

From Partners to Rivals: Normative Power Europe Meets Normative Power China?

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) has been promoting its norms, values, and rules for decades. However, in the current international environment, the EU's normative power is not being received well outside the EU, particularly in reference to the growing power of illiberal states. Within that context, this study explores EU-China relations across time and unpacks the position of normative power Europe towards China and the Chinese response. The study foregrounds the fruitless attempts of the EU to project its transformative power onto China and the growing resistance by China against this, which it expresses by presenting itself to the West as an alternative power with an alternative understanding of international politics.

Keywords: China, European Union, Normative Power China, Normative Power Europe, Strategic Partner

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Introduction

For decades, the European Union (EU) has transformed its neighbors through the enlargement process and, to a lesser extent, its neighborhood policy. It is now widely accepted that the EU's transformative power has worked well both within and beyond the borders of the EU: the EU successfully transmits its norms, values, and rules to its members and neighbors (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). However, the world has been changing, and the rise of illiberal states and the necessity of engaging with them poses new challenges for the EU. As a normative power, the EU wants to promote its normative model to the external world, but emerging alternative illiberal gravity centers, particularly Russia and China, are now forming their own magnetic normative frameworks. As Kavalski (2013: 251) emphasizes, "the complexity of global life confronts the EU with the reality where other countries do not perceive it as a magnet." In such an environment, the EU has realized that these illiberal states are not interested in accepting the European model of politics and governance and prefer to act in line with their own understandings.

Considering that the EU has aimed to project its transformative power onto China for more than 30 years now, we can say that the EU is realizing the uselessness of efforts to promote change in line with European standards due to several reasons, including the lack of asymmetrical relationships, which previously drove change in its neighborhood. Therefore, beyond enlargement and neighborhood policies, the EU's transformative power based on its normative framework has remained limited and, most importantly, in engaging with China, the EU has met an alternative power challenging its European normative narrative. In essence, the dilemma of Brussels in its relations with China is the "impossible task" of employing its normative power consistently "without appearing inconsistent or hypocritical" (Mattlin 2012: 181).

This study explores EU-China relations over time and analyzes how normative power Europe is meeting China, providing specific examples by unpacking the issue of human rights, therefore, focusing on the political norms of the EU. It argues that EU-China relations have moved from an optimistic partnership to a pessimistic rival framework, revealing the fruitlessness of EU attempts to project its transformative power onto China. However, the EU is still unable to abandon its normative stance towards China despite the firm challenge posed by China and the unsuccessful attempts to promote change there. Accordingly, the first section of this article analyzes the historical development of EU-China relations and questions the success of the EU's engagement. The second unpacks normative power Europe and its projections onto China. The third explores whether there is a normative power China and if it challenges the EU's normative power, while the fourth unpacks the issue of human rights in EU-China relations. Finally, the article provides concluding remarks as the necessity to change the EU's unfruitful attempts to project its transformative power toward China, which has asserted its own normative framework on a global scale.

From Partners to Rivals: Building Trust or Deepening Mistrust?

EU-China relations were shaped by Cold War dynamics, beginning in 1949 and continuing to evolve through the 1980s, explicitly influenced by China's relations with the United States (US) and the Soviet Union (Mingjiang 2016: 14). In the 1950s and 1960s, while Europe was conducting its relations with China through the lenses of its relations with the US, China similarly perceived Europe through the lenses of its alliance with Moscow (Mergenthaler 2015: 25). The rift between China and the Soviet Union subsequently changed the Chinese perspective regarding Western Europe, with China beginning to see economic integration as vital for its interests (Mergenthaler 2015: 26).

As of the 1970s, both sides were eager to engage with the other, establishing the first steps for an institutional framework for their relations that was essentially focused on trade-related issues (Mergenthaler 2015: 25). In 1975, China and the EU established official diplomatic ties and, in 1978, signed a trade agreement entailing the offer of most-favored nation treatment to each other and the creation of an European Community (EC)-China Joint Committee for monitoring the agreement's implementation (Zhou 2017: 3-4). In 1985, they upgraded their relations through an agreement on trade and economic cooperation, formalizing the previous mechanisms and expanding the functions of the Joint Committee while encompassing economic

cooperation in different areas (Mergenthaler 2015: 31). In 1988, they exchanged diplomatic missions “providing the official channel for further improving the bilateral relationship” (Zhou 2017: 4). However, despite these increasing interactions over the years, both China and the EU “lacked a fundamental understanding of the other side in political and economic terms” (Mergenthaler 2015: 31).

