

Guided by identities? A constructivist approach to sino-american relations¹

1. I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. All errors remain mine.

Guiado por identidades? Uma abordagem construtivista das relações sino-americanas

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ABSTRACT

The nature of the relationship between the US and China has become one of the most discussed topics in the field of IR. Contrary to Realist expectations, this relationship has thus far been characterized by cooperation on a wide range of issues rather than permanent conflict. Proponents of socialization maintain that this has been the result of Chinese integration within existing institutions and norms. Differently, this article argues that Sino-American cooperation stems primarily from each country's self-images, perceptions of the Other, and the interests associated with them. American ideas of Exceptionalism, Chinese notions of Tianxia and modernization, and mutually positive perceptions of each other, dating back to the late 18th century, underpin a set of interests that explain why current Sino-American relations are characterized by a high degree of cooperation.

Keywords: United States. China. Constructivism. Identity. Foreign policy

RESUMO

A natureza da relação entre os EUA e a China tornou-se um dos temas mais discutidos na área de Relações Internacionais. Contrariando as expectativas realistas, esta relação tem sido, até agora, caracterizada pela cooperação em uma ampla gama de questões, em vez de conflito permanente. Os defensores da socialização sustentam que este tem sido o resultado da integração chinesa dentro de instituições e normas existentes. Diferentemente, este artigo argumenta que a cooperação sino-americana decorre principalmente de auto-imagens de cada país, das percepções do outro, e os interesses que lhes estão associados. As ideias americanas de excepcionalismo, noções chinesas de Tianxia e modernização e percepções positivas mutuamente um do outro, que remontam ao final do século 18, sustentam um conjunto de interesses que explicam por que as relações sino-americanas atuais são caracterizados por um alto grau de cooperação.

Palavras Chave: Estados Unidos. China. Construtivismo. Identidade. Política Externa

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Introduction

The nature of US-China relations has become one of the most discussed topics in the field of International Relations. Some scholars, building on the realist tradition in general and power-transition theory in particular, have argued that war between both powers is inevitable as China reduces its power differential with the US.³ This approach to Sino-American relations assumes enmity and confrontation in the strategic interaction between both.

3. See Gries (2005), Wang (2005) or Chan (2008).

On the other side there are authors who maintain that China is a status-quo power that wishes to integrate itself within existing institutions and norms. These scholars point at the current liberal international order and argue that even though it reflects American preferences it is also beneficial for most other states. This, coupled with Beijing's need to concentrate on economic growth for the foreseeable future, has led Chinese leaders to accept the prevailing order to benefit as much as possible from it.⁴ Authors purporting this view presuppose collaboration and cooperation between the US and China.

4. See Deng and Moore (2004) and Johnston (2008).

Irrespective of one's approach to the study of present and future Sino-American relations it seems clear that their interactions in the early 21st century have been mostly based on cooperation. Certainly, instances of tension have occurred. However, as Ikenberry (2010) argues, China has yet to show any signs of wishing to disrupt current international structures or to challenge the US. Tellingly, tensions over issues such as the Dalai Lama's meeting with Barack Obama, American arms sales to Taiwan and the alleged undervaluation of the renminbi have not prevented cooperation.

In fact, a bilateral Strategic and Economic Dialogue is in place. In addition, both countries have been working together in multilateral efforts to curb the nuclear programmes of Iran and North Korea. Furthermore, the US and China have recently been cooperating to manage the threat of proliferation of WMD. China and the US have worked together to contain the effects of the recent global financial crisis as well. Finally, Washington and Beijing officials met several times to reach an agreement on climate change, leading to the Copenhagen Accord of December 2009.

The above would serve to prove that socialization of China has worked so far. Material considerations on the part of Chinese leaders have led them to pursue integration within the current international system. Beijing is increasingly willing to take its share of responsibility in managing the system in return for material gains. Meanwhile, American elites wish to help China integrate in the existing world order. This would reinforce the existing order, which reflects American interests. Peaceful integration of China would also avert the costs of Cold War-style bipolarity. Hence, socialization of China is a win-win situation for Washington and Beijing.

However, the argument that Sino-American relations are defined purely in materialistic terms seems incomplete. Ideas do matter in the conduct of foreign policy (KEOHANE, 1993). From this follows that they also matter in the study of bilateral relations between states – in the case

of this article, relations between the US and China. The notion that non-material factors matter in IR is of course not new. However, constructivism has been the main driving force behind the move beyond material explanations of IR phenomena over the past two decades.

In this article the author draws from constructivist accounts of how socially constructed identities and interests shape actor behaviour. The author will argue that US-China cooperation in the period between 2001 and 2012 is partly explained by each country's self-image and the interests associated with it. Even though material considerations are important in understanding relations between China and the US, their identities are a key driver behind cooperation between them. What the author seeks is to elaborate on American and Chinese corporate and social identities to show how Sino-American cooperation is to a certain extent the by-product of ideas, culture and history.

To make this case, the author explores the identities that the US and China constructed in the 1949-69 and 2011-12 periods. The first period covers from the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the start of a rapprochement process between China and the US. Bilateral relations throughout this period were marked by enmity. Meanwhile, the second period covers the George W. Bush presidency and the first Barack Obama administration in the US, as well as the Hu Jintao government in China. This period was defined by Sino-American cooperation. Also, focusing on this period allows the author to cover both a full Republican presidency plus a full Democratic term in office in the US, and the years in which China became the world's second largest economy and military power. Contrasting the self-images and mutual perceptions of each other that Washington and Beijing had during these two periods will serve the author to explain how identities matter in explaining the relationship between both. Due to space constraints, no other time periods are covered in this article.

