security culture and its impact with regard to its policy on China.6 Wang postulates that Japan’s consistent cooperation with the United States over China policy during 1950–90 can be mainly attributed to the transformation of post-war Japan’s security culture, which was made possible by US hegemony. Wang argues that changes in Japan’s security culture were initially induced by the propagation of the American vision of a post-war East Asian world order. Japan’s new identity in this order was scripted by the underlying ideology of the United States’ occupation authority in post-war Japan. Pro-American Japanese elites were socialized into these American-hegemonic ideas and these elites then diffused them to the Japanese populace. These ideas became hegemonic as they were gradually institutionalized in the Japanese political structure and policy process, as evidenced in the emergence of the perma-government of the pro-US Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). As such, Japan’s policy towards China was cast in the mould of American ideas because Japan’s continued cooperation with the United States was intimately linked with the LDP elites’ political legitimacy. Failure to continue such policies would have resulted in political punishment for the LDP politicians, so alternative policies towards China were never allowed to emerge.

Wang then provides four case studies with sustained and detailed empirical analysis to substantiate his arguments: Japan’s peace treaty with the exiled government of the Republic of China in Taiwan in 1952, Japan’s diplomatic normalization with the People’s Republic of China in 1972, Japan’s signing of a peace treaty with the People’s Republic of China in 1978, Japan’s resumption of yen loans to the People’s Republic of China after its suspension in the wake of the Tiananmen incident in 1989.7

While Western authors such as John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan and Alexander Wendt focus on the secondary elites’ socialization with the dominant state’s ideology for prolonging hegemonic cooperation,8 Wang usefully extends the focus to include the mechanisms through which socialization of secondary states’ mass publics in the dominant state’s
ideology takes place, and the consequential impact of such socialization for hegemonic cooperation.  

**Domestic ideological change and Chinese foreign policy**

Zhu Liqun offers a constructivist analysis of the causal relationship between Chinese leaders’ domestic ideological world-views and Chinese foreign policy towards more cooperation with the international community (Zhu, 2007: 9–15). She argues that the gradual change of Chinese foreign policy toward more cooperation with the international community after 1949 is due to domestic ideological change, combined with the opening provided by the change in political leadership after Mao Zedong’s death.

Shortly after the Chinese communist victory in 1949, Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong decided to ‘lean to side’ in the emerging Cold War conflicts between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, thus ushering in a period of animosity between the United States and China. In the 1960s, China adopted a bitterly confrontational policy towards both the United States and the former Soviet Union after the Sino–Soviet split. China’s guiding principle for foreign policy was ‘revolution and war’ as Chinese leaders strongly believed a third world war was inevitable, which, in turn, would lead to the final triumph of international communism.

After the arrest of the ultra-leftist Gang of Four and the rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, Chinese leaders gave top priority to economic reforms and the opening up of China, and ‘peace and development’ became the new guiding principles for Chinese foreign policy in place of ‘revolution and war’. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Chinese leaders became even more pragmatic, refusing to take up the vacant leadership role among the few remaining socialist countries. As the Chinese economic growth began to accelerate in the late 1990s, Chinese leaders began to contemplate the idea of becoming a responsible state in the international community and maintaining a balance between the pursuit of national self-interest and upholding the collective interests of the international community.

This dramatic ideological and ideational volatility has led to remarkable changes in Chinese foreign policy over the last three decades. Instead of adopting a confrontational policy and seeking to change the existing international order, Chinese foreign policy has become pragmatic and cooperative with the international community, which is evident in China’s gradual integration into the existing international order by joining the World Bank and the IMF in the 1980s, developing a good-neighbourly policy towards Asian countries, participating in the regional multilateral arrangements,

**Domestic causes and the internalization of international norms**

Another issue that Chinese constructivist scholars have engaged with are the domestic causes that underlie Chinese internalization of international norms, such as Zhu’s argument that domestic structure and politics are the primary causes of Chinese foreign policy change. A good example of such a study is an article by Kang Xiao, where Kang again relies on Alexander Wendt’s work to explain why China has internalized the rules and norms of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Zhu, 2008: 18–26). The first indication of China’s internalization of the UNFCCC is the Chinese government’s determination to shift its goals of economic development from a singular emphasis on economic development (with a concomitant neglect of environmental protection) to assigning equal importance to economic development and environmental protection. The second is a shift from relying on administrative guidance to cope with environmental problems to relying on a combination of law, economic incentives, technological innovation and administrative guidance to ensure environmental protection.

