

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK ON GLOBAL CHINA

Edited by Maximilian Mayer, Emilian Kavalski, Marina Rudyak and Xin Zhang

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EPILOGUE

Global China: Epistemic Traps and Analytical Registers

*Maximilian Mayer, Emilian Kavalski,
Marina Rudyak and Xin Zhang*

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*Maximilian Mayer, Emilian Kavalski,
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This *Handbook* set off with the intention to explore the content, meaning and practices of the phenomenon of Global China. As the chapters in this volume demonstrate, the complex entanglements of Global China and their implications are contingent on diverse sets of dynamic and reciprocal relations with multiple actors, contexts and agencies. At the same time, the relationship between the international outreach of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the effects of Global China are hardly clear-cut and obvious, even though the two are intimately intertwined. It is therefore not surprising that the bulk of the contributions included in this *Handbook* suggest that it is by acknowledging the multiple sites, voices and faces of Global China that we can begin a more meaningful conversation on the nature and implications of China's rise, and a much-needed reconsideration of the key concepts and frameworks of analysis of Global China.

Thus, accounting for the full complexity of Global China requires overcoming entrenched ontological, epistemic and normative dichotomies intent on disciplining, excluding and denigrating its experiences, patterns and contributions to the making, observation and explanation of world politics. The following sections outline some of the epistemic traps and analytical registers disclosed in the contributions to this *Handbook*.

The Epistemic Traps of Global China

The chapters included in this *Handbook* emphasize that what is at stake in the encounter with Global China and its theorizing is the ability to engage other ways to observe and encounter the world, ourselves and the problems that embroil us; and to put such alternatives into a nuanced comparative conversation with more familiar critical political lexicons and procedures. Beyond outlining the distinct and diverse ways in which such endeavors could proceed, the individual contributions to this volume also uncover important epistemic traps that plague many research endeavors seeking to grasp the phenomenon of Global China.

Firstly, the Global China framework resists *othering* – as found in various forms of self-limiting and prejudiced concepts in analytical engagements and the partisan policy responses they inform and produce. In consequence, the very concepts that guide policymakers can be not just self-limiting but perpetuate prejudices. One such example is the apparent

contradiction between the European Union's (EU) designation of China as "a partner, a competitor, and a systemic rival" all the while Brussels is keen to forge an "open strategic autonomy" for Europe (Kavalski and Mayer 2024, Mayer and Kavalski 2024). How useful is this formula for dealing with Global China? Admittedly, it is certainly more nuanced than a simple friend/foe binary, and it allows the EU to avoid the practices of explicitly othering China. Yet, it does still have blind spots. For instance, it omits the registers of coordination, convergence, coexistence and co-evolution, which could be relevant in areas ranging from climate policy to development cooperation, and from the governance of emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence to sustainable supply chain management. Another case is the notion of a "New Cold War," a prime example of the dangers of othering when it comes to theorizing, as a concept that portrays China as an authoritarian or even totalitarian threat to democratic polities. Yet, at the same time, the Global China framework can infuse much needed multi-perspectivity into the notion of the "New Cold War" by incorporating a historical-situational dimension to conceptualize it as a "Global Cold War," taking into account its diverse regional manifestations (Schindler and DiCarlo 2022). Consequently, embracing a Global China perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of the geopolitical landscape and encourages a complicated act: Balancing the sensitivity for threats and intensifying competition (Moldicz, this volume, Zhang 2020) with the notion of great power "coexistence" (Heer 2023) or even peaceful co-evolution. The great power reductionism embedded in associated "power transition" (Walton and Kavalski 2017) narratives is typically privileging grand narratives over granular research. The Global China perspective instead makes it possible to account for local conflict dynamics amid global change while allowing for nuance and complexity.

Secondly, a Global China framework elevates positionality as a methodological concern in addressing the "strategic narcissism" outlined by Hans Morgenthau (1978). Strategic narcissism refers to the tendency to see the world from a singular perspective and to assume that actors have only one set of intentions and outcomes. Research on Global China reflects the vacuity of such positions by highlighting the simultaneity and diversity of global, regional and local interactions, resonances and mobilities. The phenomenon of Global China challenges the deductive imposition of linear patterns of causality, while articulating theoretical sensitivity to the heterogeneity of actors and contexts. As a result, Global China approaches require detailed empirical field studies and data-rich research designs. They also need to include an empirical openness to diverse concerns, controversies and agencies that inform research designs and analytical frameworks (cf. Otele 2020, Chiyemura et al. 2023, Moldicz 2022).

Taking relationality and agency seriously also means recognizing that different facets of Global China are perceived differently in different parts of the world. Though almost a banal observation, it needs to be acknowledged that China's image as a global actor differs depending on the audience, country and region. Such acknowledgment requires analytical nuance and dispensing with the privileging of one perspective over another. For example, Chinese development finance is seen exclusively as a challenge by the US/West, while Global South stakeholders perceive both Chinese and US/Western development assistance as complementary. Such alternative knowledge production, by implication, would then seek to place "the rest," the so-called "Global South," on a map that eschews the strategic narcissism centered on US-China confrontation or the "China threat" to global liberal order.

