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*International Studies Bachelor Thesis*

# “A Narratological Approach to Chinese Politics”

Developing a Narrative-Based Theoretical Framework in South East China  
Sea and Hong Kong Mainland Conflicts (1974-2020)

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## ABSTRACT

Narratives are usually depicted as auxiliary tools for the correct implementation of material politics. Similar interpretations have been presented in China's case, where the CCP has developed a *benevolent* narrative in order to gain institutional centrality and overall international recognition. Two approaches emerged to explain the liberalization trend walked by China over the last 50 years. While socialization theory supporters claimed that this new discourse was the reflection of China's candid attempt to embrace liberalism, ascetic realist supporters defended that this narrative simply responded to CCP's unchallenged realpolitik interests.

In this thesis, we get to prove (i) the incompleteness of former theoretical frameworks, and (ii) the autonomous agency developed by China's narrative. In this study, we show that China's *benevolent* narrative managed to seize CCP's traditional internal flexibility reaching a paradoxical state where narratology and realism interact in an organic fashion. To support our claims, we have edified our own theoretical framework based on Jones and McBeth NPF (2010), which is tested in South East China Sea and Hong Kong – Mainland conflicts.

### Key words

China; narratives; theoretical framework; NPF; realpolitik



## **DEDICATION**

To my parents Loreto and Luis Miguel for their unconditional love and support in my academic, professional, and personal life. To my brother Ignacio for his inspiring day-to-day self-improvement. To my family and friends for making me the man I am today. To Covadonga for her infinite patience in this process, and to Prof. Richards and Prof. Colli for their mentoring and expertise which led to this Bachelor Thesis.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>1C2S</b>	One Country Two Systems
<b>AIIB</b>	Asian Investment Infrastructure Bank
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of South East Asian Nations
<b>BFA</b>	Boao Forum for Asia
<b>CCP</b>	Chinese Communist Party
<b>DOC</b>	Declaration on the Conduct of Parties
<b>FDI</b>	Foreign Direct Investment
<b>FT</b>	Financial Times
<b>FTA</b>	Free Trade Agreement
<b>HK</b>	Hong Kong
<b>HKM</b>	Hong Kong Mainland
<b>HKMC</b>	Hong Kong Mainland Conflict
<b>ICJ</b>	International Court of Justice
<b>IGO</b>	International Governmental Organization
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organization
<b>IR</b>	International Relations
<b>Legco</b>	Legislative Council
<b>NPF</b>	Narrative Policy Framework
<b>NSL</b>	National Security Law
<b>NYT</b>	New York Times
<b>OBOR</b>	One Belt One Road
<b>PRC</b>	Popular Republic of China
<b>PST</b>	Political Shift Theory
<b>SEA</b>	South East Asia
<b>SECS</b>	South East China Sea
<b>SECSC</b>	South East China Sea Conflict
<b>TASMSU</b>	Tripartite Agreement for Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking
<b>UNCLOS</b>	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>WSJ</b>	Wall Street Journal
<b>WTO</b>	World Trade Organization



# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Motivation

*“China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that is just a fact.”*

Yang Jiechi, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2010

As presented by Jones (2018), individuals usually do not fear facts but fear the imaginaries associated to those facts. In that regard, narratives play a quintessential role in the shaping of feelings and experiences, operating as cognitive bridges between actions and attitudes. Unsurprisingly, political actors have developed comprehensive narratives throughout history for gaining the favor of its people (Kennan, 1946). As a result, the academia has energetically tried to incorporate the role of narratives within their theoretical corpuses in order to understand the evolving nature of different polities. In this sense, narratives have turned out to be extremely effective for explaining the dynamics of micro and macro policies (Subotic, 2016), and Chinese politics are not an exception.

China has emerged as a major international actor through a unique mix of unprecedented economic growth, political authoritarianism, and physical expansionism (Hurrell, 2013; Rudd, 2013). As a result, understanding the ever-changing nature of Chinese politics has become crucial for developed and developing economies, and especially for the current *world order leader*, the United States of America (USA).

Narratives have always played a central role within Chinese society, as for Chinese people the way something looks is as important as the way something is (Garlick, 2018). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is aware of this constructivist view, and consequently, it has edified a comprehensive political structure which combines narratives and facts. For instance, looking at Yang’s quote, we would all agree that China’s size is, indeed, a fact, not a narrative nor an imaginary. Still, this “fact” seems particularly worrisome for South-East Asia (SEA) countries. China’s geographical, economic, and military size has shaped the behavior of international actors, not because its factuality but because it evokes a very particular narrative inside the international community, namely China’s assertive role as a new world leader (Medeiros, 2009).

To sustain the increasing necessities of such a big country, the CCP has adopted a pragmatic posturing which ambitions to impose its political primacy in the Mainland while ensuring the economic prosperity of the nation (Li, 2012; Zweig and Bi, 2005). China’s regional hegemony, Chinese Government realpolitik approach to International Relations (IR), and Chinese People political flexibility have allowed Chinese Officials to perform apparently disconnected actions for the sole acquisition of CCP’s immediate

goals. The incoherent and *schizophrenic* nature of these actions (Shambaugh, 2011:21) worries Western Countries, which observe with concern the rise of a global realist stakeholder willing to ignore the fundamentals of the *liberal world order* for achieving its objectives (Rudd, 2013).

This *ascetic realist* interpretation of China's personality suggests that there is no point in identifying common underlying patterns behind CCP's actions, despite the existence of macro-projects like the One-Belt-One-Road (OBOR) initiative (Economy, 2014; Sidaway and Woon, 2017). This academic body has flourished in international publications, trying to elucidate China's micro-policies without providing a compelling theoretical framework which embraces the heterogeneity of Chinese practices between 1974 and 2020.

On the other hand, there is an extensive literature which advocates for a *partial socialization* interpretation of China's personality (Han, 2017; Li, 2010, Weissmann, 2015). These authors claim that CCP's disconnected actions are the result of an incomplete "socialization" or "liberalization" process. According to their view, as any other emerging country, China is just climbing the *Western ladder* of socioeconomic development. Thus, the interaction between these two forces, incipient liberal and former realpolitik trends, have shaped China's contradictory (inter)national personality. However, this vision, besides being inherently Eurocentric, fails to explain China's revived assertiveness in the last decade.

## 1.2. Objectives

To solve the limitations of these two approaches, this study looks forward to explaining in a holistic way the paradoxical and disconnected nature of Chinese actions (1974-2020) without lying onto simplistic realist interpretations of Chinese politics neither on incomplete liberalization theories. To solve this puzzle, we adopt a narrative-driven approach which suggests that China's policies have been shaped and constrained by the emergence of an autonomous narrative, especially during the last decade. This political narrative was originally created by the CCP as an auxiliary realpolitik tool in the 1990s, but soon it gained its own agency, effectively limiting Chinese ambitions in an organic and paradoxical fashion.

For understanding the origin and evolution of this narrative, we combine a series of theoretical schemes including Narrative Policy Framework (NPF - Jones and McBeth, 2010), Political Shift Theory (PST - Subotic, 2016), Cosmopolitan Theory (Chea, 2006) and key insights from Chinese tradition. These models provide us with (i) enough flexibility so that we can embrace apparently incoherent Chinese actions within the same corpus, and (ii) very suitable terminology for analyzing the different elements of this narrative. Eventually, to test the validity of our theoretical framework and to illustrate the

evolution of Chinese politics/narratives, we use current South East China Sea Conflict (SECSC) and Hong Kong Mainland Conflict (HKMC) as testing grounds.