Engaging the Western debates directly, Kang argues that Wendt’s theory of internalizing norms is superior to alternative theories developed by Martha Finnemore and Jeffrey Checkel. Whereas Finnemore believes states’ internalization of international norms is a result of states’ socialization through learning, and Checkel stresses the importance of the policy-making process in effecting the internalization of norms, following Wendt, Kang argues that states’ internalization of norms results from a combination of material interests and non-material interests (such as the desire for self-respect and dignity). Specifically, Kang argues that China’s internalization of international environmental norms is best explained by its need for a new model of economic development and its desire for international recognition and respect (Kang, 2010).

**External pressure, learning and China’s international images**

Other Chinese IPE constructivists disagree with this framework and argue that pressures emanating from the broader international environment are the primary causes of China’s foreign policy change. In an article entitled ‘Pressure, Cognition and International Image’, Meng Honghua introduces the constructivist concepts of international cognition and images as variables to explain the changes in Chinese foreign policy towards international institutions from 1949 onwards (Meng, 2005: 17–20). Contrary to
conventional rationalist explanations, he argues that China’s foreign policy changes are best explained by China’s own subjective understanding of international institutions and the resultant role it has assigned itself to play in those institutions. China’s engagement with international institutions has, therefore, been constructed on the basis of China’s own understanding of international institutions and the degree of mutual trust (or lack thereof) between China and the international institutions as a result of prior interactions, rather than being determined solely by material interests.

Like Qin Yaqin, Meng stresses China’s role in international institutions as shifting from being a revisionist state from the 1950s to the 1970s to being a supporter of international institutions today. Meng argues that China’s gradually more positive perception of international institutions is a result of more frequent interaction with the international community and the gradual recognition of the importance of having a positive image within international institutions in order to further its self-constructed national interests. Meng attributes China’s change of role to three important variables: international pressure, China’s interest in promoting a positive international image and China’s socialization into international rules and norms. However, Meng does not provide clear hypotheses to specify how these factors have worked to cause China to shift its international identity. He simply suggests that there are interactive relations between these factors. Nor has he conducted a rigorous empirical study to support his arguments (Meng, 2005: 20–2).

Similarly, but more rigorously, Pang Zhongqi develops the interesting concepts of world-view (Yi Xiang) and ‘worldview gap’ in his analyses (Pang, 2007: 48–50). By world-view, he means a state’s image or vision of how world order is constructed. By worldview gap, he refers to the gap between the actual world order and the vision of world order that a state holds. Pang argues that a state’s world-view and worldview gap directly determine its international behaviour. When a state’s world-view is closely identified with the actual existing world order and the state has no incentive to change the existing order, then it is likely to become an order supporter. When a state’s world-view is very different from the actual world order, when the worldview gap is large, then the state is likely to become a revisionist state whose aim is to change the existing international order. The extent of worldview gap is, in turn, influenced by the interaction between that state and the existing world order. The more positive the interaction between the state and the actual world order, the smaller the worldview gap, for example. The more negative the interaction between the state and the existing world order, the bigger the worldview gap and the more the likelihood of there being conflict between the state and the existing world order. Through an empirical analysis, Pang concluded that China has shifted from being a spoiler or revisionist
WANG AND BLYTH: CONSTRUCTIVISM AND IPE IN CHINA

state to being a supporter of the existing world order because China has had increasingly positive interactions with international institutions (Pang, 2007: 50–4).