This article is organized as follows. In the first section the author will explain the strand of constructivism being used. Then, the author will lay out the self-image and associated interests of the US. Afterwards, the article will explain China's self-image and the interests based on it. In the fourth section the author will delve on the relationship concomitant to the identities constructed in 1949-69 and in 2011-2012. A brief concluding section will summarize the argument of the article.

Constructivism in International Relations

Constructivism moves beyond materialist explanations of IR phenomena and focuses on the role that ideas play in shaping actors' identities and interests and, consequently, actions. This does not mean that constructivism denies the existence of a reality (structure) in which humans exist. However, for constructivists this structure is mutually constituted by actors (agents) in collective processes. This is summarized in Wendt's (1992, p. 31) axiom "anarchy is what states make of it." Hence, the material structure in which social interactions take place is secondary to the shared ideas and beliefs that give meaning to it. Therefore, the mate-

rial structure that matters less than the ideas which determine how the structure is used (ADLER, 1997).

Even though authors using different theoretical and methodological approaches have been lumped together as constructivists, there are nevertheless some common features which are relevant to this article. To begin with, ideas are given primacy over material factors. Ideas shape the identities and interests of actors. All actors have “some pre-existing ideas about who they are” before encountering other actors (ZEHFUSS, 2002, p. 44). By focusing on the constitutive effect of ideas, constructivism explains how actors’ identities and interests are construed (TANNENWALD; WOHLFORTH, 2005, p. 7). Ideas about self and other are linked to how an actor perceives itself as an independent entity and as a social object, that is, how it self-identifies. These identities then play a central role in shaping the actor’s interests (TANNENWALD, 2005, p. 19). From this follows that ideas also affect interactions between actors and the structures resultant from these interactions (see below).

Ideas are prioritized over material structures because the meaning of the latter is ultimately contingent upon the former (WENDT, 1992, p. 394-395). Realism and liberalism purport that structures conform a natural world which is independent of how it is perceived by actors. In contrast, constructivism asserts that structures exist insofar agents attach particular meanings to them. These particular meanings derive from the ideas held by actors.

Closely related to the above is the centrality of agency. Constructivists believe that agents are at least as relevant as structures. In fact, constructivism maintains that agents and structures are mutually constitutive and therefore they cannot be disentangled. As Adler (1997, p. 322) puts it, *“the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world”* (in italics in the original).

Nevertheless, constructivism does not purport that agency renders structural factors redundant. Identities, interests, and their interaction processes create structures which affect the behaviour of actors. Finnemore (1996, p. 12-13) pinpoints that structures, in the form of international norms, may be the driving force behind certain interests. However, for constructivism these structures do not produce quasi-mechanic responses. These rest on the interactions between states, which are key drivers of the process of identity- and interest-formation referred before (WENDT, 1999, p. 148), along with identities.

A final element most constructivists share is the belief that identities are multiple. Firstly, there is an identity intrinsic to each actor, stemming from its domestic environment. Concurrently, there is a second identity that exists only within the context of an external social structure in which actors interact among themselves (JEPPERSON; WENDT; KATZENSTEIN, 1996, p. 59). Wendt (1994, p. 385) labels the first identity “corporate” and the second one(s) “social”; both identities interrelate to shape the interests of an actor (WENDT, 1999, p. 233). If one identity follows domestic developments within an actor, the other is contingent upon fluctuating external social structures, and both serve to shape interests,

one would believe that identities and interests ought to be in constant change. Nevertheless, this is not necessarily the case because interaction processes may instead serve to reinforce previous identities and interests (WENDT, 1999: 331-334). In this article the author will analyse the corporate identity of China and the US, as well as their mutual social identities.

Given the centrality of identities to understand actors' interests and behaviour it is necessary to know how those identities are created. With regards to the corporate identity, it refers to "the intrinsic, self-organizing qualities that constitute actor individuality." In the case of organizations, such as states, the corporate identity is constituted by its individuals, physical resources and shared beliefs and institutions. The corporate identity is singular and is used by the actor to assert its self-image (WENDT, 1994, p. 385). In most cases, the state will define and present its corporate identity to the international system through its government.

Social identities refer to "sets of meanings that an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others, that is, as a social object." Differently from the corporate identity, social identities are multiple. Whereas the corporate identity serves the actor to identify itself as an individual, social identities not only serve for this purpose but also to position the actor in relation to others. Thus, social identities shape the role of actors (WENDT, 1994, p. 385). Social identities may be continuously redefined through interaction processes. Alternatively, they may remain stable in determined contexts. This will be the result of an actor's practices (WENDT, 1996, p. 51).

Identities can change through the interaction between an 'alter' and an 'ego' engaged in a relational process in which social learning occurs. Identities, however, can also be sustained as a result of the process of interaction between 'alter' and 'ego' in the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy. 'Alter' and 'ego' may treat each other as if a certain response is expected from the other. They will then learn a set of shared ideas that produce those responses. By taking these ideas as the starting point of their interaction process, 'ego' and 'alter' tend to reproduce them, therefore sustaining the identities (and interests) constructed from this interaction process (WENDT, 1999, p. 326-335). In this article the author will argue that the identities of China and the US remained relatively unchanged during the 1949-1969 period and have been fairly stable in the 2011-12 period century too.⁵

On the issue of how identities shape actions Lebow (2009, p. 218-219) argues that the relationship between constitution and causation is reciprocal and fluid. Identities and their consequences can be placed along a continuum. At the higher end we find identities requiring some type of behaviour and precluding other actions from being taken. At the lower end of the continuum identities have little impact on the actions of an actor but may be used to justify certain policies. In the middle of the continuum we encounter identities that make certain behaviour more likely. Accordingly, a state's corporate identity and perception of another state may make certain policies inevitable or more likely if the identity and perception are towards the higher end of the continuum. For example, for most of the Cold War the identities of the Soviet Union and the US made