According to IPI Global Observatory, the SECSC is one of the Global Top-Ten Peace and Security issues. This multilateral conflict confronts the sovereignty claims of China, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei over the South East China Sea (SECS). This dispute stands out as a global crucial matter because of the strategic importance of this Sea in military and economic terms and the geopolitical implications derived from Chinese primacy in SEA (a territory historically under American influence). On the other hand, HKMC refers to Mainland-HK tensions due to Beijing's systematic violation of the one-country-two-systems (1C2S) principles. This conflict is a source of global concern too, not only because it coerces the autonomy of one of the biggest financial hubs in the world, but also because it indirectly threatens the security of other SEA countries like Taiwan (and consequently, the interests of the USA in the region).

Our theoretical framework allows us to enlighten major dynamics within Chinese international personality. We claim that China's creation of a *cosmopolitan* narrative in the 1990s originally provided China with outstanding results in terms of institutional centrality. Nonetheless, this discourse had middle- and long-run undesired effects on CCP's undisputed political flexibility. The organic interaction between authoritarian ambitions and liberal narratives has generated some sort of Thucydides Trap which pushes back against Chinese realpolitik interests. Our Research Question can be expressed as: "*How can we understand the evolving nature and paradoxical character of Chinese politics through a narrative approach?*"

For effectively tackling this incognita, this paper is structured as follows: Section 1 introduces some stylized facts about SECSC and HKMC from a historical and political perspective. Section 2 explains what is paradoxical about Chinese actions and summarizes socialization and realist interpretations of Chinese (inter)national identity. Section 3 presents the NPF theoretical framework and tests the validity of its assumptions in SECS and HKM conflicts. Section 4 describes the origin and the first two stages of China's narrative (1974-2010). Section 5 shows the paradoxical outcomes derived from the organic interaction between traditional Chinese realpolitik and the novel *cosmopolitan* narrative (2010-2020). Finally, Section 6 concludes.

## **2. A BRIEF HISTORICAL DEPICTION OF THE SOUTH EAST CHINA SEA CONFLICT AND THE HONG KONG MAINLAND CONFLICT**

### **2.1. South East China Sea Conflict**

SECS can be characterized in geographical terms as the waters enclosed between Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei, and Taiwan's landmasses. The economic and geopolitical importance of this territory is huge. From a financial perspective, SECS is part of the main route connecting Eastern Asia manufactures with Middle East oil. It is estimated that around 5.3 trillion USD pass every year through this Sea (CRS, 2019:5). Moreover, it also contains (i) one the biggest fisheries reserves in the world, with around 10% of global fisheries (Fisher, 2016), and (ii) vast deposits of oil and gas, with estimations exceeding 750 million barrels (USGS, 2010). Finally, in geopolitical terms, SECS has been the scenario of numerous clashes between Western and Eastern powers since WWII. Indeed, the USA has developed a complex network of alliances in the region, including Philippines and Vietnam, for containing Chinese expansionism (Chiang, 2015). Based on this preamble, there is no doubt why SECSC is considered one of the Global Top-Ten Peace and Security Issues (IPI Global Observatory, 2014).

Although we could further extend the time scope of this dispute, the modern conflict begins in 1949 when the PRC claimed sovereignty over the waters contained within the nine-dashes line. This dashed line is just a drawing based on historical rights of dubious veracity which encloses more than 90% of SECS territory (Severino, 2010). China's vindication obviously interferes with the fundamental sovereignty principles enunciated in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), of which China happens to be a signatory. Despite China's provocations, their claims remained unattended in the Geneva Accords of 1954, where the international community agreed to deliver the Paracel and the Spratly islands, the two largest archipelagos of the region, to South Vietnam. Latent Chinese ambitions notwithstanding, the sovereignty of the archipelagos was undisputed until 1974, when, unexpectedly, China invaded the Paracels taking advantage of the favorable development of the Vietnam War. Since then, the CCP has considered "not even negotiable" its control over this archipelago. Despite sporadic verbal condemn for Chinese abuses, China's ruling over the Paracels is *de facto* accepted by all SEA countries (Lo, 2003; Scott, 2012).

After 1974, SECS reached a quasi-peaceful appearance that got progressively muddled by Chinese unpredictable use of violence. This chaotic spiral culminated in 1995 with the Mischief Reef incident, an episode which confronted the sovereignty claims of Philippines and China over this reef. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) frontally reprobated Chinese behavior leading to a regional stalemate.

Many authors were expecting China to increase its assertiveness as a response to ASEAN's reprobation; however, we observed an unexpected shift in Chinese attitude after this conflict. China adopted a collaborative spirit which yielded important multilateral agreements (Scott, 2012) including the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC, 2002), whose objective was to

*“REAFFIRM their determination to consolidate and develop the friendship and cooperation existing between their people and governments with the view to promoting a 21st century-oriented partnership of good neighborliness and mutual trust.”*

This multilateral trend was further reinforced with several public and private agreements and cross-country billion-dollar investments (Amer, 2015). Nevertheless, things can go in the same way they came. After just 15 years of prosperous cooperation, in 2011 China dynamited this collaborative environment with a new violent conflict, the Scarborough incident. In the last decade, direct and indirect violence has proliferated (Chinese construction of artificial islands in disputed territory, increasing militarization of the Sea, restrictions to freedom of navigation, American rebalance in the region, Sino-Philippines litigation, etc.) leading to an unsafe and fragile scenario under PRC's primacy.

## **2.2. Hong Kong Mainland Conflict**

Not that far away, in Hong Kong, the HKMC started in the 1840s-1860s where, after the Opium Wars, China is forced to cede Hong Kong to Britain, which transformed it into a free port enclave as part of its imperial expansion. A few years later, in 1898 China *leased* the rest of Hong Kong's territory to Britain for 99 years. Since then, China and Hong Kong have undergone two differentiated paths. While communism triumphed in China after Mao's Revolution, Hong Kong's economy soared through a high-tech capitalist economy. Despite these differences, China had never given away its ambitions to reunify the former Chinese Empire into a single polity (So, 2011).

Indeed, after a few years of negotiations, in 1984 China and Britain signed a Joint Declaration on the conditions of the Handover that, as agreed, took place in 1997. Tiananmen massacre (1989) raised Hong Kongese concerns about the upcoming transition, as they feared a degradation of their freedom and living conditions. To shield Hong Kongese political and personal rights, Chris Patten, British Official in charge of the disconnection, announced a series of amends to the Basic Law, the mini-constitution that ruled Hong Kong after the Handover. Nevertheless, just a light version of Mr. Patten reforms eventually got approved, and Hong Kong failed to implement universal suffrage.

During the first decade of the century, although important pro-democracy demonstrations took place, China-HK relations remained very solid. While the pro-democracy/pro-independence group achieved comfortable victories in the Legislative Council (Legco)

elections, Beijing actively supported the economic integration of the region within Mainland China. This apparently peaceful cooperation, however, reached a sudden end in 2014, when Beijing passed a law which ensured CCP's pre-screening of all candidates who wanted to run for office in HK. Hereafter, there have existed major clashes between pro-democracy activists and pro-China supporters. This tension has been revived in 2019 after Beijing's announcement of its intention to implement an extradition law which allows China to judge Hong Kongese in Mainland courts. This measure has been interpreted by Hong Kongers as a legal pitfall for judging political dissidents. Finally, in 2020, in the middle of a self-destructive spiral of violence, Beijing approved a new HK National Security Law (NSL) which threatens even more Hong Kongese's freedoms.