The interaction between the domestic political economy and the international system

Building upon this line of research, Su Changhe has examined the interaction between domestic politics and the international system, but, in this case, she privileges the international system as the primary cause of Chinese foreign policy changes. Drawing on the more materialist work of Robert Keohane and Helen Milner in *Internationalization and Domestic Politics* (1996) and conjoining this to Robert Cox’s *Power, Production and World Order* (1986), Su has developed a materialist framework of analysis with a constructivist twist (ideology) to study the interaction between the domestic political economy and the international system (Su, 2007: 6–9).

Su posits that the international system is defined as the sum of the international power structure, production and trade. The domestic political economy refers to the sum of the various social and political forces, including various political parties, domestic interest groups, as well as foreign groups such as multinational corporations (MNCs) and foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that operate domestically. Su then identifies three channels through which the international system and domestic political economy can interact: political power, price movements and the cross-national human interactions that result in ideological exchange. The state, MNCs and NGOs are the three major actors that lead the interaction between the international system and the domestic political economy through the three major channels.

Through these interactions, Su argues that the international system can cause the reconfiguration of the domestic political economy in ways that make the two more alike, or the international system may fail to transform the domestic political economy due to strong domestic resistance. The outcome of the transformation depends on whether the components of the international system (power, production and ideology) can bring benefits or costs to the various domestic constituents since some domestic forces will benefit from the international system and some may be harmed by it.

Using this framework of analysis, Su argues that the transformation of the Chinese domestic political economy in the last three decades has been closely associated with the influence and pressure of the international system. Influenced by Susan Shirk’s earlier study on a similar subject, Su argues that the nature of domestic transformations depends on the interaction between the international system on the one hand and the three major socio-political forces inside China on the other: the coalition that seeks to keep the existing socialist planning system intact (the
conservative group), those that seek to completely transform the Chinese political economy through radical means (the revolutionary group) and those that seek to transform the Chinese economic system by introducing market mechanisms while persevering in the existing political system (the gradualist group). The gradualist group has to date had the greatest political support and success. Su sees it as the most powerful because it is a compromise between the two more extreme positions.

For example, the creation of the two-track pricing system in the 1980s as a strategy of economic reform was a product of this gradualist group. Its strategy became dominant because it was able to generate momentum for gradual marketization while garnering enough political support from the conservative group through side-payments. The core component of this gradual group included the coastal provinces, where the labour-intensive export-oriented sectors are concentrated, the growing non-state sectors, the expanding middle class, liberal-minded intellectuals, and central and local officials who gain concrete benefits directly from the gradual reforming strategy, such as increasing tax revenues. The strategy worked to contribute to the successful adoption of the notion of the ‘socialist market economy’ at the 14th party congress in 1992, which officially sanctioned the gradualist reform strategy of the CCP – a major turning point in the transformation of the Chinese domestic political economy (Su, 2007: 9–13).

International ideas and China’s foreign trade policy

Although Su’s analysis contains a constructivist element, Wang Qingxin Ken offers a more thoroughly constructivist study of the same phenomenon by analysing the politics of international ideas and their effects on Chinese foreign trade policy.11 Wang Qingxin Ken studied the effects of Chinese economists’ socialization into the theory of neoclassical economics and the impact of such ideas on China’s WTO accession in 2001. Wang’s analysis clearly demonstrates that China’s foreign trade policy has been heavily influenced by Chinese socialization into Western economic theories, as in the case of the WTO accession. In particular, he argues that the reason that China eventually agreed to the signing of the WTO accession agreement with the United States in 1999 was because of highly-placed Chinese economists’ familiarity with neoclassical economic ideas and the dissemination of these ideas to top leaders, which contributed to these leaders’ final resolve to sign a very liberal version of the agreement.

Wang argues that the Chinese decision to liberalize trade policy was dependent on the politics of ideational contests between the conservatives and liberals over the direction of the SOE and foreign trade policy reforms. According to Wang, a rival group of conservative Marxist economists supported a vision of a socialist market economy that was characterized by the continued dominance of public ownership in the form of SOEs,
a semblance of a market environment being created for SOEs to compete with each other. The government was to be both the main player in the marketplace through its ownership of SOEs and a regulator of the market. Private sector agents, including foreign investors, would be relegated to secondary positions in the economy, as the preservation of the dominance of public ownership was paramount.