Before the end of the Cold War, relatively stable relations between the EU and China were eminent apart from the Tiananmen Incident of 1989 (Li 2016: 14).¹ Due to Tiananmen, relations remained poor for some time, especially after the EC imposed sanctions on China, including an arms embargo (Zhou 2017: 4). However, in the 1990s, EU-China relations entered a new phase of active mutual involvement in line with the EU’s desire to play an active role in the international arena (Mergenthaler 2015: 32). Since the mid-1990s, the continued development of bilateral relations has been manifested in the official documents of the EU, joint statements, the establishment of joint initiatives and consulting mechanisms, and “an amazingly long list of cooperative projects that the two sides have carried out” (Li 2016: 14). Furthermore, human rights dialogue was established between the EU and China in 1996, with a Chinese proposal putting “an end to the diplomatic confrontation on the issue of human rights for many years” (Zhou 2017: 4). In 1998, the two parties agreed to establish a leaders summit “starting direct bilateral strategic communication” together with a “cooperative partnership” (Zhou 2017: 4).

As seen, EU-China relations developed steadily in the early years of EU engagement, and in this process, “common economic and trade interests have played a pivotal role in pushing the two sides together” (Li 2016: 14). Such steady development was due to three factors: “the step-by-step promotion of China’s reform and opening up and the overall development in different areas, the gradual enlargement of the EC/EU and its own continuously improved capacity, and the motivation of globalization” (Zhou 2017: 3). In these years, the EU adopted the aim of transforming China, encouraging the country to pursue internal reforms and understand the operation of international norms (Michalski and Nilsson 2018). However, both sides also had strategic considerations in using each other to realize their similar preferences for global order, their approaches to major international issues, and their roles in international politics (Li 2016: 14-15). In essence, “the overall theme has been one of engagement, linked to the development of a strategic partnership that is maturing based on shared interests and challenges” (Rees 2009: 38).

During the 2000s, these relations continued to develop; in 2001, a “comprehensive partnership” approach was adopted and China acceded to the World Trade Organization with the support of the EU. In 2003, China and the EU announced a “comprehensive strategic partnership” (Zhou 2017: 8). The following years have been described as the “honeymoon” period of EU-China relations (Li et al. 2017: 36). The 2003 Iraq War drew these parties closer together since major actors in the EU adopted an approach like China and “created an atmosphere of strategic mutual trust in China-EU relations” (Zhou 2017: 8).

1 Demonstrations of 1989 in Tiananmen Square of Beijing were harshly cracked down by China that became a reference point for international as well as European criticism.

Through its “big bang” enlargement of 2004, the EU turned into China’s largest trade partner (Zhou 2017: 8). However, after 2004, growing suspicion of the EU pervaded China’s position while the EU changed its overall policies towards China, approaching it more as a competitor than a strategic partner with recognition of China’s responsibilities as a global power (Li et al. 2017: 37). The fundamental aim of the EU, however, remained unchanged: “Engagement with China continued to be critical for addressing global challenges and realizing overall EU foreign policy goals” (Mergenthaler 2015: 42).

Most importantly, in the first half of the 2000s, increasing trade with China created a greater trade deficit for the EU and “some of the main EU member states started to consider China as an unfair player in international trade” (Mergenthaler 2015: 43). The toughened EU discourse on and stance towards China was very much related to this steadily growing trade deficit. As Cameron (2009: 57) states, “in the first decade of the twentieth century, the balance of power began to shift in China’s favor, and EU concerns now surrounded economic and trade issues, especially protecting EU jobs from alleged unfair Chinese competition.” The second half of the 2000s saw further friction and tension between the EU and China over a range of issues including the EU’s continuing arms embargo, the resistance of the EU regarding China’s market economy status, the meetings of EU leaders with the Dalai clique, and the possible European boycott of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing (Cameron 2009: 60; Li 2016: 21-22). These concerns led to the cancellation of the 2008 EU-China Summit, confirming that these frictions had begun influencing overall relations.