### 3. CHINA AS AN INCOMPLETE LIBERAL AGENT OR AS A REALPOLITIK TROUBLEMAKER?

Despite the uncountable efforts to unify Chinese practices within a unique robust theoretical body, there is a wide consensus on the apparent irrationality of Chinese behavior in the international arena. Chinese initiatives are paradoxical at two different levels: The material-material level – that is to say, the implementation of contradictory tangible policies – and the material-discursive level – meaning the mismatch between narratives and actions. I will use Sino-Philippines relations to illustrate these dual-nature conflicting behavior.

Sino-Philippines diplomacy has been very fluctuant during the last few years, especially regarding SECS territorial disputes. Sino-Philippines conflicts include, among others, disagreements about the Spratly Islands, the Mischief Reef (1995), and fishing rights in the Scarborough Shoal (2012). This love-hate relationship has produced an incoherent thread of collaborative and conflicting episodes. For instance, in 2005, China signed the Tripartite Agreement for Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (TAJMSU), an agreement which established common ground for collective exploitation of SECS's fuel resources under the maxim "Sea of Cooperation" (Amer, 2015; Meng, 2017). Furthermore, in 2019, during Rodrigo Duterte's – President of Philippines – visit to China, both countries agreed on an ambitious collaboration plan to support freedom of navigation and cooperative fuel extraction (ParsToday, 2019). In addition, China's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Philippines soared during the last few years. Just in 2019, Chinese FDI in Philippines increased by 74.9% reaching 1.75 billion USD, consolidating the PRC as the second-largest international investor in the archipelago (Xinhua, 2020). This material collaboration was further reinforced by High Officials' speeches, who claimed in favor of peaceful *Panasianism*, where the SECS could stand as a meeting point for all SEA countries (Reeves, 2018).

*I am confident that China and Philippines will work together on COVID-19 response and economic recovery. Our time-honored friendship and mutual trust will deepen, and our relationship of comprehensive strategic cooperation will embrace greater prospects. History will prove that friendship between China and the Philippines serves the fundamental and long-term interests of the two peoples.*

President Xi telephone conversation with President Duterte in June 2020

However, this collaborative frame has been constantly obstructed by coercive episodes. For example, in 2016 the ICJ confirmed that China had unambiguously violated Philippines' water sovereignty, hence, it must immediately cease its expansionist practices. Still, China shown big disdain for this ruling (Page, 2016) and threatened Duterte with a war after Philippines' ongoing complaints about active presence of Chinese warships in the Benham Rise, a region under Philippines's jurisdiction (Mogato, 2017).

Surprisingly, this threat took place the very same year that these two countries had signed important cooperative agreements for the *fruitful development* of the region. Finally, in 2019, tensions re-emerged after Chinese unauthorized fuel extraction in the Reed Bank, a reef also under Philippines' sovereignty (Gulf News, 2020).

Sino-Philippine relations are paradigmatic of the aforementioned paradoxes. There exist contradictions not only in China's material policies (active cooperation through TAJMSU vs Reed Bank unauthorized fuel extraction) but also across CCP's tangible actions and political discourses (*Sea of Cooperation* narrative vs unilateral expansionism speech). For solving this maze, a prolific number of authors have developed two differentiated academic bodies: a *partial socialization theory* and an *ascetic realpolitik approach*.

*Socialization theory* supporters suggest that China's realist agency has been shaped by ongoing international political and economic liberalization trends (Han, 2017; Li, 2010). According to their view, liberal order institutions and the *liberal spirit* had effectively forced China to embrace the Western creed and to assume the primacy of these institutions. To justify their claims, they present a convincing story which starts with the depiction of a *choleric* China in 1970s – remember, for instance, China's invasion of the Paracels in 1974. The brutality and unpredictability of Chinese politics created an imaginary which characterized China as an incoherent and violent regional power. This depiction was reinforced with the killing of 64 Vietnamese sailors in the Johnson Reef (1988) and the Mischief Reef (1995) incidents. Despite ASEAN's frontal opposition against these intolerable actions, China was willing to strengthen its hegemony in SECS through asymmetric bilateralism and spontaneous but brutal use of force. Although this choleric strategy yielded important territorial gains for China (1974-1995), starting in 1995, we observed a radical orientation shift in Chinese behavior.

*Socialization authors* claimed that PRC's post-1995 decreasing assertiveness was due to an internal change in Chinese identity (Weissmann, 2015). China had eventually succumbed to the liberal socialization process driven by ASEAN and other liberal institutions. If, despite the fact China held enough power as to impose its interest through direct violence, it refrained from doing so, then, it must be the case that either (i) China had experienced an inner transformation (willingly or unwillingly) or (ii) it had rediscovered win-win collaborative scenarios emerging from a peaceful approach to IR (Li, 2010). As we know, this period (1995-2010) is characterized by the signing of important agreements in SECS and HK. For instance in HK, during these years, Chinese self-identification among Hong Kongers peaked because of shared economic prosperity, China's financial support to Honk Kong after 1998 Asian Financial Crisis, and the consolidation of the 1C2S model (Ma, 2015).

Deng and post-Deng international openness further reinforces socialization theses. Just to mention some figures, China increased its FDI by a factor of three and its exports by a factor of seven since 2000 (Trading Economics, 2020). Moreover, China has gained

strong centrality within international institutions. While in 1966 it was only present in 1 International Governmental Organization (IGO) and 58 International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGO), by 2000 it was already present in more than 50 IGOs and 1275 INGOs (Kent, 2001).

Nevertheless, these arguments present some limitations. First, if China were going through an irresistible liberalization process, we would expect a progressive decay of its expansionist ambitions, a reduction in the use of authoritarian violence, and a progressive rapprochement with liberal institutions. Unfortunately, none of these prescriptions is true. In the last decade, China has extended its imperial ambitions and it has frequently deployed violence as a coercive tool in domestic and foreign conflicts (Graham-Harrison, 2019; Reeves, 2018). In addition, although China has drawn near to international liberal Organizations like World Trade Organization (WTO) and World Bank, it still undermines the role of some central institutions like the ICJ (Tønnesson, 2016).

*Socialization theory supporters* present all these events as *isolated episodes* which do not obscure China's overall liberalization (Metcalf, 2012). In that regard, PRC is exhibited as an *incomplete socialized agent*. Nonetheless, contrary to this view, authoritarian episodes rather than casual, seem to be more and more recurrent across time. In fact, China has consistently increased its normative power in SECS through progressive militarization of sand bunks, and in HK through the imposition of an iron NSL. Finally, from a historical perspective, attributing Chinese violence to the political impatience of one of the most strategy-oriented parties in the world does not seem very reasonable. So, even though we do not completely disregard the validity of this theory and we agree on the importance of liberalization trends within Chinese politics, we acknowledge that a wholesome framework should be flexible enough as to elucidate major trends within polities without leaning on slippery terrains involving *isolated events* arguments.

The second set of literature willing to enlighten the paradoxical nature of Chinese actions is the *ascetic realist approach* (Allison, 2017; Chow, 2015; Christensen, 1996). These authors present the PRC as a quasi-perfect realist polity, which can adapt its behavior for achieving its objectives due to its internal political flexibility and the political patience of the Chinese People (Economy, 2014). Consequently, according to their view, the only connection across Chinese actions is the underlying realpolitik conception of Chinese Officials. Based on this interpretation, China's policies are not necessarily contradictory anymore, but they just respond to the volatile interests of CCP within a fluctuant international scenario. Deng Xiaoping's quote "*It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice*" perfectly summarizes this view. This academic corpus is successful, for instance, in accurately explaining Sino-Philippines' relations or revived Chinese assertiveness in the last decade. China's mercurial behavior with Philippines could simply be a response to the continuous emergence of new micro-scenarios, in which China's military and economic superiority allows CCP Officials to adopt contradictory or disconnected policies as soon as benefits offset costs.