5. This opens the question of why Sino-American relations moved from enmity towards rapprochement in the late 1960s. As Goh (2004, p. 11-13) shows, earlier in that decade certain groups in the US began to perceive China as a relatively friendly resurgent power with several common interests to Washington's. Richard Nixon shared this view, and he was able to impinge it upon American foreign policy-makers after becoming president. Hence, the American social identity resultant from its interaction with China was directly related to Nixon's inauguration in 1969. This highlights the role that individuals may sometimes play in shaping an actor's self-image and interests. As Finnemore (1996, p. 24-28) purports, there are occasions when individuals can upload their beliefs to the social level.

enmity expected. In contrast, the author argues that the current identities of China and the US make cooperation likely and are edging towards the higher end of the continuum.

Analysing the impact of ideas on a state's identity presents the challenge of determining whose ideas matter. As already mentioned above, ultimately governments generally define and present the identity of a state in its role as an international actor. Thus, in this article the author will use government officials' ideas about 'alter' and 'ego to explore Beijing's and Washington's corporate and mutual social identities.

There is a wide range of government officials though. In this article, the author will primarily rely on head of government declarations as a proxy for a government's ideas. These declarations have been accessed directly from publicly available American and Chinese sources, from academic texts and newspaper articles citing or quoting them, or from key texts studying the identities of China and the US. Head of government declarations have been supplemented with declarations and works by intellectuals or other top-level government officials. Those of intellectuals have been used to trace the origin of American and Chinese respective corporate identities, focusing on those that have had an actual impact on their foreign policy as explained in academic texts on the identities of both countries.

In the following two sections the author will establish the corporate identity of, respectively the US and China, as well as the social identities resultant from the interaction between both powers. The author will also describe the interests of Washington and Beijing resulting from their respective corporate and social identities.

American corporate and social identities.....

The role of ideas about self in determining American interests abroad has been explored before (HUNT, 1987; LIPSET, 1996; NAU, 2002). Hunt (1987, p. 3-4) considers that understanding the ideas shaping the US as an actor is essential to understand its foreign policy (HUNT, 1987, p. 3-4). Hunt focuses on continuities in US identity and foreign policy behaviour since its inception. Similarly, Rowley and Weldes (2008, p. 198-206) acknowledge that some American identities, even though they can be rearticulated as a result of developments in the international system, may remain unchanged.

Corporate identity: American exceptionalism

There is an agreement that the fundamental idea sustaining Washington's self-image overtime has been American exceptionalism (MCEVOY-LEVY, 2001; HOGAN ; PATERSON, 2004). This idea predates the foundation of the US. In his 1630 sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* John Winthrop (1999, p. 65) said that settlers moving to what is now the US "shall be as a city upon a hill", since "the eyes of all people are upon" them and they should "be made a story and a by-word through the world." One of the bases of American exceptionalism can be already discerned in

this sermon: the settlers colonizing North America were sent by God to spread Puritan Christianity, serving as a guiding light to people discontent with the Church of England. These settlers served as an example of moral behaviour to enlighten the rest of the world.

The second basis of American exceptionalism is the notion that the US has the power to create a new world different from the old one. In the pamphlet *Common Sense*, released in 1776, Thomas Paine (1997, p. 51) introduced this point by arguing that the inhabitants of the British colonies in America had in their power “to begin the world over again” by distancing themselves from the discredited norms guiding life in Europe. In *Common Sense* we find the seeds of the idea that the US can and should create a new world.

Self-identification as an exceptional power has produced one core interest: creation and expansion of a US-centred international system. The underlying rationale behind constructing this system is extension of American values and ideas, which are deemed to be superior, and preferable for other polities (GUTFELD, 2002, p. 64, 164). The US is not impressing its own values on alien cultures but rather liberating them by introducing a more advanced stage of political, economic and social organization. This is related to the idea that the US should enlighten other countries and has the strength to create a more advanced world.⁶ According to Stephanson (1996, p. 4), the behaviour of all American administrations after World War II has been consistent with protecting the interests originating from the idea of exceptionalism.

US-CENTRED INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Interest in creating a US-centred international system is not necessarily related to American magnanimity. Expansion of American values and ideas increases Washington’s soft power. Coined by Nye (2003, p. x), soft power refers to “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.” Soft power is a cost-effective way of consolidating American exceptionalism because it does not require the use of force. Rather, soft power results from the appeal of culture, political ideas and policies. Hence, the idea of American exceptionalism would be accepted by third parties once the system has been consolidated.

Creation of a US-centred international system has produced two types of policies. Firstly, forceful expansion of the ideas, values and interests associated to American exceptionalism. This was first articulated through ‘Manifest Destiny,’ coined by Democratic politician John L. Sullivan (1839, p. 427) and which served as a conceptual framework for justifying westward expansion of the US. In 1898, William McKinley (cited in Morgan 2004, p. 225) referred to Manifest Destiny to validate annexation of Hawaii by the US. Similarly, the ‘Monroe Doctrine,’ introduced in 1823 to warn European states against expansion in the Americas, later evolved to justify US intervention in Latin America. As Theodore Roosevelt (1904) explained, the US had the right to intervene if any Latin American government incurred in “loosening of the ties of civilized society.”