The chapters included in this *Handbook* indicate that any of the Global China approaches need to be wary of the two epistemic traps outlined above and in the

Introduction to this volume. Overcoming the conditions of “sinological Orientalism” and claims to “positional superiority” (Vukovich 2013: 3), is first and foremost a question of scrutinizing the underlying assumptions of knowledge production both within and outside of China (Shih 2011). As mentioned in the introductory chapter of this *Handbook*, it is crucial to avoid falling into the traps of great power reductionism, the territorial trap and civilizational essentialism when designing research. Instead, it is advisable to adopt principles and approaches that can effectively address the complex and challenging dynamics of global competition, fragility and crisis, which are intricately intertwined with the practices, perceptions and reactions of Global China. This approach allows for a more comprehensive examination of the multifaceted factors that shape and impact Global China, taking into account its intricate interactions within the broader global context of competition and crisis.

Analytical Registers of Global China

The diverse perspectives of the contributions to this *Handbook* offer ample evidence that there is no such thing as *the* theory, perspective or narrative of Global China. In other words, the chapters collected in this volume do not intend to suggest that there is a single analytical approach that can capture the full spectrum of practices, processes and dynamics of the phenomenon of Global China. This phenomenon, just like global life itself, is “simply too complex and multidimensional to fit easily and completely into any one ready-made model” (Huang 1998: 186). Instead, this *Handbook* seeks to contribute to the call for dialogical analytical engagement that acknowledges a multiplicity of theoretical takes on the variety of experiences and phenomena enfolded under the label of Global China (Nordin et al. 2019). Such a dialogue across theoretical and disciplinary divides intends neither synthesis nor accumulation, but transformational imaginary that can, in varying degrees, free the explanation and understanding of Global China from the anxiety and/or prejudice dominating so much of current analyses. Being clear about biases and binaries involves a commitment to being transparent about the aims and purposes of the analysis. As indicated in the preceding chapters, the encounter with Global China suggests five analytical registers to guide future research design: (1) relationality, (2) global capitalist processes, (3) language and discourse power, (4) planetary scale modernization, and (5) experimentalism.

Relationality

The attention to the notion of Global China in this volume emphasizes the dynamism of relations, processes, negotiations, adaptations and contestations rather than the parsimony of capacities, intentions and hegemonic transitions. Instrumentally speaking, such conceptualization outlines “resistance, bargaining, accommodation, appropriation and adaptations by players in this power project not as an afterthought or secondary supplementary study but as *constitutive* of global China” (Lee 2022: 317). The point here is that while the phenomenon of Global China may have remained a “blind spot in IR theorizing” (Pan and Kavalski 2018, Pan and Kavalski 2022), the conceptualization and practices of China’s outreach have provoked substantive shift towards *relational* theoretical perspectives (Aryodiguno and Shih, this volume, Huang, this volume). Although a comprehensive theoretical framework has yet to fully emerge, this collection asserts that it is the

experiences and phenomena related to Global China's concepts and practices that form the foundation for the growth of relational theorizing as a means to observe and engage with the world, ourselves and the complex problems we face. Furthermore, it seeks to facilitate a nuanced comparative dialogue between alternative perspectives and more familiar critical political vocabularies and methodologies (Garlick, this volume, Kavalski 2023, Pan and Zhao, this volume). Rooted in the conviction that global life outlines a complex mesh of contingent interactions, the contributions to such a "relational revolution" (Kurki 2022, Kavalski 2018) draw attention to the ongoing interpenetration between agency, structure and order amongst the diversity of action, form and matter implicated in, enacting and enabling global life.

Commitment to relationality is not new to the explanation and understanding of world politics. Rather, it is the multi-layered effects of Global China that have helped *uncover* the commitment to relationality as a defining feature of a number of Sinophone intellectual traditions (Zhang 2015: 180, see Shih et al. 2019, Zhang and Chang 2016). As such, several proponents tend to draw on the ancient Chinese thought and ideas for their explanation and understanding of the relationality uncovered through the dynamics of Global China. For instance, Zhao Tingyang zooms in on the concept and historical patterns of *Tianxia* (天下, usually translated as "all-under-heaven"). According to Zhao (2021), *Tianxia* rests on a relational ordering principle, which prioritizes the most beneficial mutual interactions (the minimization of mutual harm) rather than the most beneficial unilateral strategy (the maximization of individual interest). Likewise, Qin Yaqing (2018) deploys Confucian concepts to ascertain that the volatility characterizing the international society reflects its constitution as an unpredictable relational web whose dynamics are embedded in and emerge from contingent and often erratic interactions. Others, referring to the approaches of the English School, argue that the Chinese practice of *guanxi* (关系) became so widespread globally that it has gained the status of a primary institution (Ye 2023). In all such framings, what passes for world order is not only constantly changing, but also demands ongoing commitment to participating and maintaining social exchanges (Callahan, this volume). Against this backdrop, the disclosure of the relationality of world affairs prompted by the phenomenon of Global China has helped uncover the complex, eclectic and non-objective blend of cultural universals and culturally specific patterns of social interaction underpinning the dynamics of international life (Hwang, this volume).

