

RECONNECT CHINA

POLICY BRIEF 36

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Contending Universals

Bart Dessein

Executive summary:

Ever since the People's Republic of China (PRC) published its *Zhongguo renquan zhuangkuang* (China's Human Rights Situation)—its first White Paper on Human Rights—in November 1991, the concept of human rights that had been dismissed as 'bourgeois' in earlier times, was declared to be 'glorious'.¹ As a constant, the PRC is seen to focus on the 'International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' (ICESCR), one of two covenants that were drafted in 1966—the other covenant being the 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights' (ICCPR). Herewith, the PRC testifies of the possibility for countries to balance values between the ICESCR and the ICCPR that was introduced through the drafting of the two covenants, despite the fact that both covenants were agreed upon to be of equal value.² The PRC has framed its focus on the ICESCR as in line with and a continuation of the country's traditional and historical focus on 'collective' values and its concomitant legal tradition. This interpretation appears to be increasingly appealing in a number of countries in the Global South.³

Looked at from a theoretical viewpoint, the 1948 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (UDHR)

witnesses of a positivist conviction that the complexity of human history with its cultural differences can be rationally accounted for in a systematic manner "by assimilating individual historical events and phenomena to a general scheme or narrative,"⁴ i.e., the conviction of a linear-progress development towards a more peaceful, moral, and liberal future. Also the PRC's 'Global Civilization Initiative' (*Quanqiu wenhua changyi*), introduced in March 2023, that projects 'Chinese values' on the world at large and that can be interpreted as the PRC's vision of the UN human rights pillar, witnesses of a positivist universalism, i.e., the conviction that there is a timeless matrix to which we can appeal to determine what is ultimately good or right—also the 'Global Civilization Initiative' is universalizing in its universal claim to the prevalence of national determination.

Acknowledging that the PRC is a legitimate participant in the international human rights debate, knowing that two simultaneous claims on universality cannot be equally universal and that maintaining a 'one world' strategy, aimed at growing wellbeing for all humans, hereby taking cultural differences into account should be possible, this policy brief offers some perspectives

to—without falling in the traps of cultural relativism or cultural universalism—resolve the conundrum of how the European Union (EU) can engage with the PRC in the domain of ‘universal values’.

Policy recommendations:

- Acknowledge that the PRC is a legitimate participant in the debate on universal values / human rights.
- Take into account that a large majority of Chinese citizens value their human rights situation positively.
- Acknowledge that a large number of Chinese citizens see themselves as part of global society, and that this self-identification enhances the PRC’s position in the universal values / human rights debate.
- Be aware that both the prevailing interpretation of universal values / human rights and the PRC’s alternative proposal equally and each in their own way lay claim to ‘universality’.
- Be aware that overemphasizing the PRC’s role as either being a pure entrepreneur of new norms or a staunch antipreneur in following the currently prevailing norms risks to negate the possibility for debate, and may reinforce the rise of nationalism in China and of authoritarianism in the world.
- While standing firm with EU values, avoid the trap of falling into either cultural universalism or cultural relativism, in this way avoiding to be perceived as paternalistic in the eyes of China and the Global South, or negating the possibility for debate.

power balance of the world that commenced in the early 1990s. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger noted that while during the period of the Cold War the legitimate power of the United States (US) and of the Soviet Union served to maintain a balance between liberal democracy and revolutionary internationalism respectively, the demise of the Soviet Union left the US-led order as only legitimate power.⁵ As a result, the current institutions of global governance are an integral part of the so-called ‘liberal democratic world order’. As a corollary to this, a focus on the ‘International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights’ (ICCPR) (New York, December 16, 1966; in force March 23, 1976; 999 UNTS 171) came to the foreground, and adherence to this specific interpretation of human rights became a criterion of the “collective judgment of international society about rightful membership”.⁶

The growing geo-economic and geopolitical clout of the PRC has given this country the possibility to formulate its counternarrative for the positivist narrative that socialization into the liberal democratic normative system is the condition to be recognized as member of the international society.⁷ This counternarrative, phrased as the ‘Shared Future for Mankind’ (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*) and the ‘Global Civilization Initiative’ (*Quangiu wenhua changyi*), is based on a sovereign international (or neo-sovereigntist) view of world order. In this, the PRC can refer to the fact that self-determination is enshrined as a ‘right’ in the United Nations Charter. For many developing countries, this self-determination is an anti-imperialist force and a force of decolonization.⁸ That the phrase “to create a shared future, based upon our common humanity”—a phrase that mimics Xi Jinping’s slogan of ‘Shared Future for Mankind’ (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*)—was taken up in a United Nations resolution (Economic and Social Council Res. 2017/11, 41. June 8, 2017) on June 8, 2017, was, by Beijing, considered as an *international* victory for its discursive power.⁹ This interpretation was further enhanced when the aims of “building a community of shared future for human beings in which human rights are enjoyed by all” and “promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights” were adopted into the resolution of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UN Doc A/HRC/RES/46/13) of March 23, 2021. This development has recently been underscored by China’s ‘Global Civilization In-