The post-World War II period witnessed a reincarnation of the idea of American exceptionalism expressed through the forceful creation of a

6. This is a benign interpretation of the interest related to American exceptionalism. Creation and expansion of an American-centred international system has of course had a negative impact on many states, from the Philippines in 1898 to Afghanistan today. The US has not refrained from invading or destabilizing countries whose regimes were deemed to be challenging American interests or that were strategically important. Nevertheless, this article focuses on the positive self-perception linked to American exceptionalism.

US-centred international system. The National Security Council (1950) published NSC-68, signed by Harry S. Truman, comparing the nascent conflict between the Soviet Union and the US to a confrontation between a “fanatic faith” and freedom, with the US portrayed as the leader of the ‘Free World.’ This report suggested balancing of the Soviet Union as well as the use of force to defend American interests. Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson ascribed to this view of the Cold War (McCRISKEN, 2003).

American exceptionalism continued to be the most prominent self-image of the US during the Bush administration. Bush was well-known for his numerous references to God. Lines such as “you can’t put freedom and liberty back into a box” or “and we believe that freedom is not for us alone, it is the right and the capacity of all mankind”, aphorisms such as the “Axis of Evil” and policies such as spreading democracy and freedom (NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL, 2002), have all clear links to American exceptionalism. The Bush Doctrine borrowed from the Monroe Doctrine. Based on unilateralism, pre-emptive strikes and democracy expansion, it was ostensibly implemented to stop terrorism, similarly to the way that Kennedy sought to prevent the spread of Communism.

A second policy associated to the creation of a US-centred international system is the development of international regimes supportive of American values, ideas and interests. Regime theory posits that international regimes produce convergence of principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures among participating actors. Regimes survive changes in power relations and interests and create obligations leading to predictable behaviour and, subsequently, a certain degree of stability (KRASNER, 1982, p. 186-187). Hence, regimes are cost-effective ways of consolidating specific worldviews.

It was only after the end of World War II that Washington was able to craft a regime reflecting its interests. On the economic sphere, pro-market policies were universalized through the World Bank, the IMF and the GATT/WTO. On the security realm, Washington created a system of alliances with the cornerstones of NATO plus the ‘hub and spoke’ system in Asia. Finally, on the political realm the UN works to promote liberal principles such as democracy and human rights (RUGGIE, 199, p. 121-127). In short, Washington has successfully created a liberal world order reflective of the values and interests associated to American exceptionalism. Even if liberal values and practices are unlikely to become universal, today most countries purport liberal economic policies. Meanwhile, political freedom around the world has been rising over the past three decades (FREEDOM HOUSE, 2009).

Barack Obama’s adscription to the notion of American exceptionalism was made public even before the 2008 Democratic primary race (COHEN, 2007). Afterwards, when Obama (PHILLIPS, 2009) referred to Washington being “ready to lead once more” in his inaugural speech there were clear parallels with the belief in the US as an example for the rest of the world. Yet, there are differences between Obama and Bush. Obama has sought to strengthen the role of international institutions. This would suggest that Washington is again resorting to shaping inter-

national regimes, such as those on climate change or nuclear weapons control, to advance its worldview.

Social identity in 1949-69: Red China

To explain Sino-American relations we ought to understand both their corporate images and the social identities resultant from their interactions. In the case of the US we have to comprehend how it perceives China and what social identity results from this. As the author will show in this section, in the 1949-1969 period the corporate identity of the US in relation to China was based on the simple Free World-Red China dichotomy.

The US portrayed itself as the leader of a Free World based on individual freedom, democracy and market economics. This was juxtaposed to the socialization, authoritarianism and economic centralization inherent to Communism. With regards to China, this meant that American leaders made a clear distinction between the liberties warranted by free countries, epitomized by the US, and the oppression of Communist regimes, including China. In fact, the expression 'Free China' became a popular depiction of Taiwan/the Republic of China. This implied the existence of 'Red China', the authoritarian PRC (FOUSEK, 2000).

Therefore, US leaders considered China a dangerous and threatening Other. The second 'Red Scare' that swept the US from 1947 to 1957 predated the founding of China by two years but intensified as a result of the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War and China's intervention in the Korean War. Red China was not only an authoritarian polity opposed to the values of the Free World, but also a military threat. China might have not been a menace to the existence of the US, but it endangered the stability and existence of American allies in Asia.⁷

Identification as a leader of the Free World with the obligation to counter the threat of Red China produced two interests on American policy towards China: containment and encouragement of Sino-Soviet divisions. Containment, first articulated as a doctrine by George F. Kennan in 1946, was the basis of American policy towards the Communist camp throughout the Cold War. Containment included restraining Communist expansionism in areas of strategic importance. In the case of China, containment meant ensuring that Taiwan was protected from a possible take-over, as well as extending an American security umbrella to Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asia to prevent Chinese-inspired establishment of Communist regimes.

Also specific to Beijing was the conduct of actions aimed at creating a split between the Soviet Union and China. Even before Mao's victory in the Chinese civil war, many in the US argued that the Communist camp was not monolithic. They maintained that Soviet leadership was contested by other Communist countries. Their view was vindicated when Yugoslavia defected from the Soviet camp in 1948 (GARRETT, 1991, p. 212). Hence, Washington pursued actions conducive to turning the Soviet Union and China against each other. The goal was to weaken the Communist camp by fostering a split between its two most powerful members.