In contrast, the group of liberal-minded economists, who were influenced heavily by neoclassical economics through their academic exchange and schooling by US-based neoclassical economists, conceived an alternative vision of a socialist market economy that called for a fundamental transformation of China’s state planning system into a free-market system with a fair and level playing field for the SOEs and the private sector to compete on an equal footing. These economists believed that the socialist market economy is about social fairness and efficiency, rather than the maintenance of SOE dominance per se. The role of the government is, therefore, to play the role of referee and create the rules to enable the market economy to function, rather than to be a player and a referee at the same time. Public ownership in this vision is limited to the provision of public goods and SOEs that did not provide public goods were to be privatized.

Both groups had their political supporters in the different bureaucratic agencies. According to Wang, the appointment of liberal-minded Zhu Rongji as the new premier in 1997 tipped the balance between the two competing groups since Zhu, and many of his colleagues, were socialized into the liberal vision. Moreover, the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 discredited the East Asian economic model of the developmental state in the eyes of many Chinese leaders, and the conservative vision of the socialist market economy, which was akin to the East Asian model, suffered alongside. The East Asian crisis led to a new political consensus in favour of the WTO accession, which legitimated the top leaders’ decision to liberalize the trade regime by signing the WTO agreement with the United States in 1999.12 Thus, as Wang concludes, the so-called ‘China Model’ of economic development, which has been debated by liberal and Marxist IPE scholars, is no more than a political modus vivendi between the conservative economists and their political allies on the one hand and liberal economists and their political allies on the other hand. Seen in this way, Chinese constructivist analysis sheds new light on contemporary policy problems.

Taking constructivism further: Confucianism and Chinese foreign policy

The growing influence of constructivism as a legitimate perspective for the study of international relations has made Chinese constructivist scholars more appreciative of the important impact of Chinese cultural values and beliefs on the conduct of Chinese foreign policy. In particular, a small
number of Chinese scholars have focused on traditional culture (especially Confucianism) and its influence on current and future Chinese foreign policy (Zhao, 2005; Yan and Xu, 2008). They argue that Confucianism has continued to exert a great deal of influence on contemporary Chinese policy despite the abolition of Confucianism as a state ideology after the 1911 revolution.

Wang Qingxin Ken’s study of the impact of Confucian norms on Chinese foreign policy was one of the first such studies. Wang’s study identifies several prominent cultural norms in Chinese tradition that have important bearings on China’s foreign relations. These norms include the Confucian emphasis on moral conduct and rules of propriety, the principle of chung-yung (zhong-yong) and pragmatism, aversion to the use of force, and a preference for defence over offence. Wang examines the influence of these cultural norms on contemporary Chinese leaders’ conceptions of international relations and the impact of these norms on the conduct of Chinese foreign policy after 1949 by providing detailed empirical evidence. He argues that Chinese cultural norms have shaped contemporary Chinese leaders’ conception of international relations to a certain extent, as the leaders had been socialized into these cultural norms during their formative years, despite their commitment to communism. Indeed, these cultural norms have exerted some discernible influence on the conduct of Chinese foreign policy after 1949.

A more recent study on the subject is a book written by Yan Xuetong, which examines the writings of several pre-Qin Chinese philosophers and their views on international relations affairs and draws some implications of these ideas for future Chinese foreign policy. One chapter analyses the writings of Xunzi, the ancient Confucian philosopher, who distinguished three types of international authority: humane authority, which is exerted by a sage king on the basis of the king’s extraordinary benevolence and moral justice; hegemony, where the ruler falls short of the sage king’s morality, but attains his leadership through military force and strategic reliability; and tyranny, which is a lesser form of international power than hegemony and relies solely on military strategy and conquest. Humane authority is the most ideal international authority, according to Xunzi. Yan believed that Xunzi’s ideal of humane authority should be the goal that future Chinese leaders should aim for if China were to ascend to the status of an international great power.