This argument, however, presents some limitations too. Look, for instance, to Sino-American tensions in SECS because of American undisputed patrolling in these waters (Valencia, 2019). The USA have consistently patrolled the SECS (2014-2020) to ensure freedom of navigation as prescribed by UNCLOS while avoiding Chinese primacy in the area. However, taking into consideration Trump's monroeism and China's overwhelming superiority in the region, the PRC could have "easily" prevented this harassment without further reprisals from the USA. At the end of the day, China had conducted far more defying actions in SECS, such as militarizing disputed waters, with little international unrest. Nonetheless, China has surprisingly shown an unexpected deference for UNCLOS in this regard.

Similar trends can be found in the HKMC, where despite Beijing's systematic violations of the 1C2S spirit, China has not abusively tackled down pro-democracy riots in the same way than it has in Shenzhen, a neighbor city just a few kilometers away (Cheung and Hughes, 2019). This partial respect for International and Humanitarian Law cannot simply be interpreted in terms of costs and benefits as, apparently, the benefits of Hong Kong and SECS's control largely exceed the costs associated to those breaches. Furthermore, costs do not seem substantially larger than the ones that China had faced in the past for disregarding ICJ's ruling over SECS or for *eliminating* four booksellers in Hong Kong city (Joseph and Hunt, 2016). This random succession of infringements and adhesions to liberal principles, even when adherence is costlier than violation, cannot be sustained from a strict realpolitik perspective. Moreover, China's historical strategic vision clashes with this ascetic interpretation of Chinese actions and suggests that there is a deeper-level connection across its policies. So, once more, although we do agree that China has preserved its realist agency during the last fifty years, we believe that there are other factors beyond realism which shape China's personality. Consequently, this framework seems, at best, incomplete.

As we can see, both corpuses successfully explain major Chinese political trends during the last fifty years. However, they both fail to provide a solid theoretical framework which embraces the heterogeneity of its practices while taking into consideration China's idiosyncrasy. For solving some of these problems, we present an alternative theoretical model, which departs from former approaches, not only in terms of substance, but also in terms of form. In fact, our theoretical body is based on the discursive nature of Chinese actions, rather than on its material content. This hybrid model, which combines constructivism with realism, allows us to understand Chinese identity in a more accurate and flexible fashion than its predecessors.

## 4. A NARRATIVE-BASED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHINA

As defined by Miskimmon et al. (2014) narratives do not only work as representations of identities or events, but they also operate as communicative tools through which political actors confer meaning to the past, the present and the future. Narratives have always played a major role within Chinese politics (Garlick, 2018). Their constructivist view of reality, heir of Confucianism, highlights the central position of narratives in domestic politics. Note, for instance, the zero stigmatization of the word propaganda (宣传) by Mainlanders, who see it as natural for the ruling party to strive for the correct explanation of (inter)national policies (Shambaugh, 2015:100).

Consequently, it was crucial for us to incorporate this political narrative as a central element within our theoretical framework. To do so, we present a detailed characterization of the Narrative Policy Framework – which operates as the central support for our model – and, eventually, test the validity of its assumptions in SECSC and HKMC. This narrative-driven approach is more versatile than traditional material views, a feature which we believe is essential when dealing with a polity as changeable as China (Chow, 2015).

The NPF is a political theory corpus created by Jones and McBeth in 2010 to rebuild a bridge between positivists and post-positivists. While post-positivists are essentially constructivist and postmodernist authors who defend a relativist view of political actions, positivists defend the existence of empirically falsifiable facts. In that sense, NPF emerges as an intermediate vision which advocates for the ultimate importance of narratives and feelings within the political arena without discounting the existence of a material objectivity which can be perceived and analyzed.

For solving these apparently irreconcilable perspectives, NPF relies on five pillars or assumptions (Jones, 2018:727):

- **The social construction of realities.** There is an external objective reality out there, but what truly matters for individuals is not that much that reality, but the meanings that this reality evokes for them.
- **Bounded relativity.** NPF suggests that given a specific context, there exists a bounded set of messages an individual can perceive. NPF agrees that there may exist a wide-range variation within this bounded set, but it disregards the idea that this set can be as big as to be indistinguishable from any other narratological event.
- **The narrative has generalizable components.** NPF defends that narratives can be divided into generalizable components which can be counted and analyzed.
- **Three levels of analysis.** NPF studies the impact of narratives at three different levels, namely micro (concerned with the impact of narratives on individuals), meso (focused on the strategic construction of coalitional narratives) and macro (concerned with the

impact of narratives on cultures and institutions).

- ***Homo narrans***. Feelings dynamically interact with human rationality in all cognition, communication, and decision-making processes.

In this way, NPF brings together, in a relatively successful manner, elements from structuralist, postmodernist and positivist theories. The richness of its tenets provides us with an unbeatable starting point for the creation of our framework. Moreover, these assumptions seem particularly reliable in the Chinese context case because (i) China has traditionally approached IR in a perspectivist fashion, and (ii) both SECSC and HKMC hold numerous embedded feelings:

- For example, according to some estimations, PRC is spending around 10 billion USD a year just in external propaganda – 15 times more than the 2014 American public diplomacy budget (Smyth, 2016). Moreover, note that these figures do not capture Chinese economic diplomacy (i.e. OBOR) which also contains powerful bridge-building and shared opulence narratives (Sidaway and Woon, 2017).
- Regarding feelings, the geopolitical and economic importance of SECS notwithstanding, the transcendence of these waters to SEA countries is tightly related to its emotional importance (Severino, 2010). For Philippines, this Sea was the entry point used by the Japanese army during WWII; for Vietnam, the SECS is the only backdoor for escaping from Chinese suffocation; for Malaysia, the SECS is a bridge between its East and West territories; and for Brunei or Taiwan, these waters are a potential life-jacket against the rising power of its neighbors. The SECS also contains strong sentimental considerations for the Chinese People, as this Sea links its former glorious imperial past and its new golden future, what makes it a quintessential component of their identity and not just a territory. Not surprisingly, China looks forward to redefining its whole naval strategy using SECS as the central hub of its vessels (Buszynski, 2012). Finally, important collective narratives have emerged too around SECS. Lai (2017), for instance, identified the *Sea of Cooperation* narrative, a framework which advocates for a reconceptualization of SECS as a meeting point between China and SEA countries.
- Similar considerations hold for Hong Kong. Chinese People have historically considered British tenancy of Hong Kong a reminder of imperial humiliation after Anglo-Chinese Opium Wars. Furthermore, HK's free-port status has always been presented in Chinese imaginary as the Mainland's conduit to the rest of the World. In fact, during Japanese invasion in 1937, many Mainlanders sheltered in Hong Kong, what bolstered its *freedom refuge* imaginary (BBC, 2019). The fact that Britain was controlling this liberty valve explains Beijing's resentment and the overall importance of the Handover (Sherlock, 1997). More recently, symbolism has emerged as a central weapon in the dispute. For instance, in July 2019, a mob of pro-democracy supporters vandalized with black paint the state's emblem (Chun and Dou, 2019). This event is

rather insignificant if we compare it with daily violent confrontations between pro-democracy and pro-China supporters. Still, this symbol emerged as a representation of Hong Kong's vindications against Beijing's tyranny. On the other hand, this same image was presented in CCTV media news as a proof of Hong Kongese ungrateful response to China's active financial support since 1997.