7. For an account of how China was constructed as a menacing Other during the 1950s and 1960s, see Goh (2004), ch. 2.

During the 1960s, dividing the Communist camp meant putting pressure on Beijing whilst improving relations with Moscow. This was possible after Nikita Khrushchev became the leader of the Soviet Union and introduced a policy of detente. From 1962 onwards, relations between the US and the Soviet Union improved. Differently, American and Chinese troops were fighting in Vietnam, the US sought to isolate China in international institutions and to curtail its nuclear programme, and Washington proclaimed Beijing a greater threat than Moscow. Kennedy, for example, argued that the world would be “far worse off if the Chinese dominated the Communist movement” because its leaders believed “in war as a means of bringing about the Communist world.” (THE AGE, 1962)

Social identity in 2001-12: Special relationship with a great power

To understand Washington’s current corporate identity towards China it is necessary to explore early Sino-American relations. The first recorded contact between both countries occurred when the American ship *Empress of China* arrived in Guangzhou in 1784. From the onset, Americans entertained the idea of having a special relationship with China, a country which they perceived as a great power (MAY ; ZHOU, 2009, p. 3). Benjamin Franklin, the first well-known American Sinophile, admired the Chinese civilization, which he held in more esteem than the European.⁸ Meanwhile, Thomas Jefferson (1993, p. 66) envied China’s isolation from Europe, which he hoped the US could replicate. China therefore provoked admiration among prominent American leaders.⁹ Enthusiasts regarded Chinese millennial history and trade prowess as evidence of the country’s advanced civilization and work ethic (HUNT, 1983, p. 28-29). This group thought that the US should remain friendly with China and protect it from foreign interventionism. They regarded China as a declining power that nonetheless had the potential to regain its status as an advanced nation.

This view resulted in one specific interest: the US should guide China on the path towards regeneration. It came from the idea that the US was the only great power with pacific and selfless intentions towards China. The US ought to contribute to Chinese development and integration into the family of nations. American elites argued that this would ensure influence over a reformed China and allow Washington to help the country regain its status as a great power (HUNT, 1983, p. 170-171). The US would benefit from trade with China in return. The Open Door policy introduced in 1899 reflected American interests. Secretary of State John Hay wrote two notes to other powers with significant economic interests in China. On the one hand, the notes demanded equal opportunity for trade in China. On the other hand, Washington asked for respect towards China’s territorial integrity. The notes reinforced the idea of a Sino-American special relationship (US STATE DEPARTMENT, 2009b).

US perceptions of China as a great power with which it maintains a special relationship have been reinforced in the 2001-12 period. In his second visit to China, Bush (PRESIDENT..., 2002) labelled this country a “great and enduring civilization” and “a great nation, a nation that has

8. Franklin published a series of papers entitled ‘From the Morals of Confucius’ in the magazine *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1737. There he described Confucius’ philosophy with admiration.

9. From the onset there were critics of China too. Some Americans came to regard the Chinese as backward and inherently inferior to the US (Hunt, 1983: 34). Nevertheless, the views of this group are not explored in this article because they do not seem to have been shared by Washington foreign policy-making elites during the 2001-12 period.

not only a great history, but an unbelievably exciting future” to which he offered American “friendship” to help its development. In his third visit, Bush (COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS, 2006) talked about a “very important relationship” on several occasions. On his last trip to China, Bush (2008) once again referred to a “great nation” with which the US had a “strong relationship”, remembering that both countries shared “a long history” from the time when the Empress of China travelled to China. Furthermore, when Robert Zoellick (2005) invited China to become a responsible stakeholder he mentioned that the US would help in this regard. Zoellick was referring to Beijing moving beyond its national interest and becoming more cooperative at the international level. Here we can infer the reproduction of Washington’s historical interest in helping China integrate in the international system and modernize. However, the interest moved beyond helping in Beijing’s modernization into having China as a “global partner” engaged in the resolution of international issues (US STATE DEPARTMENT, 2010).

The positive perception of China did not shift under the Obama administration. In his first major speech on China, (REMARKS..., 2009) implicitly recognized it as a great power and explained that “the relationship between the United States and China will shape the 21st century,” so the partnership between them should be based on the centrality of their bilateral ties. Earlier, Hilary Clinton (2009) had stressed that her country and China had “to show leadership to the rest of the world” to solve the major problems affecting the international system. Then, when Hu visited the US in January 2011, Obama paid tribute “to the bonds between two great nations and two proud peoples”, focusing on “the values that [their] people share”, and wishing for Americans and Chinese to “work together and create new opportunities together” (REMARKS..., 2011). All these words demonstrate that the idea of a special relationship between two great powers is embedded in the American psyche. Washington’s self-image when dealing with China has turned into that of a relationship between two special great powers, as it did during the times of Franklin and Jefferson.

Chinese corporate and social identities.....

There is extensive literature on the impact of Chinese policy-makers’ beliefs and images on the foreign policy of their country.¹⁰ Gerald Chan (1999) analysed Chinese perspectives on international relations and how they affect Beijing’s interactions with other actors. Chan (1999, p. 5-7) stated that given China’s long and rich history, its understanding of international relations and its foreign policy behaviour are bound to be affected by a culture dating back several millennia.

10. For a survey of this literature see Li (2008), p. 21-30.

Corporate identity I: Tianxia

Students of Chinese international relations would agree that *Tianxia* was the most powerful concept driving China’s view of the world throughout most of its history. *Tianxia*, literally “all under heaven”, refers

to the world itself as a geographical space, the people in their capacity as the ultimate owners or representatives of that world, and a world institution as the political system to govern that world. Following *Tianxia*, the world and relations among its units are seen in terms of “world-ness”. That is, the world as a whole, defined by its trinity of geographical, psychological, and political worlds, is primary, and smaller units such as states are subordinated to *Tianxia* (ZHAO, 2006, p. 30-31). The concept of *Tianxia* produces a worldview in which the world itself is a single entity both in material and non-material terms.