THE DEBATE BETWEEN OBJECTIVISTS AND RELATIVISTS

The debate between objectivists and relativists that has been around since the beginnings of philosophy has gained renewed attention in the contemporary period, also with regard to the issue of universal values and human rights. This is the direct outcome of changes in the

initiative’ (*Quanqiu wenhua changyi*), introduced in March 2023. This initiative can be interpreted as the PRC’s vision of the UN human rights pillar. As much as the conviction of a linear-progress development towards a more peaceful, moral, and liberal future witnesses of a positivist universalism, also the ‘Global Civilization Initiative,’ in its conviction that there is a timeless matrix to which we can appeal to determine what is ultimately good or right, witnesses of a positivist universalism—in casu a universalist claim to the prevalence of national determination which, ultimately, negates any common ground and makes collaboration impossible.

NORM ENTREPRENEURS, NORM ANTIPRENEURS, AND ROLE TAKING

Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink observed that many international norms began as domestic norms and that it is through the efforts of various ‘entrepreneurs,’ i.e., those who attempt to convince a critical mass of states to embrace these new norms, that norms may become internationally recognized.¹⁰ In this process, institutionalization in specific sets of international rules and organizations, such as the UN’s human rights conventions, has been proven to be of primordial importance.¹¹ Because new norms never enter a normative vacuum but instead emerge in a highly contested normative space where they compete with the prevailing norms, this explains why the integration of formulae such as the ones mentioned above in UN resolutions, has resulted in it that the PRC is increasingly seen as attempting to displace the existing international norms.¹²

In line with a positivist constructivism, Finnemore and Sikkink saw norms themselves as unchanging. As contended by Alan Bloomfield, however, this attitude witnesses of a ‘liberal bias’.¹³ He therefore introduced the concept of ‘antipreneurs,’ i.e., those actors who defend the normative status quo. He further nuanced the spectrum with the observation that defining entrepreneurs as ‘pure changers’ and antipreneurs as ‘implacable resisters’ conceives of entrepreneurs and antipreneurs as “ideal types at either end of the spectrum.” In practice, states may simultaneously take on different roles. As alluded to above, the PRC can in this sense be seen as an entrepreneur in its focus on the ICESCR, but as an antipreneur with respect to the ICCPR. Over-

emphasis on either rival category, ultimately, risks to negate the possibilities for debate.

DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL INTERCONNECTEDNESS

From a government’s perspective, soliciting international support for one’s state policies largely depends on domestic support for these same policies. To judge how citizens of different countries assess their human rights situation, and how they perceive the roles of their governments herein, the ‘World Value Survey’ (hereafter WVS) is a good instrument. The WVS findings should be interpreted cautiously, as preference falsification and general constraints on public discourse and international news gathering in authoritarian contexts may affect responses; the Chinese citizens’ appreciation of the human rights situation in their country may partly have to be explained by the power of top-down narratives in a context of absence of open political debate and restricted access to international media. Nevertheless, even accounting for these caveats—also taking into account that the results of WVS wave 7 (2017–2022; field work period 2018) show a diminishing number of ‘do not know’ or ‘no answer’ as compared to WVS wave 6 (period 2013–2017)¹⁴—the domestically narrated focus on subsistence rights outlined above, clearly translates in the way Chinese citizens—at least for the 2013–2022 period surveyed—appreciate their government and its universal values / human rights policies.

Asked about the most important policy domains of national policies, 55.4% of the interviewees judge ‘a stable economy’ as most important. ‘Progress toward a less impersonal and more human society’ is valued as most important by 13.3% of interviewees, and ‘progress toward a society in which ideas count more than money’ by 7.0%.

	total	male	female	aged up to 29	aged 30–49	aged 50 and more
A stable economy	55.4	56.7	54.1	54.9	57.8	52.4
Progress toward a less impersonal and more human society	13.3	13.2	13.3	13.3	13.8	12.6

Progress toward a society in which ideas count more than money	7.0	7.4	6.6	7.6	7.5	6.0
The fight against crime	22.1	20.6	23.6	22.3	18.8	26.5
Don't know	0.0	-	0.1	-	0.0	0.1
No answer	2.2	2.0	2.3	2.0	2.0	2.4

Table 1: importance of national policies (source: WVS wave 7)

Economic priorities are also valued as very important for the next ten years, with 31.4% of interviewees seeing this as the major policy domain. This policy domain is, however, taken over in importance by 'making sure the country has strong defense forces' that was valued as most important by 37.6% of the interviewees.