As we can see, the narrational transcendence of symbolism in both disputes support the constructivist assumptions contained in NPF – pillars 1 and 5 –. Based on these assumptions, the NPF looks forward to creating a compelling body of evidence which enables the researcher to explain the mechanisms connecting narratives and policies. To standardize their analysis, they suggest the existence of three different elements within every narrative (remember pillar 3): (1) the components of the narrative, (2) the system of beliefs, and (3) the strategies of the narrative.

The components of the narrative are composed by a set of form and content specifications. The content specifications refer to the material specificities of the narrative which makes it substantially distinct from others. That is to say, the elements that make vaccination policies in Europe and Chinese expansionism in SECS different from each other. On the other hand, formal components reflect the overall structure of the narrative, and they can be divided in:

- a) **Setting.** Initial background of the narrative like the geography or the legal-institutional framework. Actors may or may not agree on the initial setting. For instance, SEA countries do not recognize China's historical rights over SECS. Similarly, Hong Kong and Beijing disagree on the legal framework which should regulate their relations.
- b) **Characters.** All the different actors and their role inside the narrative. Some of the most popular characterizations are the hero, the villain, or the victim.
- c) **Plot.** Set of relationships between actors across time and space. It normally includes an introduction, a middle and an end.
- d) **Moral.** Lesson that actors try to convey through the narrative. The moral usually takes the shape of a call to action or a policy solution.

Finally, regarding the two extra elements of the narrative: The system of beliefs can be defined as the set of values that orient the perspective of certain group about a specific policy. For instance, your overall assessment of the pro-democracy movement in HK will most likely predetermine your vision towards NSL. Finally, narrative strategies are conceptualized as the tactical portrayals which shape our evolving perception of a policy. These include expansion, containment, devil shift and angel shift, among others. For the matter of this paper, it suffices to characterize the devil shift as the demonization of the other party through exaggerating its normative power, and the angel shift, as the tactical portrayal based on emphasizing the ability of certain collective to proactively do something. Both, narrative strategies and the system of beliefs, work together to conform

“the context” in the *bounded relativity* tenet (pillar number 2). So, to summarize, we could say that the system of beliefs defines a cognitive circle and the narrational strategies defines our vision from that circle towards a specific policy.

Although, we acknowledge that this set of concepts and their interactions may be slightly convoluted, throughout the following sections we bring them all together and use our two case studies as illustrations. In addition, we complement our framework with two further theoretical supports, namely Cosmopolitan Theory and Political Shift Theory. Finally, it should be mentioned that, although mainstream appliances of the NPF usually rely on quantitative content analysis, we have adopted a qualitative approach for two reasons. (i) Chinese narrative and Chinese institutions create an overwhelmingly complex environment which hinders the implementation of quantitative methods. Indeed, to the best of our knowledge, there are no major publications which present numerical macro-analysis using NPF, let alone Chinese politics. (ii) Because we are dealing with paradoxical outputs, mathematical relations would not be able to grasp the essence of our argumentation. Hence, we have selected an output-driven qualitative approach, which attempts to reconcile China’s fluctuant inputs, paradoxical outputs, and official narratives through qualitative induction.



## 5. FROM CHINESE REBELLIOUSNESS (1974-1995) TO THE BENEVOLENT QING EMPIRE (1995-2010)

We start the characterization of our model by introducing the formal components of China's policies in the late 70s.<sup>1</sup> The macro *setting* at that time is well-known. The arrival of Deng to power and his commitment to open the country instilled equal amounts of hope and concern in developed economies (Tamaki, 2015). Nevertheless, to its regional neighbors (*characters*), Chinese awakening was perceived mostly as a threat, as they anticipated a frightening *plot*.

With the arrival of Deng (1978), we assisted to a deft shift in the political narrative of CCP. According to Subotic's Political Shift Theory (2016), narratives can act as cognitive bridges between contradictory policies by connecting and disconnecting elements of the narrative while pretending to let the central corpus undamaged. In this regard, it was essential for Deng to shift the prevalent Cultural Revolution *system of beliefs*, which posed Maoist communism at the center, to a developmental state conception, where the Government would lead the country towards economic prosperity. Before Deng's advent, CCP's motto was to deliver welfare to its citizens through the *Chinese Socialist Way* after the humiliating plunder of the Chinese Empire (Chea, 2000; Chow, 2018). Hence, for successfully disconnecting communist ideology out of this *system of beliefs*, it was of ultimate importance to ensure the economic buoyancy of the PRC at all costs (Economy, 2018; Zweig and Bi, 2005).

For sustaining the increasing economic expectations of Chinese population in the 1970s and 1980s, the CCP adopted an already presented despotic identity (Lind, 2017). The narrative during these years (1974-1995) was as choleric and ambitious as Beijing's expansionist policies.

*"[...] developing countries have long suffered from colonialist and imperialist oppression and exploitation [...]. These countries cover vast territories, encompass a large population and abound in natural resources. Having suffered the heaviest oppression, they have the strongest desire to oppose oppression and seek liberation and development. In the struggle for national liberation and independence, they have demonstrated immense power and continually won splendid victories."*

Teng Hsiao-Ping, Chairman of the PRC, UNGA (1974)

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<sup>1</sup> Remember, every narrative includes three different elements: components of the narrative, system of beliefs and narrative strategies. The components of the narrative can be decomposed into content and formal components. Finally, formal components can be decomposed into setting, characters, plot and moral. For a complete description of these elements visit Section 4.

*The key [...] is stability. I have told President Bush that in China the overriding need is for stability. We must counter any forces that threaten stability, not yielding to them or even making any concessions. We should not be concerned about what foreigners say [...] Anyway, the affairs of Chinese should be handled by the Chinese themselves. China cannot afford any disorder [...]. We have to send out a signal that China will tolerate no disturbances.*

Deng Xiaoping, Paramount Leader of the PRC (1989)

These two excerpts reflect (i) the ambitious expansionist setup of Chinese Authorities for ensuring economic prosperity in the Mainland (*plot*); (ii) the use of a rebellious discourse as part of China's realpolitik approach (*narrative strategy*); (iii) the characterization of China as a victim of former colonization (*character*); and (iv) the emergence of a new *moral*: "Leave room for China." This non-compliant posturing provided China with outstanding benefits in the short and middle run, but at the same time, it highly undermined the possibility of a successful long-term prosperity, for instance, in the view of the upcoming HK Handover. In fact, CCP's bonanza was threatened by the International Community's condemn of China's domestic abuses, ASEAN's frontal reprobation of Chinese expansionism, international activists' increasing visibility, SEA countries' socioeconomic improvement, and Cosmopolitanism victory.

At the international level, the *system of beliefs* was very different from the Chinese one. In fact, the prevalent liberal *system of beliefs* in the West spurned Chinese rebellious behavior (Raman, 1999; Chea, 2000). Chinese totalitarian *moral* was frontally rejected by ASEAN and Western countries, especially after Tiananmen's incident in 1989 (Han, 2017; Solinger, 1993). Moreover, this confrontation rather than purely material, was based on the antagonistic nature of their two *systems of beliefs*.

As defined by Chea (2006), after WWII, a *cosmopolitan* world order emerged sustained on the defense of a set of inalienable Human Rights. The world was slowly moving towards a decentralized multipolar environment (*setting*), where people themselves became major *actors*. This new framework, which reached SEA political debate in the 80s (Ba, 2003), widely recognized the free will of nations, especially colonies, against the despotic desire of foreign polities. Within this novel *setting*, former *discursive strategies* got obsolete, thus it was necessary for the CCP to redefine its *plot* and its *moral* to stay in power and to avoid Western opposition. In other words, although Chinese furious realpolitik could have provided China with further material returns, its rebellious speech was not valid anymore, it was the origin of the South-to-South narrative (1995-2010).