Thus, it would seem that along with the intensification in cross-border movements of ideas, capital, people and media attendant on the growing significance of Global China, China's outreach has become the investigative focus of a range of disciplines. Zhang (2023), for instance, demonstrates how framings that combine postcolonial thought and right-wing ideas are easily moved between the Chinese and other societies. Others are addressing evolving processes including topics such as the expanding geographies and politics of China's international relations; the interactions between China and the Global South; the outreach of Chinese migration and diasporas; the trans-nationalization of Chinese families, religions, businesses, and education; the rise of Chinese Internet worlds; the histories, trans-national imaginaries, and characteristics of a transnational Sinophone cultural sphere, to name only a few (Benabdallah 2020, Kavalski 2012, Miles 2020, Nonini and Ong 1997, Ong 2003, Rudyak 2023b). A key insight from the research on Chinese diaspora is the fluid, hybrid and multifaceted identity of "Chineseness" (Aryodiguno and Shih, this volume). In the same line, Callahan (this volume) argues that the current "neo-socialist" ideology of

the party-state is equally of a hybrid or composite identity “syncretically mixing Chinese tradition, capitalist modernity, and socialist modernity.”

Global China seems to have sparked a proliferation of relational discussions across various disciplines. These debates aim to uncover modes of understanding, explanation and engagement that not only acknowledge complexity and foster dynamism but also promote the cross-pollination of diverse ideas (Huang, this volume). They also seek to engage with the ever-changing and multifaceted processes that intermittently overwhelm, intensify and influence the mercurial trajectories of global life (Kavalski 2020, Liu, this volume). One example of such alternative perspectives is the “People’s Map of Global China” (2024), which concentrates on the Chinese involvement with global civil society and aims to elevate the voices of marginalized communities often overlooked by political and business elites. In contrast to grassroots approaches, the Chinese government has increased its collaboration with UNESCO to support intercultural dialogue and preserve heritage (Liu and Zong, this volume). An alternative, more pessimistic lens on emerging relational politics focuses on the growing resonance and similarity of authoritarian technologies exported by China and forms of governance on one hand (Arsène, this volume, Dimitrov, this volume), and the activities of the “united front,” which capitalizes on ethnic and cultural relations, on the other hand (Weber, this volume).

Global (Capitalist) Processes

A crucial conceptual angle to make sense of the processes and relationships of Global China is to situate its analysis within global capitalism and the ways in which its ascendance shapes and is shaped by the evolving global capitalistic system (Arrighi 2007, Dirlik 2017, Hung 2009). This perspective defies simplistic treatments of China–US competition as rivalry between two distinct material and ideological systems and instead emphasizes the nature of China within and on top of the global system, and its potential to shape the global system through co-evolution with other components and actors within the system.

Typically, China’s economic rise is narrated primarily as a consequence of the country’s meteoric economic growth since the early 1980s, which was supported by its integration into the post-Cold War global capitalist expansion and its membership in the World Trade Organization in 2001. However, in exploring the causes for and effects of China’s resurging economic might, Global China advocates a broad, long-term view that reaches well beyond the reform era for answers. Such a lens would suggest that China has been a key part of a global trade and production system for centuries and its modern transition has been closely related to the rise and expansion of the global capitalist system. Even during the Maoist period, China was closely economically interconnected, for instance, with the Soviet Union and the Eastern camp, with whom it had established trade and technology exchanges (Kelly 2021). China also had, even if to a lesser extent but nevertheless not insignificant, economic connections to Africa. In 1960, for instance, Chinese purchase of Egyptian cotton helped stabilize Egypt’s economy in crisis (Shinn 2019). The PRC was, as noted by Su and Kim (2023: 703), “never insulated from the global economy after its formation in 1949” because it was “internationalized right from its inception by becoming a major component within the USSR-led ‘socialist world economy.’” Such a lens, in addition, grounds China’s development historically within a changing global environment and spatiality of dynamic shifts in global capitalism, different forms of capital, and includes discussions of

the imperative and feasibility of a post-capitalist (socialist) Chinese model, reconstructed as an alternative to standardized modernity at an impasse.

On the one hand, internally, Chinese capitalism may exhibit distinctive features that combine both “accumulation without dispossession” (Arrigi 2007) and simultaneously extreme forms of primitive exploitation of labor and nature by capital, with social and ecological consequences that extend beyond China’s national borders. While such features may differ from the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism, which has been the dominant form of capitalism in the world since the late 1980s, China as a whole has also benefited from and adhered to the US-led liberal capitalist order since the beginning of its reform period in the early 1980s. On the other hand, key features of Chinese capitalism have also begun to reshape the defining features of the new era of global capitalism, be it financialization or the rise of the infrastructural state, platform capitalism/surveillance capitalism or the growth of inequality (Rolf and Schindler 2023, Zuboff 2019, Klein and Pettis 2020). There might also be increasing convergence between the US and China in terms of how domestic capitalism is managed, which actually further drives the competition between these two leading economies (Hung 2022). How such “competition in convergence” – including industrial policies, subsidies for emerging technologies, trade barriers and strategic standardization policies – will play out in the future will have a direct bearing on the coming shape of the global capitalist system (Zhang 2020, Rühlig and Ten Brink 2021).