In the meantime, the Eurozone crisis of 2008 weakened the EU and its “credibility as a cohesive actor and turned the tables in the EU-China strategic partnership” (Michalski and Pan 2017: 622). During the crisis, the EU became more “accommodating towards China” due to Chinese support for Europe, lowering its expectations of Chinese liberal reforms as it became less confident in its own power to influence China (Michalski and Pan 2017: 622-623). After 2009, however, relations returned to their usual state and further deepened, and in 2010, a high-level strategic dialogue was launched between the two parties (Li et al. 2017: 38). The year 2013 was declared the “10th anniversary of the establishment of the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” leading to further strengthening of the relations (Li et al. 2017: 40). In those years, the EU and China confirmed each other as strategic partners and accepted each other’s sensitive interests (Michalski and Pan 2017: 623). In 2016, the EU’s new strategy paper on China was published, which increasingly stressed the rise of China and China’s responsibilities in “going global” (European Commission 2016). The wording of the document showed that the EU’s approach to China was changing but could be described as somewhat “low profile and indirect” (Hackler 2020: 2).

The slow change in the EU’s approach towards China took a new turn with the strongly worded 2019 Strategic Outlook defining China as a “partner,” “competitor,” and “rival” (European Commission 2019) and questioning “the balance between challenges and opportunities presented by China” (Hackler 2020: 2). This wording demonstrated a radical shift in the EU’s perception of China, moving from a stance of unquestioned full engagement to cautious engagement with a rival.

The Covid-19 outbreak and its repercussions created disturbances in the EU related to China's assertive "mask diplomacy," which divided Europe over the EU's lack of response in the first months of the pandemic (Hackler 2020: 5). As Hackler (2020: 5) stresses, "the new crisis-driven pandemic might have solidified the negative perceptions of China in the EU." Despite the need to engage further to combat the pandemic, "worsening geopolitical rivalry and lingering mutual mistrust [would], however, not make this an easy task" (Holzer 2020: 199). Therefore, we can conclude that EU-China relations began with the building of mutual trust but evolved towards solid mistrust.

Transforming China: Normative Power Europe

The EU's normative power is widely recognized in the literature, understood in line with Manners' definition as the ability of the EU "to shape conceptions of 'normal' in international relations" (Manners 2002: 242-243). EU norms such as human rights are "constitutive norms of a polity which is different to existing states and international relations," and such difference in the EU's existence, norms, and policies is a part of "redefining what can be 'normal' in international relations; such ability to define what is normal in international relations gives the EU a vital power base" (Manners 2002: 253).

As Manners (2002: 242-243) argues, normative power Europe relies on the five core norms of peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law, and human rights embodied within the *acquis* and the four minor norms of social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, and good governance. Manners (2002: 252) highlights that the EU's normative power is built on "not what it does or what it says, but what it is." Therefore, the EU is an example for other actors to emulate, diffusing its norms, values, and norms intentionally with its external initiatives and unintentionally by providing a model for others (Forsberg 2011: 1185; Wunderlich 2020: 3).

The normative principles of the EU are divided into three main areas: political (human rights and democracy, rule of law, and good governance), economic (market economy, fair trade, and free trade), and social (poverty reduction/economic development for developing countries, social solidarity in forms such as labor standards and gender equality, and sustainable development/environmental protection). (Hoang 2016: 184). This study focuses on the first dimension of the EU's political norms within the framework of normative power Europe.

The EU increasingly relied on such normative power to transform its neighbors throughout the enlargement process, employing conditionality and enlarging its sphere of influence beyond its borders. In the post-Cold War era, the EU's transformative power successfully drove change in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs), and the EU functioned as a magnet for these countries, attracting them towards membership (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). In the end, with Europeanization processes, the EU transformed candidate states beyond its borders as well as neighborhood states within the context of the European Neighborhood Policy, albeit to a lesser extent due to the lack of membership perspective. Normative power Europe requires vital leverage to transform target states, and that leverage

lies in the membership perspective, which is not available in the EU's external relations beyond immediate neighbors.

The Europeanizing mechanisms, and especially conditionality, seem "ill-suited" to "out-of-Europe areas" (Kavalski 2013: 251). The EU does not have asymmetrical relationships with the outer world beyond its neighbors and suffers from its own approach as it expects the non-EU to adapt itself but not the EU itself; however, the non-EU might not want to adapt and might not perceive the EU as a magnet (Kavalski 2013: 251). Quite simply, the EU does not possess any leverage over countries that do not share European norms, values, and rules (Mattlin 2012: 185).