Using this cosmopolitan scenario as a setting, China developed a comprehensive narrative around *post-colonial victimization*. The *plot* shifted from a vengeance structure to a global opulence structure. According to this new narrative, China had achieved prosperity through a specific non-western *Chinese Path* based on perseverance and hard work (Cheah, 2000), and now, it was willing to share this opulence with all. To do so, China

adopted a humble equal-to-equal approach (or in Chea's terminology South-to-South) when dealing with developing countries. Unlike in the previous stage, China escaped from traditional categorizations of power and reappraised the shared *colonial victim identity* of these countries (Lind, 2018; Mastro, 2019). Deng Xiaoping's quote on this regard "*fear no one, antagonize no one, avoid excessively provocative statements or actions, assume a low profile and don't take the lead*" was foundational to this new vision. China attempted to stand out as an alternative to traditional Western Powers, not as a replacement for those, but as a representative of historically oppressed countries.

As we see, South-to-South narrative departs from the previous discourse in all three NPF elements. Regarding the formal components, China's *setting* evolved from a violent postcolonial Cold War world order, to a multipolar cosmopolitan scenario where non-aligned countries played a major role within international politics. Moreover, in terms of characterization, China's *villanization* of foreign powers evolved towards a *self-victimization* framework, where the wrongs of Western powers were displaced to a second tier in lieu of China's hidden potential. This characterization shift was reinforced with a *plot* turn. China preserved the elements of the introduction (former colonial past) and the middle (progress through hard work and perseverance) but it changed the rebellious end (China's revenge) for a collaborative end (South-to-South cooperation and global development). Moral was modified accordingly, from a "Leave room for China" message to a "Leave room for all" message.

*"The rise of the first Five-Star Red Flag [...] showed the world that China had achieved national independence and liberation and embarked on a road to socialism. Thanks to reform and opening-up, a rejuvenated Chinese nation has taken on a completely new look, and its international stature has been greatly enhanced. It is under these conditions and against this historical backdrop that Hong Kong has finally returned to the motherland."*

President Jiang Zemin at the Ceremony for Establishment of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 1997

*The people of Asia have an unyielding spirit of seeking self-improvement. In their long history, the people of Asia have created a colorful and brilliant civilization that remains the envy of the world. However, in the modern era, due to internal and external factors, Asia experienced twists and turns in development. To change their destiny, the people of Asia have been forging ahead in an unyielding spirit and with hard work. Asia's development achievements today are the result of the persistent efforts of the industrious and talented Asian people*

Hu Jintao at the Boao Forum for Asia Opening Ceremony, 2011

These formal changes, which perfectly fitted Chea's new *system of beliefs*, were invigorated through new narrational content and strategies. From a strategic point of view, China moved from a devil shift strategy – which exaggerated the normative power of

former Western colonial empires – to an angel strategy – which emphasized the abilities of developing countries for achieving socioeconomic progress –. Finally, from a content perspective, China had to create a solid depiction of the material gains associated to this new collaborative world order under Chinese primacy. That image was the revival of the Qing Empire (Crossley, 2019). Inside Chinese imaginary, the Qing Empire (1644-1912) is presented as a prosperous regional power with an Eastern ideological foundation, which provided opulence to Asia through a tributary net of alliances. The Qing Empire narrative can be seen, for instance, in the powerful bridge-building and shared wealth metaphors contained within OBOR (Sidaway and Woon, 2017), which links tangible and intangible realities.

The material content of this narrative, far from being reduced to the discursive plane, has been complemented with auxiliary policies in four main areas since 1990s:

1. **Foreign investment.** China has created vast financial structures including Developmental Banks (AIIB), Free Trade Agreements (FTA), and investment plans (OBOR) for spreading its opulence imaginary while ensuring the long-term subjugation of the receiving economies (De Morais, 2011; Lind, 2018). This combination of economic investment and narratives has been particularly efficacious in countries with weak political structures. A good example of this economic partnership can be found in HK, where China lobbied with numerous businessmen through favorable loans and infrastructure funding (Lam, 2016). This *wealth irrigation* reinforced Beijing's narrative while ensuring PRC's control of the Legco where companies held several seats, now under Beijing's control. In addition, this new narrative allowed China to sign ambitious FTAs with up to 24 countries (Medeiros, 2009). Direct benefits to Chinese industry notwithstanding, this economic diplomacy was used by China as a source of leverage inside the WTO for shifting its direction towards *more favorable* frameworks.
2. **Media.** Media constitutes the visible ram of Chinese peaceful narrative (Shambaugh, 2015). This image is spread through positive and negative actions inside and outside the Mainland. Positive actions are those related to projecting an optimistic vision of the Chinese Government. They are executed through state-controlled media, like Xinhua or China Global Television Network, which has experienced an unprecedented expansion in the last decades. For instance, Xinhua's international presence has increased from 23 overseas bureaus in 1978 to 123 delegations in 2010 (Hong, 2011). On the other hand, negative actions refer to internal and external censorship campaigns. For example, in 2017, the academic journal Springer Nature bowed to Chinese pressures and withdrew numerous publications containing "sensitive issues" about Chinese Politics (Lind, 2018). The spread of narratives through official media is essential also domestically. In fact, Li (2016) found that there existed a positive correlation between exposition to official media among university students in Beijing and reprobation of Hong Kongese attitudes.

3. **Education.** The CCP promotes the internationalization of Chinese students and the arrival of international pupils to Chinese Universities as a micro-expansionist tool for spreading Chinese ideals (Lind, 2018; Shambaugh, 2015; Economy, 2018). In Section 6, we minutely analyze the outcome of these policies as part of the HKMC.
4. **Strategic diplomacy.** China's actions in this regard have been featured by a prevalent embracement of multilateralism. The PRC has signed binding and non-binding resolutions advocating for peaceful development (Kent, 2013) and it has ratified major International Agreements including UNCLOS (1996). A good example of this growing international presence trend has been the sharp increase in Chinese Leaders' Trips Abroad (Zhang and Liu, 2008). In the period, 1981-1991 a total of 122 Official Trips took place, while in the period 1992-2006 more than 420 visits were arranged. Moreover, China has actively participated in South-to-South forums, mostly in Asia, including ARF (1994), ASEAN (1996), BFA (2001), SCO (2001) and East Asia Summit (2005), and it has signed important multilateral agreements such as the Joint Communiqué (1998), the DOC (2002), the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (2003), the TAJMSU (2005), and the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Code of Conduct (2011) (Medeiros, 2009). China's regained centrality allowed the CCP to establish collaborative structures under Chinese primacy within these institutions. These formal diplomacy channels are complemented with accessory policies like the celebration of international events (Beijing 2008 Olympic Games), which reinforce the creation of a global Eastern Empire imaginary.

All these three elements (*system of beliefs, narrative strategies, and narrative components*) aligned to create a new Chinese narrative. Indeed, at this point, it could be argued that our interpretation of the mid-90s political shift does not substantially differ from the socialization postulates presented in Section 3. There is, however, a key distinction between narratological and liberalization theories. While socialization authors (Han, 2017) claimed that this liberal process was driven by external forces, namely ASEAN normative power, increasing American presence in SECS, the upcoming HK Handover (Ma, 2015), and the ideological influence of cosmopolitan liberal institutions, we defend that the selection of this narrative was due to internal realpolitik considerations. Our claim is that Chinese Officials consciously selected a South-to-South narrative for gaining centrality within the new *setting*, such that the PRC could further expand its political and economic power, while leaving its realist essence untouched. The submission to the liberal creed was not part of a forced assimilation process nor a candid liberalization, but a deep-level strategy to redefine the world order. By using this narrative, China managed to seize traditionally liberal institutions like ASEAN from the inside (Feigenbaum, 2017), and openly challenge the Western bias of many others such as ICJ, WTO or UNCLOS (Odgaard, 2016).