As Yan explains, ‘an increase in wealth can raise China’s power status but it does not necessarily enable China to become a country respected by others, because a political superpower that puts wealth as its highest national interest may bring disaster rather than blessings to other countries’. As Yan suggests, Xunzi’s understanding that hierarchical norms are beneficial in preventing conflict is still relevant today. But Yan thinks that the hierarchical nature of the tributary system practised in ancient
China is irrelevant in today’s world because ‘any effort to restore the tribute system will weaken China’s capability for international political mobilization’. Rather, he suggests, ‘China should propose that large states and small states should have different international responsibilities and rights commensurate to their size and capabilities, and that different states should respect different security norms. For example, if small states are not allowed to develop nuclear weapons, the large states should have the responsibility to provide nuclear guarantee.’

**Conclusion: Convergences and divergences in Chinese and American constructivist IPE**

Daniel Maliniak and Michael Tierney’s 2006 survey of US IPE revealed what might be the counter-story to the one told here concerning the evolution of Chinese IPE. In the Chinese version of events that we have just surveyed, Marxism is dominant, but, over time, it has had to share journal space and intellectual respect with liberalism and, increasingly, with constructivism. In Maliniak and Tierney’s account, we see Marxist accounts, which were the dominant perspective in US IPE in 1980, collapse to 0 per cent of the top 12 journals by 2005. In its wake, liberalism was ascendant, appearing in 70 per cent of all US articles by 1999. By the time that their data collection ends, in 2006, liberalism in IPE remained triumphant and constructivism had barely made an impact.

It is more than a little tempting to read these developments as reflective of how different parts of the world construct their version of the way the world works and their place within it. Liberalism reached its zenith in the US and in US journals in 1999 at the end of the millennium, when Marxism had been defeated and markets and democracy seemed to be the only game in town. Before the global financial crisis shook the world’s faith in the American version of the globe, Dr Pangloss’ liberalism reigned supreme. IPE in the US reflected this. China, as we see here, increasingly embraces liberalism as China becomes more embedded within and socialized into the liberal international economic order, just as Chinese constructivists would predict. But it does so with Marxism as a legitimate competitor, while Chinese liberal scholars share many of the same critiques of the US-dominated IPE as their Marxist colleagues.

In the light of the on-going global financial crisis, we must qualify this picture still further, however. Since the onset of the crisis, Marxist and realist perspectives have gained some strength in relation to the liberal and constructivist views in Chinese IPE scholarship and this is reflected even in Chinese English language scholarship. A recent Brookings Institute report, written jointly by leading American and Chinese scholars, analyses the growing distrust that exists between political elites in both countries in the wake of the crisis.
The report argues that the crisis prompted the Chinese elite as a whole to coalesce around the belief that China is on the road to becoming the dominant world power and that the US is in decline. They have reactivated the notion that China’s model of economic development may provide an alternative to the Western liberal democracy model for developing countries, as discussed above. Moreover, Chinese elites believe US policy is guided by the objective of maintaining US hegemony and that a part of US–China policy is to constrain China from challenging the US in Asia through policies such as arms sales to Taiwan, promoting democracy in China and, more recently, in the rebalancing of the entire US military posture toward Asia. US pressure on China to revalue the renminbi was also seen by many in the elite as little more than a protectionist measure to put China in an economically disadvantageous position. Indeed, some even believe that the global climate negotiations are simply a US plot to slow down Chinese economic growth in order to prevent China from challenging US hegemony.

Nonetheless, Chinese liberal and constructivist thinking remain robust. After all, what these elites are doing is reformulating their beliefs, which is an essentially constructivist process. This is evidenced in a joint publication of the World Bank and the Development Research Center (DRC) of China’s State Council released in late 2012, entitled ‘China 2030’. This report argues that China’s current growth model is not sustainable and calls for drastic reforms to the Chinese economy in order to avoid a sharp downturn of economic growth over the next two decades. Specifically, the report calls on China to implement structural reforms to strengthen its market-based economy by redefining the role of the government and curtailing the size of SOEs and banks. This, it is hoped, would provide a fairer and freer market where private actors can compete with state enterprises on a level playing field. The report clearly attacks the leftist advocacy of the China model as an alternative to Western capitalism and lends credible support to the liberal-minded Chinese economists who have been advocating the building of a more competitive and freer market economy in China.

