

China's relationship with its territories is of increasing importance in the global balance of power. Major disputes over Hong Kong protests for democracy and controversy over Tsai Ing-wen's election demonstrate the growing trend of territorial importance for international relations. In fact, renown international relations scholar, John Mearsheimer alarmingly describes the potential for Taiwan to become a hotspot for nuclear escalation<sup>1</sup>. Mearsheimer's recent article is a sort of an "I told you so" to liberalist policy makers that sought to encourage peace by integrating China into the world economy.<sup>2</sup> Instead, in realist fashion, he describes Xi as offensive and power hungry. However, his paper's brief mentioning of the security dilemma in China's "sacred commitments" to Taiwan glosses over another explanation for Xi's policy.<sup>3</sup> Instead of Mearsheimer's realism, sacred commitments demonstrate an example of constructivism's three core assumptions: Social facts are more important than brute facts; behavior is governed by identity and norms; collectively held ideas constitute structure.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, China's approach to Taiwan and Hong Kong requires constructivist analytics, rather than realism and liberalism, to fully appreciate China's foreign policy.

First, Chinese policy makers prioritize social facts of national identity over brute facts when determining commitments to historical territories. For China, the aforementioned "sacred commitments" to Taiwan are a social fact. To Chinese leaders, "Taiwan is fundamental because after Hong Kong and Macau's return, it is the single remaining inhabited Chinese territory not yet returned to the motherland."<sup>5</sup> China's *raison d'être* for these specific countries is not national security, but based on the historical memory of imperialism over these territories. To demonstrate the importance of historical memory, Gregory Moore established in a survey of experts that the dominant reasons behind Chinese policy towards Taiwan were "sacred

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<sup>1</sup> Mearsheimer pp. 57

<sup>2</sup> Mearsheimer pp. 58

<sup>3</sup> Mearsheimer pp. 57

<sup>4</sup> Ian Hurd pp.298-305

<sup>5</sup> Moore, Gregory. "The Power of 'Sacred Commitments': Chinese Interests in Taiwan." *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Volume 12, Issue 2, April 2016, pp. 221, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12039>.

commitments” (given 49% weight). The next most important reason was fear of loss of legitimacy (given 21% weight).<sup>6</sup> Moore’s survey demonstrates the first tenet of constructivism: brute facts of legitimacy and power are less important than its sacred commitments. Moreover, social fact priorities lend explanatory power to empirical examples of Chinese differential treatment. For example, in response to the sale of American F-16s to Taiwan, China’s rhetoric emphasized “unequivocal opposition” to arms sales, highlighted the “high degree of sensitivity and severe impact of [the] issue,” and called them “extremely dangerous.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast, response to F-35s to Japan were met with calmer rhetoric, “[urging] Japan to adhere to the policy of ‘exclusive defense’, [and staying] committed to the path of peaceful development.”<sup>8</sup> These differing responses resemble when constructivist Alexander Wendt questioned why the US feared North Korea more if the UK had a greater nuclear arsenal.<sup>9</sup> He concluded that the US’ friendliness with the UK must mean that security threats are also tied to relationships and identities, not just fire power.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, even though Japanese F-35s are far more dangerous than F-16s, China’s rhetoric demonstrates more concern over Taiwan than Japan<sup>11</sup>. Realists would predict it was the other way around. Instead, China-Taiwan historical memories such as those reflected in the “One China Policy” demonstrate concerns over social facts rather than material ones. However, China’s treatment of F-35s does not mean its actions to Japan are entirely ahistorical. During the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands crises, Chinese nationalism called back to imperial Japanese oppression of the Chinese.<sup>12</sup> Still, a more extreme response to Taiwan’s

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<sup>6</sup> Moore, Gregory. “The Power of ‘Sacred Commitments’: Chinese Interests in Taiwan.” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Volume 12, Issue 2, April 2016, pp. 219, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12039>.