From such a perspective, Global China would emphasize the internal contradictions and challenges facing the internal political economy of China, for example, emerging problems of overaccumulation since the late 1990s, rising inequality and new forms of social exclusion, and seeks to explore its connection with the consequent policy changes regarding international engagement, such as “Going Abroad,” the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the more recent “Dual Circulation” (双循环). Through such a lens, BRI may be looked as joint efforts of state businesses to promote overseas capital accumulation and expansion, with a clear vision of how to organize global capitalism on different scale and spatialities from the current arrangement, including a focus on regional and transregional corridors and transnational infrastructures (Zhang 2017, Mayer and Zhang 2021, Schindler and Kanai 2021). A related question remains crucial for the shape of Chinese global and local impacts: Varieties of the “spatial fix” produced by the injections of Chinese capitalism in different world regions influence the social realities and political economy of growth, extractivism and industrialization co-created by the economic entanglements of millions of Chinese actors (Zajontz and Taylor 2021, Moldicz 2023, Chen, this volume, Wise 2020). In a similar manner, the nature and impact of such a grandiose initiative as the BRI, especially its core mission of “connectivity,” is still highly dependent on the hybrid nature of Chinese capitalism in the world system and how the Chinese state shapes and is shaped by globalized capitalism (on a local and global scale) and digital ecosystems (through “selective connectivity”) (Huang et al. 2022, cf. Zheng 2004). Thus, Global China leaves open the questions whether “Chinese-style capitalism” and novel forms of economic statecraft expressed through projects such as the BRI (Petry 2023, Su and Kim 2023) and the global presence of Chinese commercial tech giants (Creemers, this volume) will be able to inject new dynamism into the current capitalist world system and unleash a fundamentally different power transition, or whether it will just be a short-lived, self-defeating chapter in the long cycles of capitalist hegemonic competition.

As constitutive part of the global capitalist system and major contributor to its expansion and cyclical change, Global China is often associated with intensified global economic dependencies and consequent “strategic dependency” by other actors. The contributions to this volume examine in detail various spheres and mechanisms through which such dependencies are developed, as well as their nature and consequences. Among others, Gottwald and Duggan (this volume) argue that the RMB and Chinese norms and ideas on financial governance still have a long way to go before they can fundamentally change global finance; while in the field of international development, Carmody et al. (this volume) find that the distinctive characteristics of the Chinese economy and overseas economic engagements have not altered the overall dynamics and contradictions related to the global dialectic of development/underdevelopment given their fundamentally capitalist nature; China’s emergence has in crucial ways reproduced capitalism “as usual.” Safdar (this volume) demonstrates, in line with various case studies on project negotiations of the BRI, the agentic role of local actors and local political dynamics in negotiating with Chinese capital in Pakistan’s power sector. These analyses demonstrate overall that such interaction, co-evolution and “dependency” is not a purely deliberate creation by the Chinese party-state or commercial actors, nor result of a forceful imposition onto China’s partners or a willing adoption by the actors on the receiving end.

Additionally, as global capitalism evolves, Global China will have a critical role in sectors relevant to emerging technologies, social and economic organizations, and not least the organization of social spaces where the two former evolved and take place. This involvement has the potential to shape new characteristics and influence the practices of global capitalism. Flock and Meyer-Clement (this volume) examine the interplay between the changes of global connectivity in China’s urban history and the engagement of China’s cities with the global. Dimitrov (this volume) examines China’s potential export of digital authoritarianism to Africa, while Séverine (this volume) outlines China’s adoption of the global trend of leveraging big data and utilizing its specific resources to rapidly and extensively develop its digital industry, establishing a Chinese algorithmic power deeply intertwined with the global political economy. Cao and Sun (this volume) argue that China’s ascent as a global power in science, technology and innovation is based on both indigenous efforts and the benefits offered by globalized innovation networks and technology transfers. Currently, the Chinese leadership faces a crucial challenge as to how it can switch to a more self-reliant mode, while further increasing connectivity and managing growing interdependencies with the rest of the world. Similarly, in the realm of renewable energy development, Tyfield (this volume) observes that the progression of China’s sustainability is increasingly dependent on its self-reorganization of power/knowledge dynamics, which may be constrained or propelled by the escalating geopolitical tensions.

Language and Discourse Power

A register of Global China that is increasingly gaining prominence pertains to the role of language and discourse practices in China’s quest to expand its global political reach. Attention to language and discourse power in the study of Global China corresponds to the increasing attention to discourse analysis in International Relations (IR) scholarship, not least as a pathway to bridge the disciplinary divide between the domestic and the international (Carta and Narminio 2021, Fisher-Onar and Kavalski 2022). Such an approach,

first, calls for attention to Chinese language sources, which still are too often neglected in Western IR scholarship and, thus, for taking the Chinese language seriously as a medium in which people are trying to comprehend the world. Second, such a perspective sheds light on the politics of translation – an area largely overlooked within IR scholarship – and how it is employed by China to increase its influence over international discourses including, for instance, in the security and global governance fields (Cho and Kavalski 2015, Van Noort and Colley 2021, Gurol 2023).