Tianxia describes how Chinese leaders have perceived the international system throughout history but does not explain the self-image that they have of their role in that system. *Tianming* and *tianzi* are the interlinked ideas that summarize how China saw itself within *Tianxia*. *Tianming* means “mandate of heaven” and was first developed early in the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BC). *Tianzi* refers to the “son of heaven” and was the title vested upon the Chinese emperor until the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912. Irrespective of Chinese power and the power of the emperor inside China, the *tianzi* was considered the embodiment of the *tianming*. The emperor derived its natural position as ruler of *Tianxia* from the fact that its mandate was bestowed by *tian*, or Heaven (HSIAO, 1979, p. 489-490).

The idea of *Tianxia* produced one interest present in China today: the development and preservation of a harmonious international system in which all pieces are in place. Such a system allowed the emperor to provide material prosperity to the Chinese population. The system therefore legitimized the emperor’s ethical and moral prowess, since a stable international environment was tantamount to acceptance of its position. When China was the most powerful country in its sphere of influence, *Tianxia* was articulated through a tributary system. The system bestowed Chinese benign rule and protection on “barbarians” in exchange for tributes. Hence, even when Chinese power was disputed, China still sought to maintain the tributary system (FAIRBANK AND TENG, 1941, p. 533-534). Certainly, *Tianxia* also had negative implications. States not abiding by the tributary system could be attacked by Chinese troops. But this article builds on Chinese current views of *Tianxia*, whether shared by others or not.

Tianxia has recently been boosted among Chinese elites (CALLAHAN, 2008, p. 749). This followed decades in which this idea was eliminated from China’s corporate identity. But Hu’s (2005) emphasis on building a ‘Harmonious World’ based on multilateralism, cooperation, harmonious coexistence and a reformed UN links to the idea of having a harmonious international system. This system would allow the Communist Party of China (CPC) to provide for the Chinese population, the same way that the emperor did through the tributary system. Reproducing the tributary system is not possible due to the realities of the current international system. Instead, Beijing now seeks a greater role in existing international institutions, such as the IMF, or the development of new institutions where it occupies a pivotal position, such as the G-20 the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Corporate identity II: Revolutionary or reformist state

Modernization has been the second idea behind China's corporate identity for long periods of time since first becoming prominent in the mid-19th century.¹¹ Chinese leaders became aware of the relative backwardness of their country as a result of the Opium Wars and the Open Door policy, and henceforth sought to modernize their country (QIN, 2007, p. 331). Modernization has created a dichotomy among Chinese leaders with regards to the second pillar of their country's corporate identity. On the one hand, some understand China as a revolutionary state, in need of radical transformation to achieve modernization. On the other hand, a second group perceives China as a reformist state which should introduce changes gradually. Revolution and reform have sometimes coexisted in time, each espoused by competing groups. However, for the most part one or the other has reigned and has been China's "official" identity.

11. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Revolutionary state was the prevailing identity in two crucial periods of Chinese history: the May 4th or New Culture Movement and the Maoist era. The former officially began in 1919, when students gathered in Beijing to protest the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and denounced Confucianism. Maoism borrowed from the May 4th Movement. Indeed, key figures of the movement were instrumental in setting up the CPC and influenced Mao (GOLDMAN, 1968/69, p. 564; SCHRAM, 1989, p. 4-5).

From the 1930s onwards, Mao (1964) called for the destruction of old customs and forms of production. He sought to build a new system based on the principles of Marxism and Leninism adapted through the CPC. Maoism was an epitome of the revolutionary identity. As a course of action, Maoism meant strengthening nationalism through a nationalized economy and the defence of Chinese sovereignty (MAO, 1964). The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were two of the clearest expressions of Maoist goals: economic modernization of China and eradication of foreign ideas within Chinese society. Similarly to what 4th of May Movement supporters advocated, Mao believed that this was the key to eventually return China to its great power status.

Reformist state has been the driving identity in China's path towards modernization since Deng Xiaoping talked about 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics.' It was introduced as a response to the failure of Maoist policies. Even though it was not the first reformist movement, the Hundred Days Reform of 1898 being the earliest one directed from above, Socialism with Chinese characteristics has been the most enduring reformist movement.

According to Deng (1984), the goal of Socialism with Chinese characteristics is to develop the productive forces to modernize the economy. This would be done through economic reform and opening up to introduce market principles. However, the state still maintains ownership of a large part of the production units. This is considered the best path for China to modernize. The set of policies implemented are reformist instead of revolutionary because they will serve to make the existing economic system evolve in incremental steps. As for the political system, the

single-party system is maintained. Similarly, no sweeping societal changes are introduced. Hence, modernization is introduced in incremental stages. No revolution is necessary, since China will slowly become a powerful country.

China as a reformist state has carried on as the main idea behind the country's corporate identity in the 2001-12 period. Hu (2008) has lauded the reform and opening up process initiated by Deng in 1978. Beijing has continued the process of progressive marketization of its economy. Since its accession to the WTO in December 2001 China has reduced barriers to trade, allowed the renminbi to appreciate by 20%, partially liberalized the financial sector and signed several bilateral currency swap deals. Hu's emphasis has been on reducing inequalities and improving wealth distribution. These are two of the pillars of building a Harmonious Society.