Although in the very short-run this narrative yielded little returns to China because

imaginaries take time to penetrate the *ethos* of a polity, there is no doubt that China's narrative shift responded to a cost-benefit analysis. Chinese Authorities (and Chinese People) were willing to exchange short-term losses derived from halting its expansion in SECS and respecting HK's sovereignty for a few years, for prospective ASEAN centrality and undisputed control over Hong Kong:

- In SECS, China partnered with peripheric economies to impose its political willingness under an alleged *shared development* framework. Sino-Cambodian relations are a paradigmatic example in this regard. Since 2006, China has invested more than one billion USD in Cambodia, mostly through OBOR initiatives (O'Neill, 2014). In addition, it has strengthened its political friendship with the Cambodian regime through a bilateral Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the use of a *benevolent* narrative. Nonetheless, behind this perfunctory collaborative framework, China has leveraged the power asymmetry of these structures to gain Cambodia's political alignment. In 2012, in Cambodia's ASEAN Summit, Cambodia used its Chairmanship role to veto an ASEAN Conference resolution – for the first time in 45 years – to protect Chinese interests in SECS (Otto, 2016).
- Similar practices were implemented in Hong Kong. After Hong Kong's Handover, China could have further restricted the political rights of Hong Kongese in Legco. In fact, up to 2004, HK pro-democracy parties achieved comfortable victories in the elections, reinforcing *Beijing's tolerant depiction*. When, in fact, during that time, China was using state-sponsored migration of Mainlanders into HK, while partnering with local business for, eventually, taking full control over "Legco's legitimacy" and impose its agenda (Lam, 2016).

These pieces of evidence strongly suggest that China adopted this liberal narrational framework as part of a broader realpolitik strategy. Still, liberalization trend supporters defend that it was ASEAN and liberal institutions' pressure what forced China to assume the liberal creed. There is, however, no evidence on this regard. As we have seen, SEA countries were unable to fight back Chinese bravado for over 20 years (1974-1995), Japan and the USA were reluctant to directly confront China in SECS, and the UK was unable to guarantee Chinese respect for the Basic Law before and after the Handover (Wang, 2008). China had, consequently, enough normative power for preserving its assertiveness in the region, still, it strategically decided to "embrace" the liberal world order principles. Furthermore, under a sincere internal transformation of China's personality interpretation, we should have expected Win-Win scenarios to emerge from Chinese collaborative policies. Nonetheless, as shown in Cambodia, it does not happen to be the case neither. In fact, it is easy to prove that China used its narrative (and its associated auxiliary policies) to develop extractive structures and not for the peaceful development of these territories (Chea, 2000; De Morais, 2011).

Under our theoretical framework, it could be argued that China would have selected an alternative narrative if it had faced a different global *setting* or *system of beliefs*. While in 1995 Chinese Authorities used (i) a *colonial victim characterization* and (ii) Qing Empire's economic prosperity imaginary as cognitive bridges, in a counterfactual world where the Soviet Union had won the Cold War, China could have embraced a completely different narrational strategy based, for example, on the superiority of Socialism over Capitalism, without substantially modifying the content of its policies.

To summarize, we can conclude that (i) there is not such a thing as a *material Chinese socialization*, as this socialization mostly took place in the discursive dimension, rather than in the content one. China's "liberal" policies had a double function, namely to operate as auxiliary support elements of Chinese benevolent imaginary for gaining institutional primacy and to establish dependency structures under Beijing's control. In addition, we claim that (ii) this superficial liberalization was not driven by external forces, but by deep-level narrational strategy conducted by the CCP for the long-term acquisition of its interests.

However, there are still major questions within our theoretical corpus. We have previously claimed that there existed paradoxical outcomes resulting from an organic interaction between China's narrative and China's material policies. Nonetheless, so far, no apparent incoherencies have been presented. Originally (1974-1995), both Chinese actions and Chinese narratives were equally *schizophrenic* due to China's juvenile realpolitik essence. With the advent of a new IR paradigm (1995-2010), China's realism shifted towards a narratively based personality, where benevolent discourses coexisted with apparently liberal policies. Although we have shown that China's liberalization was strictly superficial and that it did not affect its realpolitik fundamentals, there were not major inconsistencies neither within this stage.

Furthermore, there were not deep interactions between narratives and politics neither, as in both stages the relation between narrative and policy was fairly linear. In the first period, the rebellious narrative was at the service of realist actions, whereas in the second one, actions were at the service of a broader liberal narrative. Apart from this direct connection, we have not yet identified major organic dynamics. Thus, to conclude our theoretical corpus and to provide a compelling answer to these open enigmas, we proceed to analyze the third stage of China's narrative-politics duality. Let us dive into the revival of China's assertiveness (2010-2020).

## **6. THE PARADOXICAL OUTCOMES OF THE CHINESE NARRATIVE. CHINA'S REVIVED ASSERTIVENESS (2010-2020)**

This new decade started with a very similar *system of beliefs* in the international arena – the preponderance of the cosmopolitan framework – and inside China – the *whatever it takes to grow* mentality – compared to the previous stage. However, the *setting* was completely different. China was not a marginalized polity anymore. Its convincing narrative and the quasi-colonial economic structures that it implemented in developing countries had allowed China to shape key liberal institutions from the inside to ensure its long-term primacy. Western feebleness after the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 enabled Chinese media and Chinese investment structures to penetrate the liberal order, achieving substantial political centrality within this IR framework.

Based on this preamble, it could be reasonably argued that the CCP flawlessly evaluated ex-ante the profitability of its narrative shift. At the end of the day, they had traded short-term bounded costs in the late 90s and early 2000s for unbounded long-term benefits. By pretending to wear (self-imposed) handcuffs, China had made it into the “central police station,” and now it was willing to take control over it. However, these imaginary handcuffs, soon turned out to be not that “imaginary.” In fact, Chinese Officials might have undermined the long-term costs linked to their liberal discourse, which paradoxically ended up threatening the main asset of the CCP: its internal maneuverability. In the following paragraphs, we detail some of these unexpected backlashes.

### **6.1. Fiscal and Economic Backlashes**

The implementation of this narrative and, especially, the implementation of its auxiliary policies have ended up being very costly in economic and fiscal terms. OBOR alone is estimated to cost between four and eight trillion USD, and it is very unlikely that these investments yield benefits to Chinese manufacturers in the middle-run (Wang, 2017). Similar concerns exist regarding Chinese debt forgiveness to its regional neighbors (Medeiros, 2009), which besides political alignment will not provide China with non-negligible economic returns in the foreseeable future. These economically dubious policies have been complemented with the misuse of absurdly large amounts of money for maintaining the official narrative through censure and propaganda. For example, in August 2019, China spent more than one million USD in promoting a friendly image of Beijing's policies in Hong Kong through Facebook and Twitter (Zheng, 2019).

Despite internal censorship, this wastage has reached middle-class Mainlanders, who are



unwilling to suffrage these sorts of policies. Traditionally resilient CCP is likely to encounter further popular resistance soon because these expenses threaten economic reforms and economic prosperity (Li, 2017). For instance, Standard and Poors (2018) fears that on top of public deficit accounting for 47.6% of Chinese GDP, China might be hiding 6 trillion USD in off-balance sheet deficit.