Chinese politics has always paid attention to “doing things with words” (Schoenhals 1992). *Tifa* (提法), the formalized language, coined by Geremie Barmé reminiscent of Orwell as *New China Newspeak* (*xinhua wenti* 新华文体) has been employed for “perlocutionary acts” (Austin 1975) – with the intention to produce consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts and actions of people, and thus not only to assert but *do* things. Language and discourse power as a Global China register help comprehend and conceptualize perlocutionary acts not as segregated phenomena that only operate domestically but as reacting, mobilizing, appropriating or connecting to broader global discourses, histories and trends.

For example, the discourse of Chinese nationalism is intertwined with international discourses on hierarchies of cultural superiority/inferiority, including Social Darwinism as part of Marxism (O’Brien and Brown, this volume). The related “re-education” and “Sinicization” of ethnic minorities in China is framed as a “civilizing” mission, yet at the same time the language found in policy documents that outline how to overcome “relative backwardness” of ethnic groups is equally employed in rhetoric about China’s foreign aid to other development countries (Rudyak 2020: 204). The politics of repression and surveillance in Xinjiang, on the other hand, were linked and justified with George W. Bush’s “Global war on terror.” Meanwhile, Chinese urban planners have connected China’s rapid urbanization and city development to a global discourse on the modern city, first influenced by the urbanization in the Soviet Union and later shaped by global economic ambitions – the latter in particular legitimizing a massive rural-urban divide with privileged access to cities and privileged access of city dwellers to urban services (Flock and Meyer-Clement, this volume). Cities represent just one facet of “modernity” and the complex process of modernization, whose effective realization, domestication and steering are central to legitimacy narratives of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (Mahoney, this volume, Callanhan, this volume, Hwang, this volume).

While the above outlined the localization of the global for purposes of power and legitimacy, the use of underlying linguistic architecture extended early on beyond China. This architecture refers to what Barmé termed “translated China,” a highly regulated language to present China to the outside world (Barmé 2012, Zappone 2018). The practice somewhat lost significance in the Reform-Era-China after 1978 and certainly seemed *passé* to “the West” after the end of the Cold War. However, it has regained considerable significance in the twenty-first century, particularly during the Xi-era (Zhao 2016). The term *huayuquan* (话语权), which can be literally translated as “speaking rights” or “right to speak” and conveys the concept of “discourse power,” has become representative of China’s frustration regarding its perceived insufficient international status and influence, as well as the perceptions of China by others (Rolland 2020). What *huayuquan* entails exactly has been subject to different interpretations within the Chinese discourse. According to Zhao (2016), these include the understanding of *huayuquan*: (1) As the right to be heard/

to have a say particularly as a developing country in the capitalist-dominated international system, (2) as an extension of hard power and national strength, (3) as the power of the media, (4) as soft power, or (5) as diplomatic skill. Rolland (2020: 7) argues that in the Xi-era, *huayuquan* encompasses essentially three central characteristics. First, it is understood as a form of material power and essential for a country to achieve comprehensive national power. Second, it is perceived as a tool employed by the West to shape the international system and world order, recognizing that words convey the concepts and values that shape international norms and govern the world order – “whoever rules the words rules the world.” Third, it signifies that China has been “hiding its power and biding its time” long enough, and the momentum has arrived to proactively participate in shaping global governance.

Debates around *huayuquan* are driven by several assumptions, namely that international public opinion, and “the West” in particular, misunderstands China; that the international rules-based order is only a “so-called” one because it falls short in adequately considering the interests of developing countries – a critique that certainly is shared by many countries in the Global South; and that “Western” countries would not be willing to share their discourse power with others (Feng 2014 in Rolland 2020: 48). Consequently, from the Xi-era on, there has been a strong emphasis on the need to “tell China’s story well” (讲好中国故事) on the global stage, urging the construction of a “discourse system for external communication” (构建对外传播话语体系) on the premise that China must promote its ideas with confidence on the world stage as an alternative to dominant Western discourse (Chen 2022).

The quest for more international discourse power is playing out most visibly on arenas of international development and around questions of development financing and debt (Carmody et al., this volume, Rudyak 2024 forthcoming), accumulation of relational productive power through foreign aid, infrastructure financing or scholarships (Benabdallah 2020, Rudyak, this volume), soft power through Confucius Institutes and language education (Repnikova 2022).

Chinese ideas and narratives are progressively finding their way into United Nations (UN) documents, either through imbuing international norms and principles such as democracy, human rights, development or multilateralism with alternative meanings or by seeking endorsement for PRC-specific concepts like the “Belt and Road Initiative” or “Community of Shared Future for Mankind” (Rolland 2020, Oud and Drinhausen 2023, Nakano 2023, Fung and Lam 2022). While China has not visibly pushed for replacement of norms within the UN system, it holds strategic significance for the Chinese leadership that the social purpose of the international order, traditionally grounded in liberal values, evolves to include additional components such as the state-led promotion of transnational material development and international “harmony” or “democratization of international relations” (i.e. political pluralism in the international system). Importantly, the primary target audience of these efforts is not “the West” but the Global South, as China places development and security at the core of its calls for a “more just” multilateralism and realization of development as the “highest human right” (Horesh and Kavalski 2014, Rudyak 2023a, Oud 2024).