	total	male	female	aged up to 29	aged 30-49	aged 50 and more
A high level of economic growth	31.4	29.1	33.6	30.6	31.0	32.4
Making sure this country has strong defence forces	37.6	43.2	32.2	40.2	38.1	35.2
Seeing that people have more say	6.1	5.4	6.8	8.2	5.6	5.5
Trying to make our cities and countryside more beautiful	22.9	20.5	25.3	19.3	23.2	24.9
Don't know	0.0	-	0.1	-	0.0	0.1
No answer	1.9	1.9	2.0	1.8	2.0	1.9

Table 2: most important aim for the country for the next 10 years (source: WVS wave 7)

While this can, on the one hand, be interpreted as a reflection of the uncertainties brought about by the insecurities in global politics, it can, on the other hand, also be seen as a means of safeguarding economic development in China amidst this turbulent international context. Against this backdrop, 'seeing that people have more say' is only valued as most important by 6.1% of the interviewees. The preference for overall stability also

translates in the choice for 'security' over 'freedom,' with 92.7% of interviewees opting for 'security'.

	total	male	female	aged up to 29	aged 30-49	aged 50 and more
Freedom	7.1	8.9	5.2	7.5	7.8	5.8
Security	92.7	91.0	94.3	92.4	91.9	64.0
Don't know	-	-	-	-	-	-
No answer	0.2	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.3

Table 3: Preference for freedom or security (source: WVS wave 7)

This overall appreciation of stability and of economic development can be attributed to the general acknowledgement of the interviewees that they have experienced a huge progress in welfare as compared to previous generations, with around 90% of interviewees valuing that they are better off than previous generations.

	total	male	female	aged up to 29	aged 30-49	aged 50 and more
Better off	87.9	86.8	89.1	86.2	87.2	90.2
Worse off	1.2	1.5	0.9	0.8	1.6	1.0
About the same	10.7	11.6	9.8	12.9	11.1	8.7
Don't know	-	-	-	-	-	-
No answer	0.1	0.1	0.1	-	0.2	0.1

Table 4: Comparing your standard of living with your parents' standard of living when they were about your age, would you say that you are better off, worse off or about the same? (source: WVS wave 7)

For all interviewees, confidence in the parliament hovers at around 90%. Figures of the interviewees' confidence in the executive power, the government, show the same tendency, as does confidence in the juridical apparatus, the police, and the armed forces.

Turning the attention to the individual, interviewees overall assess the respect for individual human rights in their country increasingly positive, with figures for 'a great deal of respect' at 29.7% overall, and figures for 'fairly much respect' at 57.7%.

	total	male	female	aged up to 29	aged 30-49	aged 50 and more
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A great deal of respect	29.7	30.3	29.0	27.4	27.3	34.4
Fairly much respect	57.7	56.0	59.3	62.0	58.3	53.9
Not much respect	9.8	10.0	9.5	8.6	11.5	8.2
No respect at all	1.6	2.4	0.8	1.1	2.0	1.4
Don't know	0.3	0.1	0.5	0.1	0.0	0.9
No answer	1.0	1.1	0.9	0.8	0.9	1.3

Table 5: respect for individual human rights (source: WVS wave 7)

All in all, this explains why the interviewees are increasingly proud of the country they live in, with 42.2% of the interviewees saying they are 'very proud' and 49.4% saying they are 'quite proud' of living in China.

	total	Male	female	aged up to 29	aged 30-49	aged 50 and more
Very proud	42.2	42.0	42.4	40.6	39.2	47.4
Quite proud	49.4	49.3	49.6	50.0	52.3	45.3
Not very proud	6.6	7.3	5.8	7.4	7.0	5.4
Not at all proud	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.4
Don't know	0.1	-	0.1	-	-	0.2
No answer	1.0	0.8	1.3	1.2	0.9	1.2

Table 6: how proud are you to live in this country (source: WVS wave 7)

Economic development and nationalism—both related to the concept of 'stability'—provide strong political discourse opportunities for the government to, in an autocratic fashion, solicit continued support for its policies. Support for its policies is further supported through the fact that, as psychological research has demonstrated, most people, most of the time, tend to favor the status quo and are only willing to divert from the status quo when ideas or norms have failed catastrophically and damagingly different from expectations.¹⁵ This '*status quo bias*' further helps to explain the tendency of citizens to, in a democratic system, re-elect incumbents, and, in an authoritarian system, remain loyal to the existing rulers.¹⁶

Given this reality, Western pressure in the human rights debate may be unwise because any pressure that does not strike a sympathetic chord with ordinary Chinese can

further strengthen support for their government and its policies. Pressure may therefore also be counterproductive as it can contribute to rising nationalism in China.¹⁷ The latter is already evident from a decrease in the number of interviewees who self-identify as 'close to the world'. The phrasing of the question differs somewhat between WVS wave 6 and WVS wave 7, but whereas in WVS wave 6, 13.2% of males and 10.3% of females declared to 'strongly agree' to be a world citizen, and 45.0% of males and 42.5% of females declared to 'agree' to be a world citizen, in WVS wave 7, only 39.5% of males and 38.5% of females declared to feel 'very close' or 'close' to the world.