Social identity in 1949-1969: Imperialist US

Maoist China's self-identification as a revolutionary state seeking to extricate China from foreign influence was accompanied by a US-related social identity based on struggle between an independent revolutionary China and an imperialist US (SHENG, 1997). The establishment of the PRC in 1949 put an end to a 'century of humiliation.' According to this idea, China had suffered under the oppression and occupation of foreign powers. Dating back to the Opium Wars of the 1840s, China's sovereignty had been violated by other countries seeking to extract maximum economic benefit whilst offering very little in return. Hence, the CPC had to protect China's independence to ensure that the century of humiliation was not repeated.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the US, as the leader of the imperialist West and staunch supporter of the government in Taipei, was perceived as the biggest threat to Chinese independence (ZHANG, 1992). The decision by the US in 1954 to sign a mutual defence treaty with Taiwan further exacerbated Beijing's views of Washington as an imperialist power. China considered Taiwan a rebel island that should be reunited with the rest of the country. Hence, in the eyes of Chinese leaders the US was intervening in China's domestic affairs.

Uploaded to the international system, Beijing's self-image as a revolutionary and independent entity in struggle against foreign imperialism translated into the 'intermediate zone' theory (SHENG, 1997), later reformulated as a 'Three World Theory' (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE PRC, 2000). Introduced by Mao in the 1940s, this idea referred to the existence of an intermediate zone between the Soviet Union and the US and other Western countries made up of "oppressed" non-Western countries. The intermediate zone had to be dominated by Western imperialists before they could launch an attack on the Soviet Union. The US, as the biggest threat to the sovereignty of the countries belonging to the intermediate zone, should be contained.

Chinese elites perceived themselves as leaders of this intermediate zone or third world. China's active role in the 1955 Bandung Conference and in launching the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, together with

military and economic help to fellow members, proved that Beijing was ready to translate this idea into concrete actions. As the biggest threat to the independence of the intermediate zone, the US was seen as a hostile country. Hence, the struggle between a revolutionary and independent Beijing and an imperialistic Washington was not confined to China.

Social identity in 2001-12: Respectful great power

Once China started to distinguish between all the “barbarians” coming from the West, a sympathetic perception of the US as a modern and powerful nation yet respectful of China emerged. This perception has informed Chinese views of the US at many points since then. Shambaugh (1991) has referred to this perception as “beautiful imperialist”, referring to how in China there has always been a powerful constituency inclined to see the US in a positive light.

From the 1830s onwards, Chinese authors articulated a view of the US as a modern power yet respectful of their country. In China’s eyes the US was not a threat to the country’s sovereignty in the same way as Britain, France or Japan. In his influential *Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms* Wei Yuan portrayed the US in this positive light. Together with Hsu Chi-yu’s *Brief Survey of the Maritime Circuit*, Wei’s work served to imprint on Chinese minds the notion that the US was friendlier to China than any of the other great powers to which his country had been forced to trade with (HUNT, 1983, p. 45-51).

The view of the US that Chinese elites had translated into one specific interest: to use the US to balance other great powers that wanted to seize Chinese territories. Wei Yuan argued that China should “use the barbarians to control the barbarians”, and no other barbarian was more useful for this than the US (DE BARY, 1960, p. 677). Hence, Li Hongzhang sought American help to contain European expansionism in East Asia in the 1870s. Later on, in the early 20th century, Yuan Shikai tried to enlist Washington to avert Japanese aggression in Manchuria (HUNT, 1983p. 83, 202). Even though American military help was hardly forthcoming, China sought to at least obtain economic aid.

The strengthening of nationalists in the early 20th century produced a split on Chinese perceptions of the US. On the one hand, a group of nationalists believed that the root of their country’s backwardness was the imperial system. Hence, this group maintained a positive image of the US. Sun Yat-sen, the foremost leader of this group and a key figure in the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, regarded the US as a friend of China. Furthermore, he thought that Washington was likely to help his country to modernize (SCHIFFRIN, 1968, p. 337). On the other hand, another group maintained that China’s weaknesses were a result of foreign intervention. As seen in the previous section, this idea drove perceptions of the US between 1949 and 1969.

China’s perception of the US as a respectful great power has been dominant in the 2001-12 period. During his visit to the US in 2002 Jiang Zemin talked about “two great countries” that should develop a “strong and friendly relationship” to be able to deal with international issues (MIN-

ISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE PRC, 2002). As for Hu, during his first state visit to the US he compared both countries and argued that they had maintained friendly relations since the *Empress of China* sailed to Guangzhou and now had a relationship between equals. In addition, Hu called the US “the most developed country in the world.” He also stressed that both countries were of “significance influence” in the world and should therefore work together to promote a stable international environment (OFFICE OF THE PRESS SECRETARY, 2006). The following year, Hu stated that the two countries were interacting at a “strategic level”, working together to solve major international issues (XINHUA, 2007). During the first US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, held in Washington in July 2009, State Councillor Dai Bingguo delved on the historical nature of improved Sino-American relations (US STATE DEPARTMENT, 2009a). And during his January 2011 visit to the US, Hu stated that Beijing and Washington should cooperate as “partners” (WU; LIN ; CHEN, 2011). The implication of these and other remarks is that China now perceives itself as an equal partner to the greatest power. Even though elites might believe that the country still needs to continue modernizing, as seen above, Beijing has now gained the respect of Washington.

Identities and Sino-American relations

As explained above, Lebow maintains that constitution and causality reinforce each other to make certain types of behaviour more likely and expected. In the two periods of Sino-American relations analysed in this article, the two decades between 1949 and 1969 and the years between 2001 and 2012, the way in which China and the US constructed their identities made enmity and confrontation very likely during the former and cooperation predictable during the latter.

Enmity in 1949-69

During the first two decades of the Cold War, the respective corporate and mutual social identities of the two powers made enmity and confrontation logical. Maoist China perceived itself as a revolutionary state. This meant modernization of the country independent of foreign influence. Differently to Deng’s China, when self-identification as a reformist state allowed for borrowing ideas from other countries and collaboration with them, Mao’s strived to display its autonomy. Beijing’s foreign policy therefore was confrontational. Most notably, China promptly challenged the Soviet Union’s leadership of the Communist side.