Liberals and realists would argue that these patterns of scholarship are reflective of the fact that China’s changing position in the world is not in doubt, but, as constructivist scholars in both the US and China would agree, it is also reflective of China’s changing perception of its identity, its interests and its agenda.

As we noted earlier, the one big question that seems to unite Chinese constructivist authors is their dissatisfaction with the liberal interpretation of why China changed so rapidly from being a radical revisionist state to being a (qualified) supporter of the dominant order. Deng’s famous line that ‘to get rich is no sin’ may be enough for Adam Smith, but it is not enough for the Chinese constructivists. As such, all the works surveyed here combine attention to mechanisms of socialization with prevailing
international ideas and norms as the source of China’s emergence and shift in stance in the international order. In this regard, we would expect, and we would find, work in Chinese constructivist IPE that mirrors work done in the US and elsewhere, but also makes some unique contributions.

In terms of the authors discussed above, since Qin Yaqing’s and Kang Xiao’s work was directly inspired by Alexander Wendt’s work, we should not be at all surprised by their similarity of approach. But in the other cases surveyed above, the parallels are less obviously derived, but just as striking. Zhu Liqun’s analysis very much parallels the ‘second image reversed’ tradition pioneered by Gourevitch. Meng Honghua’s work speaks directly to the works of Finnemore and Checkel, as noted above. Wang Qingxin Ken’s work on the influence of economists echoes work by Chwieroth, Nelson and others interested in the same phenomena in the Western world. But where Chinese constructivist IPE scholarship makes a distinct contribution lies in its ability to layer a particular critical materialism derived from Marxism onto its analysis, as we saw in the work of Su Changhe, and in the work of Wang Qingxin Ken and Yan Xuetang on the effect of Confucianism on China’s international behaviour.

If there is one area where both sets of scholars could learn from each other, it is in the need to be more comparative. While Chinese IPE constructivist scholars have not paid sufficient attention to explaining foreign policy changes outside China, the same is true for many Western, particularly American, scholars. One of the fundamental principles of constructivism is that ‘things could have been different’ – the material environment, while important, is not fully determining. Exploiting that insight demands comparative analysis so that the different ‘paths not taken’ can be analysed together. If Chinese and American constructivists bring different concerns within a common framework to the table and engage comparatively, perhaps then the true value-added of their work can be appreciated.

NOTES

1 This paper is written based on a survey of articles and books published by Chinese scholars in the fields of international relations, international political economy and foreign policy studies. Most of the articles and books were published in China, with some of the articles published in related Western academic journals. The relevant major Chinese academic journals include Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economy and Politics), Waijiao Pinglun (Review of Foreign Affairs) and Guoji Wenti Yanjiu (Studies of International Issues). What follows is not intended to be an exhaustive categorization of all Chinese work on these topics. That would be impossible in an article. Rather, the intention is to give the reader a useful overview of the major contending approaches.

2 Also see Wang Yong, The China Business Review, July/August 1999.

3 Similarly, another liberal-minded scholar, Qin Hui, Professor at Tsinghua University, argued that the success of the China model is predicated on the
exploitation of Chinese cheap labour, which is not protected with even the minimum level of labour rights. Such a model cannot be appealing to other third world countries, which have democratic polities.


12 Ibid., 457–65.


14 Ibid.


17 Ibid., 100, 104–6.


19 Ibid., 15. Later work by Abdelal et al. stress the insurgent nature of constructivism in the last part of the 2000s in the US, while Weaver and Phillips stress the dominance of the constructivist and post-structuralist approaches in European IPE, but in Maliniak and Tierney’s data, China appears as a picture of pluralism in comparison to the US’ liberal hegemony.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


WANG AND BLYTH: CONSTRUCTIVISM AND IPE IN CHINA