<sup>7</sup> “China threatens sanctions over US-Taiwan F-16 fighter plane deal.” *BBC*, 21 Aug. 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49420283>.

<sup>8</sup> “Hua, Chunying. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference.” *The Commissioner’s Office of China’s Foreign Ministry in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region*, 26 Dec. 2017, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cohk/eng/Topics/fyrbt/t1522206.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Wendt pp.74 (Originally refers to Soviet Missiles but Wolhforth Modified to North Korea so it makes more sense in the current context)

<sup>10</sup> Wendt pp.74-79

<sup>11</sup> Girard, Bonnie. “China Faces a Stronger Japan.” *The Diplomat*, 31 May. 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/china-faces-a-stronger-japan/>.

<sup>12</sup> Yeung, Jun T. “Why is Taiwan so important? The manipulation of nationalism in legitimizing one-party rule in China.” *Yale Review of International Studies*, Oct. 2019, <http://yris.yira.org/essays/3613>.

F-16s contrasted with Japan's F-35s demonstrates how Taiwan is on the extreme end of the spectrum for China's non-material commitments.

Second, Chinese behavior towards Taiwan and Hong Kong is governed by identity and norms under its "historical memory." The Chinese term, *shensheng de*, which can be translated as "sacred," "divine," or "holy," weaves its way into many places in Chinese international policy.<sup>13</sup> In 2000, Premier Zhu Rongji called "the complete reunification of the motherland" a "sacred mission."<sup>14</sup> 20 years later, Xi Jinping described the Taiwan issue as a "grave lurking threat to national rejuvenation" and even described his mission as the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation"<sup>15</sup> The consistency of Chinese policy towards Taiwan over decades establishes the historical undertones of Chinese governance. Xi's policy framing of the "great" rejuvenation and Zhu's "sacred mission" both harken to the legacy of China's identity as a once powerful nation. For Hong Kong, Xi's strategy of assimilation into autocratic China called Chinese "patriots" to act on their "deep sense of responsibility to the motherland."<sup>16</sup> To Chinese citizens in Hong Kong, that "responsibility" is about the collective Chinese identity of its members. Thus, rhetoric around patriotism, sacred missions, etc. help realize the central purpose of Chinese-territorial conflict: identity. But China doesn't just end with rhetoric. Identity increasingly guides policymaking as Xi is acutely aware of Hong Kong and Taiwan's move away from the "Chinese Identity." In 1997, 1 in 5 of Hong Kong residents defined themselves as "Chinese" but that

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<sup>13</sup> Moore, Gregory. "The Power of 'Sacred Commitments': Chinese Interests in Taiwan." *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Volume 12, Issue 2, April 2016, pp. 224, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12039>.

<sup>14</sup> Moore, Gregory. "The Power of 'Sacred Commitments': Chinese Interests in Taiwan." *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Volume 12, Issue 2, April 2016, pp. 223, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12039>.

<sup>15</sup> Buckley, Chris and Steven Lee Meyers. "'Starting a Fire': U.S. and China Enter Dangerous Territory Over Taiwan." *The New York Times*, 9 Oct. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/09/world/asia/united-states-china-taiwan.html>.

<sup>16</sup> "China's Xi Signals More Hong Kong Curbs With Call for 'Patriots'." *Bloomberg News*, 27 Jan. 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-27/china-s-president-xi-says-patriots-should-govern-hong-kong>.

number has steadily decreased, since 2006, to 1 in 10.<sup>17</sup> So, Xi has sought to inculcate patriotism to Hong Kong kindergarteners through story-telling, role-playing, drawing, singing, dancing and other activities.<sup>18</sup> Like Hong Kong, Taiwan is also in an identity war with China. 70% of Taiwanese people do not identify themselves as Chinese.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the pro-independence party led by Tsai has historically promoted *Xiangtu Wenxue*, a native Taiwan literature and emphasized Taiwanese cultural school curriculum.<sup>20</sup> In response to this identity gap, China has sought to increase integration through the liberalization of trade. New policies, such as “31 measures of preferential treatment for Taiwanese Compatriots” in 2018 or making Hong Kong the center of its Belt and Road initiative, attempt to attract Hong Kong and Taiwanese citizens back to the motherland and be proud of their country.<sup>21</sup> While this sounds like a tactic of liberalism, the economic benefit of these strategies is marginal.<sup>22</sup> Rather, these moves make sense in the context of how China values its people’s identities. Thus, constructivism fills in the gaps where economic logic fails.