Language and discourse practices are a significant but understudied phenomenon of Global China that have now emerged with force. China’s discourse power has been instrumental in shifting global dynamics, reshaping international agendas and forging connectivity and partnerships. Keeping an eye on China’s international discourse power practices is

essential for comprehending the evolving global order and the potential impacts on China's policies, priorities, and collaborations on a global scale. The way China shapes narratives, redefines global priorities and forges international relationships will significantly impact the future trajectory of global governance and alliances.

Planetary Scale Modernization

Planetary scale modernization provides a fourth lens through which to conceptualize Global China. At its core, this viewpoint recognizes that the country's modernization processes involve a scale and scope that can only be described as planetary. This explains why the one-way "socialization" narrative discussed in the Introduction to this volume was always misleading because it fails to capture the *scale* of the phenomenon of Global China. The scale of China's modernization, in terms of people, territory, market, institutions etc. – even more than the international redistribution of material capabilities (see Pu 2012) – makes it impossible for the country, even if it were a nominally democratic society (as is the case with India), to follow an "integration narrative" and just become a normal member of the international society by emulating the norms and practices of Western modernity.

Historically, China's economic growth and technological catch-up is a seminal event in world history. This includes, for instance, rapid urbanization on an unprecedented scale, the sheer number of people (labor) added to world markets after China accessed the World Trade Organization in 2001, the construction of domestic and transnational infrastructure such as roads, ports, airports and railway systems. To provide a few examples of planetary impacts: China's consumption and emissions involve substantial volumes (cf. Smil 2004). During the pandemic years 2020 and 2021, 4.9 billion tons of cement were produced and consumed in China. This is more cement than was used in the US during the entire twentieth century (Ritchie 2023). By the year 2021, China was the leading greenhouse gas emitter accounting for 33% of the global total. China's per capita emissions now exceed advanced economies (IEA 2022a, 2022b) and even in terms of historical emissions, China is now only second to the US (Evans 2021). Other examples include Chinese growing imports of soybeans that shape agricultural markets in South America (Yan et al. 2017) and the "world's largest deep-water fishing fleet" that contributes to the depletion of global fish stocks (Urbina 2020, Myers et al. 2022). Moreover, China's energy and resource needs are seen as reshaping the world (Gu and Mayer 2007, Economy and Levi 2014, Kavalski 2022, Shapiro 2019). The Three Gorges Dam, built between 1994 and 2009, is an apt illustration of the planetary consequences. Adding 0.06 microseconds to the length of the day, the dam's massive reservoir, which holds 40 cubic kilometers of water, "would shift the pole position by about two centimeters," according to calculations by NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (2005).

In the twenty-first century, China has emerged as a dynamic terraforming power on the global stage, orchestrating a remarkable transformation that spans both horizontal and vertical dimensions of human activity. The heterogeneity and diversity of the actors involved in this multifaceted endeavor have ushered in infrastructure development and modernization on an entirely new scale, spanning various fields including transport logistics, resources and computer technology among many others. All this implies, at the same time, that Chinese technology and investments are undoubtedly critical in addressing global challenges of all sorts. As China is the leading greenhouse gas emitter, it also became the biggest spender pushing for decarbonization of energy production. For instance, in 2021, China's spending

on energy transition had reached \$546 billion, which was almost half of the world's total spending (BloombergNEF 2023: 10). Chinese energy companies operated a large utility-scale solar capacity of 228 GW in 2023, which is more capacity than the rest of the world combined (Mei et al. 2023: 3). Aside from the energy transition, Chinese information technology is instrumental in wiring the Global South. Huawei, the leading Chinese telecom equipment company, provides the lion's share of the cutting-edge network equipment and telecommunication grids for countries in the Global South, thereby enabling a growing share of world population to be connected to the Internet.

China's "planetary modernization," and its complex and often contradictory reality, remains difficult to make sense of from a vantage point of IR theories. Indeed, the lenses of power transition theory or hegemonic conflict are inadequate to fully grasp the shifting entanglements and processes of the transformation from a socialist planned economy towards a market economy (see Liefner, this volume, Chan, this volume). Reductionist binaries and associated political narratives of decline/rise or "peak" China lack the analytical apparatus to understand and analyze the multiple consequences when "a billion people are rising" (Mayer and Kavalski 2021). For example, a growing Chinese middle class that consumes, travels and innovates is a force in its own right that makes it difficult to see China as a "status quo" power because its global impact on economies and ecosystems is too huge and lasting. Aside from the usual purview of foreign policy, many behavior choices inside China have far-reaching global ramifications. For instance, Fallon (this volume) finds that China's simultaneous narratives of meat as a symbol of modernization and an element of cosmopolitan consumptive urban lifestyles indicate that a widespread reduction in meat consumption to curb the carbon cost of meat and dairy production, lacks strong support from policymakers. Such effects, however, are invisible with lenses that focus on state-centric relations and "military power" or revisionist influence over international organizations.