	male	female	up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Very close	7.7	7.5	7.6	7.9	7.2
Close	31.8	31.0	28.9	32.7	31.3
Not very close	43.0	41.7	45.5	41.6	41.2
Not close at all	16.1	18.5	17.2	16.5	18.5
Don't know	0.1	0.1			0.3
No answer	1.2	1.3	0.8	1.3	1.5

Table 7: I see myself as close to the world (source: WVS wave 7)

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The interviewees' positive appreciation of the human rights situation in their country may partly be explained by the power of top-down narratives in an authoritarian political and media landscape—and current domestic economic and social problems may yield different results in the upcoming WVS—but it remains true that results of the likes of WVS wave 7 have the possibility to bolster a government's self-assurance and concomitant claim to legitimacy. Alleged international support through taking up a country's stance in international resolutions such as the 2017 and 2021 UN resolutions further enhances the domestic claim to legitimacy. It should herewith also be taken into account that politics and economy may be 'universal' concepts, but that politics and economies are singular. Deep-seated conceptual differences concerning norms and visions of society may exist between China and the West,¹⁸ but, in a context in which authoritarianism appears to be increasingly accepted globally,¹⁹ maintaining a 'one world' strategy, aimed at growing wellbeing for all humans, hereby taking cultural

differences into account should be possible. Also in the debate and policy making on human rights, taking cultural sensitivities and differences—including political cultures—into account may be necessary in order to be effective. As a long time ago observed by Edward H. Carr, realism fails because it excludes essential features of politics like emotional appeal to a political goal and grounds for moral judgment.²⁰

To make this debate possible, it is necessary to:

- Acknowledge that the PRC is a legitimate participant in the debate on universal values / human rights
- Take into account that a large majority of Chinese citizens value their human rights situation positively
- Acknowledge that a large number of Chinese citizens see themselves as part of global society, and that this self-identification enhances the PRC's position in the universal values / human rights debate
- Be aware that both the prevailing interpretation of universal values / human rights and the PRC's alternative proposal equally lay claim to 'universality'

- Be aware that overemphasizing the PRC's role as either being a pure entrepreneur of new norms or a staunch antipreneur in following the currently prevailing norms risks to negate the possibility for debate, and may reinforce the rise of nationalism in China and of authoritarianism in the world
- While standing firm with EU values, avoid the trap of falling into either cultural universalism or cultural relativism, in this way avoiding to be perceived as paternalistic in the eyes of China and the Global South, and negating the possibility for debate.

Bart Dessein is a senior full professor at Ghent University where he lectures on modern and contemporary China and EU–East Asia Relations. He is head of the Ghent University research group “East Asian Culture in Perspective: Identity, Historical Consciousness, Modernity”. He is also a Senior Associate Fellow at the Egmont Institute and scientific coordinator of the Horizon Europe ‘ReConnect China’ consortium. Bart Dessein is currently Franqui Research Professor Chairholder at Ghent University (2024–2027). He is Officer in the Order of Leopold, and Commander in the Order of the Crown.

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- Of the 2,300 respondents to the sixth wave, 50.8% identified as male and 49.2% as female; 21.78% were aged up to 29, 46.21% were aged between 30 and 49, and 31.95% were aged over 50. As far as level of education is concerned, 5.9% of the respondents did not have any formal education, 19.5% had completed primary school, 46.5% had completed secondary school of a technical/vocational type, 16.5% had completed secondary school of university-preparatory type, and 11.6% had completed university level education. As regards type of employment, 17.6% were employed in a government or public institution, 25.0% were employed in business or industry, 0.6% were employed in a private non-profit organization, 19.8% was employed in the autonomous/informal sector, and 34.77% were not yet or no longer employed. Of the 3,036 respondents of the seventh wave, 49.5% identified as male and 50.5% as female; 22.36% were aged up to 29, 44.40% were aged between 30 and 49, and 33.26% were aged over 50. As far as level of education is concerned, 5.6% only had enjoyed early childhood education, 18.6% had only completed primary education, 40.0% had enjoyed lower secondary education, 17.9% had enjoyed upper secondary education, 15.9% obtained a BA degree, 0.7% obtained an MA degree, and 0.1% obtained a PhD degree. As regards type of employment, 18.6% of the respondents were employed in a government or public institution, 36.7% were employed in private business or industry, 1.6% were employed in a private non-profit organization, and 43.2% were not yet or no longer employed. As for regional distribution, in both waves a balance between urban and rural areas, north, northeast, east, central, south, southwest, and northwest China was maintained.
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