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<sup>17</sup> “Almost nobody in Hong Kong under 30 identifies as ‘Chinese’.” *The Economist*, 26 Aug. 2019, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/08/26/almost-nobody-in-hong-kong-under-30-identifies-as-chinese>.

<sup>18</sup> Lindberg, Kari S. “Hong Kong Orders Schools to Teach Sweeping Pro China Curriculum.” *Bloomberg News*, 02 May. 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-05/hong-kong-orders-schools-to-teach-sweeping-pro-china-curriculum>.

<sup>19</sup> Li, Yitan, and Enyu Zhang. “Changing Taiwanese Identity and Cross-Strait Relations: a Post 2016 Taiwan Presidential Election Analysis.” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 22, no. 1, 2017, pp. 27, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11366-016-9452-9>.

<sup>20</sup> Li, Yitan, and Enyu Zhang. “Changing Taiwanese Identity and Cross-Strait Relations: a Post 2016 Taiwan Presidential Election Analysis.” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 22, no. 1, 2017, pp. 24, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11366-016-9452-9>.

<sup>21</sup> Lin, Syaru S. “Analyzing the Relationship between Identity and Democratization in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the Shadow of China.” *The Asan Forum*, 20 Dec. 2018, <https://theasanforum.org/analyzing-the-relationship-between-identity-and-democratization-in-taiwan-and-hong-kong-in-the-shadow-of-china/#27>.

<sup>22</sup> Ikenberry and Mastanduno pp.310-311, evidence for little economic impact:  
Lin, Syaru S. “Analyzing the Relationship between Identity and Democratization in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the Shadow of China.” *The Asan Forum*, 20 Dec. 2018, <https://theasanforum.org/analyzing-the-relationship-between-identity-and-democratization-in-taiwan-and-hong-kong-in-the-shadow-of-china/#27>.

Third, China's structural relationship with Taiwan and Hong Kong is based on collectively held ideas. Infamously, Pop singer of "Raise the Umbrella," Denise Ho, was berated by social media, cut off from fashion brands, and shut out from venues on mainland China because her song supported Hong Kong democracy.<sup>23</sup> A major film director, Wong Jing, publicly unfriended Ho on social media. Even more, the media questioned her loyalty to China: *"Is this how you treat the country that gave birth to you and raised you?"*<sup>24</sup> Mainland China's collective response latches directly onto the collectively held idea of Chinese identity--framing the mainland as parental figures to which Hongkongers are children of. Similarly, Mainlanders protested a McDonalds advertisement that showed a ticket with a Taiwanese nationality option.<sup>25</sup> Like China's top-down policies that establish a culture of One China, bottom-up actions reinforce how foreign policy around Hong Kong and Taiwan are collectively motivated.

Finally, in contrast to constructivism, realism and liberalism fail to understand the "a-rationality" of China's identity building when it comes to "reunification." While Mearsheimer correctly identifies the strategic importance of Taiwan in a US-China war, Moore's survey proves that even if strategic security is an issue, constructed values are more important. Infact, as previously mentioned, Mearsheimer's recent Foreign Affairs article smuggles in "sacred commitments" but does not reconcile how they subvert rational political calculus. Instead, trends demonstrate how China is not necessarily motivated irrationally, but instead a-rationally. That is to say, motivations are still justified, but justified by more than just "cost-benefit" means.