Starting with relationality, Chinese modernization effects and the rise of China's "technological society" can be analyzed more comprehensively and systematically by conceptually embracing the ways in which China's multiple material-social relations and roles shape the planetary. Given how much China (and equally, the BRICS-member states, among others) reshapes global resource flows, economic processes and logistical networks, it would be misleading to apply Western experiences to the Chinese pathway of modernization. Thus, a shift away from a Western-centric perspective on globalization and modernity is implied by this approach. The notion of modernity, then, is no longer Eurocentrically referring to an "increasing expansion of modern institutions worldwide" (Giddens 1990: 51), but describes "an interactional set of relations throughout the globe that may also manifest differently in particular places and times" (Friedman 2015: 56). Although China has followed Western models of "ecological modernization" to a certain degree (Mol 2006), comprehending China's modernity and its consequences requires a keen sense of the difference of magnitude involved and a redefinition of the notion of modernization and the role of technology in particular (Hui 2019, Mahoney, this volume).

Planetary scale modernization also raises crucial policy-relevant issues that inform research on Global China. Without China, global energy transition and sustainable development is difficult, if not impossible, to realize because Chinese factories deliver key components for the build-up of renewable energy production and post-fossil technologies worldwide. So, just as China is part of our common global problems, truly global solutions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and avoid ecosystem destruction cannot be

contemplated without it (Tyfield, this volume). Hence, scrutinizing the question of Chinese solutions to “Anthropocene problems” becomes ever more central. Whether China will become the “new climate torchbearer” (Cudworth et al. 2018, Finamore 2018) could be studied at the level of technological innovations and markets, for instance. An example is China’s massive investments into water, wind and solar power that have increased the share of non-fossil fuel power sources to more than 50% of the country’s total installed capacity in 2022 (Reuters 2023). Globally, China is a leader in renewable energy research and installation. Another example is China’s “Great Green Wall” that is intended to protect cities and farmland from growing desertification in the north of the country. Its landscape design implies the Chinese planners have deliberately shifted to a “planetary scale” (Nickayin 2022). In this line, contributions to this volume shed light, for instance, on the question of designing sustainable cities in China (Flock and Meyer-Clement, this volume), the changing diet of the Chinese population (Fallon, this volume) and Chinese contributions to climate protection and decarbonization with international organizations such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Yu et al., this volume).

China’s contributions can also be studied at the level of environmental thought and associated philosophical frameworks required to support policy innovations and behavioral changes on both a local and global level (cf. Chang 2019). Chinese philosophy, including Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism (Miller 2017, Tu 2001) – as well as Chinese sci-fi literature with growing global audiences (Hartley 2022) – are believed to offer new recipes to cope with planetary crises or new ways of perceiving a better global future. However, while a variety of Chinese actors can be seen as a “catalyst of change in the global South” (Garlick, this volume), how much they add to a “greening” of mentalities and the rise of alternative models of thinking remains unclear. In fact, the confluence of “authoritarian environmentalism,” geopolitical tech-competition, hyper-capitalist practices and ideologically framed sustainability goals raises many issues and doubts about how much and in which ways China can substantially contribute to preventing an Anthropocene collapse (Smith 2017, Lemon et al. 2023, Li and Shapiro 2020, Kavalski 2021).

Experimentalism

Research on Global China suggests taking seriously the notion that many Chinese activities and official policies are characterized by an agile and experimental mentality. At first glance, this insight refers to concrete policy choices and reform approaches that apply equally to the domestic arena (Heilmann 2008, Heilmann and Perry 2011, Ang 2024, Eaton and Katada 2022) and to foreign policy. From the perspective of conventional political science models of regime types and regime transition, experimentalism and absence of liberal democracy appear antagonistic, and yet, as Heilmann (2018: 21) argues, “China stands as a ‘Red Swan’ challenge to the social sciences” because it displays a level of adaptive capacity crucial for development (North 2005: 154), a “Communist” system was not supposed to have. Yet, a crucial part and substantial success of this experimentalism has been a component deeply rooted in Communist traditions: Campaign-style politics to promote ideas and mobilize people (Ang 2016, Zeng 2021). Enshrined in the slogan “Crossing the river by feeling the stones” (摸着石头过河), appropriated by Deng Xiaoping to describe China’s “Reform and Opening Up” policy, is the idea that one can figure out things along the way as long as one keeps walking.

Agile practices of experimentation and improvisation are by no means limited to China's domestic policy in line with the "decentralized nature of the Chinese developmental state" (Hung 2016: 154). But while much of the traditional scholarship has accepted that China's domestic economic development has not played by the rules of top-down policy design, it has yet to come to terms with the observation that Global China, too, is a result of experimentation and trying out of new institutional arrangements, cooperative procedures or even simply building bridges. One of the most prominent recent manifestations of Global China, the Belt and Road Initiative, resembles much more the long-standing patterns of campaign-style mobilization (Hall and Krolkowski 2022) mixed with an experimental policy approach that reflects competing domestic interests rather than a *grand strategy* which it has often been mislabeled (Lee and Zeng 2019). The experiments can fail, as was the case with the 17+1 (founded as 16+1), introduced to bring China together with a grouping of Eastern and Southern European countries (Kavalski and Mayer 2019) that did not deliver much in terms of tangible projects and is now facing criticism in partner countries due to China's position on the war in Ukraine.