Regarding Washington, this revolutionary identity was conflated with the ‘imperialist US’ perception explained above. Together, they made Beijing ready to confront Washington to protect fellow Third World members. This did not mean selfless interventions to defend other countries struggling against Western oppression. Rather, this hostility translated into a willingness to go to war when Chinese interests were at stake. Hence, Chinese troops fought in Korea and Vietnam, two countries bordering China. Beijing also threatened Washington

with military confrontation during the Taiwan Strait crises of 1954-55 and 1958. Identities and actions mutually reinforced each other, making increasing hostility move towards the middle-high end of Lebow's constitution-causation continuum.

With regards to the US, the post-World War II period witnessed the articulation of American exceptionalism through the forceful creation of a US-centred international system. Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson had similar views regarding Washington's role and policies. Hence, the US staged a coup of the Iranian government in 1953 under Eisenhower, launched the Bay of Pigs invasion and supported a coup in Iraq under Kennedy, and sent its fleet to support Israel during the Six Day War under Johnson. The three presidents were also committed to fighting the Vietnam War. In all these conflicts the US was seeking to support friendly regimes opposed to Communism. As the leader of the Free World, Washington ought to intervene to defend strategic territories threatened by Communist forces.

In the specific case of China, the Red Scare meant that Beijing was constructed as a menacing Other with threatening intentions. Chinese elites were portrayed as less rational than the Soviet leadership. Thus, containment of China and courting of Soviet leaders to, among other things, isolate the Asian power were logical results of this perception. Containment included fighting the Korea and Vietnam wars to weaken Chinese influence over both countries. Furthermore, containment involved protection of Taiwan from a possible Chinese invasion. Isolation of China was carried out through fomenting Sino-Soviet divisions. Thus, Washington granted Soviet leader Khrushchev a treatment that it denied to Mao. This helped to exacerbate divisions between both leaders. The US was not ready to perceive China as a reliable counterpart, which ensured enmity throughout the 1949-69 period.

Cooperation in 2001-12

In the case of 2011-12 Sino-American relations, identities and their corresponding policies are towards the middle of Lebow's constitution-causation continuum and edging towards the higher end. For centuries the US has self-identified through the prism of American exceptionalism, while China has an even longer history of relying on the frame of *Tianxia*. This has made each of them self-identify as a special great power. Consequently, the importance of Sino-American relations has increased along with the growing perception that they are the two greatest powers. The US is already considered the sole superpower. China has become the second largest economy in the world and its military capabilities are expanding rapidly. A similar situation during the Cold War led to relations based on enmity and proxy wars between two superpowers. Today, Washington and Beijing maintain a Strategic and Economic Dialogue. In addition, both countries have worked together to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue through the Six-Party Talks. They are also collaborating on issues such as failing states, terrorism, proliferation and climate change.¹¹

12. For an overview of Sino-American cooperation see Garrett and Adams (2004).

The experience of the Cold War might explain Washington's and Beijing's desire to cooperate and prevent conflict. However, as this article has shown elites in both countries have held positive mutual perceptions before and do so today again. Cooperation between the US and China is therefore better explained by their corporate identities and mutual social identities. Since *The Empress of China* arrived in Guangzhou, many American elites have considered China a great power which they could help modernize. Meanwhile, Chinese leaders have conceived of the US as a great power respectful of their country before, as they do today. Hence, cooperation has become increasingly likely when both countries have become the greatest powers in material terms. Following Lebow, the relationship between the early 21st century identities and associated interests and the policies based on collaboration is moving towards the higher end of the continuum. These self-images and mutual perceptions seem to have become entrenched in the psyche of American and Chinese elites, so protracted diplomatic confrontation has become unlikely and the threat of war between them is small.

The conflation of Washington's interest in maintaining a US-centred international system and Beijing's interest in preserving a harmonious world conducive to its modernisation through reform have resulted in the current period of cooperation. These interests have a long history and are entrenched in the ideational structures of China and the US. Together they reinforce Sino-American preferences for cooperation. Therefore, cooperation is not only the result of each country's material interests but also a consequence of their identities. Following Wendt, American and Chinese identities and interests are being continuously reinforced as interactions between both countries buttress their respective identities and help them to achieve their interests. This explains the positioning of the current behaviour of both powers towards the higher end of Lebow's continuum. As a consequence, cooperation is becoming more likely. This does not preclude diplomatic rows or even low-level military skirmishes. But it makes these insufficient to affect cooperation on more substantive issues.

Conclusion

This article has served to show that improving Sino-American relations are to a large extent explained by the frames of reference that both countries employ to self-identify and to perceive the other. Beijing and Washington elites constructed a favourable perception of each other in the late 18th and early 19th century that is being reproduced today. These mutual perceptions have worked together with the respective corporate identity of China and the US to make cooperation between them predictable. Chinese and American elites increasingly acknowledge this.

As constructivism purports, ideas and actions are mutually constitutive. Once American and Chinese mutual perceptions of two amicable great powers have become policy through cooperation at the bilateral, regional and global level it will become increasingly difficult for them to perceive the other as a threatening Other. This antagonistic percep-

tion happened between 1949 and 1969. Recurrence in the near future is unlikely. As this article has shown, Sino-American mutual benevolent perceptions build on positive historical images. Reinforced by cooperation, the most likely outcome is that relations between the two current greatest powers will be defined by increasing amity and collaboration.

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