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<sup>23</sup> Qin, Amy and Alan Wong. "Stars Backing Hong Kong Protests Pay Price on Mainland." *The New York Times*, 24 Oct. 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/25/world/asia/hong-kong-stars-face-mainland-backlash-over-support-for-protests.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Qin, Amy and Alan Wong. "Stars Backing Hong Kong Protests Pay Price on Mainland." *The New York Times*, 24 Oct. 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/25/world/asia/hong-kong-stars-face-mainland-backlash-over-support-for-protests.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Handley, Lucy. "McDonald's apologizes after people said an ad supported Taiwan independence from China." *CNBC*, 21 Jan. 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/21/mcdonalds-withdraws-taiwan-ad-after-china-independence-backlash.html>.

In a similar way, a-rationality breaks down core assumptions of liberalism.<sup>26</sup> In response to Chinese coercion efforts, the US threatened to remove special treatment for Hong Kong as a global financial hub and the UK offered “handover” citizenship to over half of Hong Kong’s population.<sup>27</sup> Worse, closing off Hong Kong as a hub for laissez faire capitalism also cuts off China’s access to U.S. dollars which it needs for international finance.<sup>28</sup> Under rational theory, no country would accept such massive economic losses.<sup>29</sup> In reality, most policy makers expected that to be true. They expected China to be slow and cautious with Hong Kong because of its financial importance.<sup>30</sup> However, Xi’s arrests, asset seizures, and aggressive actions have happened so quickly that analysts have called it a “lightning war.” Hong Kong’s experiences should be a warning to policy makers that a-rational factors cannot be ignored. Likewise, in national security, China has set a hard line on Taiwanese independence by codifying into law that any attempt to seek independence means war.<sup>31</sup> No matter the allied draw-in or strategic implications, “permanent delaying of reunification” is “sufficient” for the “use of force.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, rational cost benefit analysis of economic and security costs hardly account for China’s motivations.

In conclusion, while realism has been an effective tool in understanding Chinese foreign policy broadly, historical territories such as Hong Kong and Taiwan present a unique instance in

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<sup>26</sup> Doyle pp. 65-74

<sup>27</sup> Stevenson, Alexandra and Vivian Wang. “Why China May Call the World’s Bluff on Hong Kong.” *The New York Times*, 3 Jun. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/business/china-hong-kong-damage.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Stevenson, Alexandra and Vivian Wang. “Why China May Call the World’s Bluff on Hong Kong.” *The New York Times*, 3 Jun. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/business/china-hong-kong-damage.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Doyle pp.70-74

<sup>30</sup> Buckley, Chris and Vivian Wang and Austin Ramzy. “Crossing the Red Line: Behind China’s Takeover of Hong Kong.” *The New York Times*, 28 Jun. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/world/asia/china-hong-kong-security-law.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Moore, Gregory. “The Power of ‘Sacred Commitments’: Chinese Interests in Taiwan.” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Volume 12, Issue 2, April 2016, pp. 228, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12039>.

<sup>32</sup> Moore, Gregory. “The Power of ‘Sacred Commitments’: Chinese Interests in Taiwan.” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Volume 12, Issue 2, April 2016, pp. 228, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12039>.

which policymakers should consider China's social values. From the opposing perspective, Mearsheimer concludes by arguing that realist logic is essential to establishing "rules of the road" for our "modern security competition".<sup>33</sup> Yet, here, constructivism already reveals some cultural rules to watch for: Hong Kong/Taiwan independence is bad, Chinese national identity is extremely important, and money or security won't necessarily stop China. Moreover, a constructive lens suggests Mearsheimer's "security competition" is first and foremost a "cultural competition." China is not power hungry just for power, it is motivated by the great Chinese story of rejuvenation, to recover from its humiliation during imperialism and fulfill its sacred commitments. Recognizing these distinctions critically avoids mistakes such as failing to predict China's "lightning war." As China and US tensions get worse, policymakers should dig out their library cards and check out some history books before sitting atop the nuclear button.

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<sup>33</sup> Mearsheimer pp. 57-58