Examples of the unfolding of an experimental logic discussed in the *Handbook* range from the mix of bilateral, mini- and multilateral approaches to diplomacy – what Huang (this volume) describes as "improvised similarity," emphasizing self-limitation, bilateralism, gift-giving, connectivity and inclusiveness – to the existing role of sub-national actors, which can both organize a whole-of-government approach and give rise to complexities. This allows both to organize a whole-of-government approach in a way that other federal and/or democratic states cannot (Thomas, this volume), while at the same time giving rise to complex dynamics of competition between local governments at the horizontal level (Mierzejewski and Rudakowska, this volume). Another case is China's initiatives to institutionalize its relations regionally with groups of countries from Latin America to Southeast Asia. Tony Tai-Ting Liu (this volume) shows that for several years China has been experimenting with the concept of public diplomacy and promoting the realization of people-to-people relations, mixing bottom-up approaches with the more traditional top-down nature of its diplomatic style. Weber's (this volume) overview of the sets of actors co-opted or mobilized by the PRC demonstrates enormous flexibility and diversity of relationships.

Thus, experimentalism as register suggests that the ways in which China engages with a constantly growing number of actors around the world does not inevitably follow a fixed design in terms of levels, institutions or procedures, and that considerable room for test and trial is given despite many scholars observing a growing centralization of policy making under the presidency of Xi Jinping (Teets and Hasmath 2020, Kavalski 2024). Two distinctive twists from framing Global China with a focus on experimentalism need to be stressed: First, Global China cannot automatically be equated with a hegemonic agenda by Beijing, and instead suggests a significant emphasis on the open-ended and experimental nature of how China is constitutive of the world and vice versa. Second, claims that the PRC is pursuing a self-contained and unchanging grand strategy to achieve world domination, or at least to significantly reshape the world order and international institutions, need more scrutiny, especially with regard to the complexities and contradictions Beijing actually faces in implementing its goals in different local, regional and institutional settings. In the field of global health governance, Lai-Ha Chan (this volume) argues that China's overall engagement with the World Health Organization (WHO) during the COVID-19 pandemic has not led to increasing trust in Chinese health diplomacy.

While advancing nuanced and empirically rich understandings of how Chinese global power and influence actually operate, the notion of Global China alludes to the often-underestimated capacities of the party-state to learn, translate and flexibly adopt new ideas, and to a general pragmatic spirit of experimentation, in contrast to prevailing assumptions about the supposedly static nature of authoritarian policymaking and implementation. Given the growing geopolitical tensions between China and the US based on mutual threat perceptions, this perspective allows for the possibility of more creative and open-ended conflict management solutions than currently anticipated.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Looking at What Might Come Next

It must be conceded that by necessity this *Handbook* could not (and does not purport to) bring together the full spectrum of research, approaches and perspectives on Global China. Nevertheless, such acknowledgment should not be taken as an indication that the chapters included in this collection do not provide a comprehensive survey of the diversity of images, practices and aspirations subsumed within the phenomenon of Global China. On the contrary, this *Handbook* attests to the vim and vigor of the study of Global China. For the experienced China hand, this collection should provide a superbly researched account of the many aspects involved in the production of Global China. To those just embarking on the study of China, the analyses included in this *Handbook* offer comprehensive and insightful glimpses into the diverse perspectives, experiences, concepts, practices and dimensions of the complex and constantly changing phenomenon of Global China.

Yet, while it is difficult to predict either the directions which the phenomenon of Global China will take, or the reactions that it will provoke, one trajectory appears to be firmly in the offing. Namely, that Global China is not merely about sets of bilateral and multilateral interactions and diplomatic initiatives, but about the capacity to establish “generative relationships” (Lane and Maxfield 1995: 4). It is this capacity of Global China to engender meaningful interactions across different global locales, spheres of trade and industry, and academic fields that affects both the way Beijing acts in the international domain and how its interlocutors perceive China, themselves, the world and their capacity to act in it. By putting the emphasis on the phenomenon of Global China and its refractions across multiple domestic, international and transnational realms, the aim of this *Handbook* is to assist the explanation, understanding and rethinking of China’s global roles (and the impact these have) on various spheres of economic, political, social, cultural and epistemic patterns and practices.

To be sure, it is not the intention of the contributors to this *Handbook* to romanticize the consequences of Global China. Instead, this volume seeks to amplify the necessity to imagine new analytical frameworks for the meaningful encounter with Global China. Such attentiveness emerges from the awareness of coexistence, the nuanced practices of living together and the cultivation of adaptations sensitive to the emergent, historically contingent and self-organizing character of global life. The contention is that the transformative nature of China’s rise is also a point of departure for theoretical innovation, fresh analytical reflection and cogent transformation. The chapters included in this volume gesture towards the development of such novel ways of reading Global China by both the careful reconsideration of established approaches and innovative and pioneering original perspectives. It is hoped that such eclectic synergy can assist with exposing previously unaddressed features

of China's global outreach, and inspire the disclosure of new avenues for the encounter with and the reading of the complexity of Global China.

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