## **6.2. Education Backlashes**

The internationalization of Chinese pupils has been one of the main objectives of the CCP (see Section 5). This micro-oriented strategy attempts to increase the human capital of younger cohorts while contributing to the global diffusion of Chinese ideals. Although Chinese Human Capital skyrocketed from 26.98 billion yuan in 1985 to 118.75 billion yuan in 2007 (Li et al., 2009), the rising education and *cosmopolitanization* of Chinese students have had an unexpected boomerang effect on Chinese politics. Chinese international students have operated as major leaders of anti-CCP movements all around the world. Hong Kongese students, some of them with international training in the best schools in the world, starred 2014 Umbrella Revolution and 2019-2021 extradition law protests. In addition, overseas Chinese students have actively denounced the tyranny and authoritarianism of Chinese Officials. These students, using their impeccable English skills, have performed as the speakers of domestic activist in diverse INGOs and international media. This pattern concerns the CCP, as these boys and girls are challenging China on its own territory, the field of narratives (Chen, 2014).

## **6.3. Increasing Opportunity Cost**

In economic terms, there exists two types of costs associated to the maintenance of the Chinese narrative, namely direct costs and opportunity costs. Direct costs refer to the expenses associated to the aforementioned auxiliary policies, which look forward to spreading the *Chinese Way* like international media, education programs, FDI and strategic diplomacy. On the other hand, opportunity cost is described as the utility that you give up when you implement one strategy instead of its best alternative. In China's case, the opportunity cost of performing a benevolent narrative is precisely to adopt a furious realpolitik approach.

During the last two decades, China's direct costs have skyrocketed, but the biggest costs increase has come from the opportunity cost side. In 1997, after the Mischief Incident and Hong Kong's Handover, China's opportunity cost was fairly small. Although it could have obtained some returns from direct violence in SECS and HK, global condemn would have eroded these gains. However, after PRC's regained primacy over ASEAN and HK Legco, the opportunity cost of preserving a benevolent appearance rather than actively exercising its normative power has become much bigger. In this regard, we should expect China to recover its unconditional assertiveness in HK and SECS, as soon as the

increasing total costs (direct costs + opportunity costs) offset the returns of the narrative.

Partially, this is what happened. Starting in 2011 (with the Scarborough incident), China returned to the assertiveness path, as if the *benevolence lemon* could not be squeezed anymore. Nonetheless, to CCP's astonishment, despite increasing opportunity costs, narrative returns were growing exponentially too. China was receiving upwardly economic and political returns from marginal time investments. That is to say, the benefits that China could obtain from staying committed to the narrative *just a bit more* were infinitely big. This trend can be understood through two further examples:

- Regarding SECS, we can use Chinese-Laotian relations as an illustration (Otto, 2016). China has undertaken significant infrastructure and narrative investments in Laos including the Kunming-Singapore railway connection and its associate bridge-building narratives. But now (2021), China is facing a dilemma. It may re-adopt a violent approach and use the economic and military structures that it created to subdue Laos, or it may remain committed to this collaborative framework. The former will provide China with succulent immediate returns, but the latter could yield (i) even larger economic benefits through OBOR, (ii) long-run political primacy in SECS and (iii) international support for the One China Policy.

*"It bears positive significance for the cause of socialism and for peace and development in Asia and the world for China and Laos to be good neighbors, friends, comrades and partners"*

President Hu Jintao during Choummaly Saygnasone's, President of Laos, visit in 2011

- A similar scenario takes place in HK. After the 2004 pro-China victory in Legco, Beijing could have passed moderated pro-Chinese legislation, which would have reinforced CCP control over the city. Still, China strategically decided to refrain from implementing abusive policies long enough to eventually pass much more controversial legislation including 2019 extradition law or NSL.

As we can see, the ever-growing nature of return and cost functions has created an invisible trap which muzzles the free will of the polity. The returns of staying within the narrational framework offsets the opportunity cost of quitting the narrative and readopting an unconditional assertiveness, and, as a result, Chinese quasi-perfect realpolitik regime has become a prisoner of its own narrative. Pretending to wear handcuffs has transformed Beijing into its own inmate. In this regard, it is surprising that a narrative which was born as an accessory element of Chinese politics to satisfy the economic demands of the PRCS's population in 1990s, now effectively constrains CCP's agency. China's narrative has gained its own autonomy, sometimes even disconnected from CCP's best interests.

This dual-nature process has led to paradoxical outcomes. On the one hand, Chinese

realpolitik assertiveness sporadically emerges – like China’s war declaration to Philippines – threatening the continuity of the narrative. On the other hand, the narrative protects Chinese violence with an aura of *fascination* (Luft, 2016) while effectively constraining the execution of this violence. We can observe this organic interaction between narratives and politics in Chinese relations with HK, Philippines, Laos or Cambodia.

This new framework explains some of the previously presented paradoxes like China’s surprising respect for UNCLOS regarding American patrolling in SECS. The *wall* which was preventing China from executing its normative power was not the liberal spirit nor its best interests, but the strength of its own narrative. Moreover, under this prism we can understand Sino-Philippines’ relations not as an incoherent succession of Chinese whims, but as the result of deep-level interactions between a furious realist essence and an autonomous liberal narrative. Similar considerations hold in the HK students’ internationalization case. The CCP could be tempted to revoke these programs given the political reversal that it received from its pupils. Still, once more, its own narratology and the organic fight between costs and benefits prevent it from doing so, even when disadvantages clearly offset gains.

In this regard, our theory departs from mainstream NPF and Political Shift Theory corpuses. In our framework, narratives do not just operate as cognitive bridges, but as living entities with its own personality. Narratives are no longer means but ends in themselves. Narratives have become as real as facts, and as a result, a hodgepodge of outcomes may emerge from the dynamic interactions between realism and discursive liberalism.

## 7. CONCLUSION

By using a narrative-driven approach, our theoretical framework delivers important improvements in terms of Chinese politics understanding compared to former theories. Unlike socialization theory, it provides a compelling interpretation of China's regained assertiveness in the last decade without leaning into *impatience* or *isolated events* arguments. In fact, according to our theory, regained assertiveness is just the reflection of PRC's sempiternal violent realism. This violence was never disregarded by China, it was simply "hidden", first intentionally (1995-2010) and then unintentionally (2010-2020), to achieve CCP's objectives. In addition, our corpus outweighs the simplicity of ascetic realist interpretations which consider that Chinese initiatives are simply representing China's capricious essence without further internal coherence. Although we agree that China has remained as a realpolitik actor during the whole period of analysis, we claim that there existed another force shaping Chinese agency, namely its own narrative.

Furthermore, our framework successfully combines elements from NPF, PST, Cosmopolitan Theory, and Chinese history for building a solid model which enlightens major Chinese political trends in the last fifty years. We started by presenting China's narrational shift in 1990s as a response to the new liberal *system of beliefs* without losing its realist essence. This strategic shift, from rebellious authoritarianism to Eastern opulence, had an impact on the characterization, plot and moral of China's narrative.

Eventually, we analyzed the evolution of this narrative, its interaction with China's material policies, and how Chinese political discourse ended up seizing CCP's autonomy and maneuverability (2010-2020). The organic interaction between realism and an ever-growing liberal narrative led to undesired and paradoxical outcomes for Chinese Authorities. In this sense, compared to NPF traditional approaches, our framework goes one step further regarding the status of the narrative, as we place the relevance of Chinese narratology at the same level than its material policies.

China thought that it was a *big powerful country* that every nation feared, however, it did not expect the emergence of a fearless enemy, its own narrative.

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