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BOOK REVIEWS

Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980–2000

Alastair Iain Johnston
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, 273 pp.
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This is an impressive book that makes several major contributions – theoretically, empirically, and pedagogically. Written in a robust and engaging style it distils a wide range of literature in the social sciences, develops the concept of socialization, and links it firmly and productively with explanations of China's foreign policy views and behavior in international institutional settings. China's policy is presented predominantly as a case for understanding how socialization works, but that statement downplays the extent to which, in Johnston's detailed treatment of China, not only is the concept of socialization fundamentally enriched, but also our understanding of aspects of China's behavior and thinking. International Relations scholars will benefit as much from reading this book as those predominantly interested in charting the basis for change in China's security policies.

The study begins by reminding us that a great deal of diplomatic action does not involve coercive techniques or material sidepayments, but is actually about 'persuading, cajoling, or shaming' others to accept the wisdom of one's point of view. It moves on to offer a sophisticated model of how the micro-processes of socialization work, drawing on insights from IR theorists but also on the social–psychological theories that are relevant to understanding the behavior of 'newcomers' in social groups. Thus, this is not a book about state socialization but about how individuals and groups that operate within

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institutional environments are affected by that environment and, in turn, how they are enabled to seek to influence policy making. Dissatisfied with the central constructivist definition of socialization as the internalization of global or group norms, Johnston suggests we should also be alert to pro-social behavior that is not reflective of changes in belief, but is nevertheless convergent with group values or norms.

The micro-processes he identifies are three-fold. The first is mimicking, the least social of the processes that he outlines in the book. It involves novices (like representatives of the Chinese state) copying the behavioral patterns of significant others in a group that operates on the basis of formal and informal rules. That behavior is engendered by a need to find survival mechanisms in an uncertain environment. Mimicking is then used to explain China's behavior within the UN Conference on Disarmament (CD) which Beijing joined in 1980 despite a lack of familiarity with arms control and disarmament language and ideas, and an absence of arms control experts. Organizational changes and training soon made up for this short fall, which had significant foreign-policy consequences.

The next process is that of social influence involving a desire to attract approval and to reduce instances of disapproval from a group with whom one identifies. This process maps on to the idea that states may be concerned about international image and status and may be induced to change behavior in order to attain or retain valued status positions. China's signature of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in late 1996 is used to illustrate how this can operate, since, as Johnston argues, Beijing's relative power was constrained by signature of this treaty. Continued testing by China of nuclear weapons attracted the serious criticism of developing states, middle powers, and the NGO community which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued was damaging China's image. Normative arguments were not at the basis of Beijing's decision to stop testing, but social disapproval was.

Persuasion is the final process discussed in the book. This, the hardest move of all, involves the internalization of new ideas to the extent that it leads an individual or group to argue for the rightness of a particular norm or value. China's behavior in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is used to show this in operation, an environment conducive to promoting shifts in belief largely because of its counter-realpolitik ideology, and its decision-making rules. For example, the development of an interest in multilateralism within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Asia Department led some within it to argue that multilateralism was inherently beneficial for Chinese and regional security, rather than an approach that could be deployed for strategic motives. This resulted in China's embrace of concepts such as mutual and common security, which came to be expressed in its New Security Concept.

Johnston subjects these explanations for change in Chinese behavior to systematic testing against the major competition – predominantly variants of realist analysis. He is also straightforward in discussing what we can and cannot discover, and about how far we can extrapolate about overall change in Chinese foreign policy from the cases examined in his study. Additionally, he extends the contribution he makes here by relating his findings to those works that have examined China's cooperation in non-security institutions.

In short, the book is a triumph and a model and it seems either unrealistic or unnecessary to ask for more. Johnston, after all, takes care to explain that this book is primarily about process, a particular part of a process at that, and not about offering a fuller explanation of outcomes. However, in at least two of the cases, that of China's participation in the CD and attitudes towards the ARF, it would have been instructive for the study to have gone beyond the end of the twentieth century, given the breakdown in the workings of the CD in large part because of US–China differences, and the often alleged shift in Chinese interest from the presumed 'comfortable environment' of the ARF to ASEAN Plus Three. If reversals have occurred, Johnston's arguments about how these reversals have happened would have been valuable. I would also have liked some discussion of how China's embrace of mutual security ideas has influenced its military force posture and military doctrine, if at all. Greater engagement with those who have recently written on the nuclear issue, the work of Evan Medeiros and Jeffrey Lewis (both in Johnston's bibliography) in particular, might also have been useful to the reader. Notably, the former focuses substantially on the incentives and disincentives that the US has offered China in areas of policy relating to arms control (a part of the context for change even if these levers did not figure in overt ways), and both Medeiros and Lewis, like Johnston, have used interview data from China which sometimes offers explanations for policy positions that differ from Johnston's own findings.

Johnston is an exceptional scholar: able to demonstrate a mastery of theory and method, as well as a deep understanding of China. This book will find its way onto many shelves and deservedly so.

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