In its relations with China, the EU seems to be particularly challenged in this regard, but for a long time, it persisted in trying to diffuse its norms, rules, and values to China, which has been unwilling to accept the European model without any significant leverage in a symmetrical relationship. As Maher (2016: 961) emphasizes, the EU hoped for its closer engagement to catalyze change in China, "leading to greater democracy, openness, and transparency in the country". However, China rejects the EU's liberal model, and Europe faces a chronic dilemma in building a comprehensive partnership with an illiberal state that embodies ways of doing that stand in opposition to its own norms, values, and rules (Maher 2016: 963). Nevertheless, the EU maintained its "confidence in its ability to socialize China into liberal values long after China made amply clear its refusal to this effect" (Michalski and Nilsson 2018: 5).

Until the late 2000s, the EU was proactive with its normative power, aiming to socialize China. In the early years of engagement, the EU took the role of a master "to teach China how to become a fully-fledged international actor...and conduct domestic economic, social and political reforms of a liberal orientation" (Michalski and Nilsson 2018: 9). Taking on such a responsibility, the EU assumed that domestic change was in the interest of China, and the main aim was to encourage China to take initiative to transform its own internal structure (Crookes 2013: 646).

In line with the target, the EU adopted a strategy of closer engagement with China on normative issues such as human rights rather than trying to force the country to accept EU norms, values, and rules (Li 2016: 20). Importantly, in these early years of engagement, both sides had common interests to pursue through closer engagement and, as Li (2016: 15) puts it, this included the usage of each other to realize three objectives: "transforming the global system to its favor, upgrading its own international standing, and resolving international problems in its preferred way." Such strategic goals motivated both parties to engage with each other closely.

Nevertheless, despite its strategic goals, the EU's normative stance in engaging with China received much criticism due to its limited efficacy, considering the rise of China with its own priorities and interests (Crookes 2013: 648). In the second half of the 2000s, the liberal world order started to lose its attraction and China's position as a global power grew stronger, which in turn increased China's confidence that it would be treated as an equal of the US. This led to the diminishing need of China to be socialized by the EU into the international community and the weakening of the EU's ability to diffuse its norms, values, and rules to

China (Michalski and Nilsson 2018: 12; Michalski and Pan 2017: 621). The failure of the EU to lift the arms ban, its refusal to accept China's market economy status, a series of incidents related to the 2008 Olympic Games, EU criticism of the unrest in Tibet and China's dealings with protestors, and the meetings of several leaders of EU member states with the Dalai clique also influenced the relations negatively and weakened the EU's normative power (Michalski and Pan 2017: 621-622).

Developments within the EU also diminished its normative power in its relations with China. The EU toned down its normative stance towards China, especially by 2008, due to the Eurozone crisis weakening the EU's cohesiveness and, therefore, its normative power, leading in turn to lower EU expectations of China adopting liberal norms and values (Michalski and Pan 2017: 622-623). As Michalski and Nilsson (2018: 15) stress, in this process, "the EU did not give up its norms and values but decided no longer to project these upon China."

In the end, the success and strength of the EU "as an order shaper is dependent on the success of its economic and social model, as well as its capability of effective collective action" (Geeraerts 2019: 284). The multiple crises dealt with by the EU in the last decade weakened its power. Furthermore, the lack of internal cohesion among EU member states regarding EU policy towards China also hampered normative power of Europe and the EU's role as a shaper of order (Geeraerts 2019: 284). The EU's "unconditional engagement" strategy towards China failed and created frustration among the EU elites (Li 2016: 16). As Li (2016: 21) notes, despite the EU's long-standing normative stance on promoting its norms, values, and rules, its engagement with China did not produce any tangible progress, especially in the realm of human rights in China.

Most importantly, China is now increasingly dealing with Europe through its bilateral relations with individual EU member states. While the EU's normative power is fed by its cohesion, China has divided the EU from the inside by providing economic carrots such as financial support to EU member states that need such investments (Berkofsky 2019: 2). Many have warned that "Beijing has turned to dealing with individual EU member states, in an attempt to receive what it cannot get from the EU institutions" (Berkofsky 2019: 2). This Chinese strategy has been fruitful on many occasions, such as the vetoing by Greece and Hungary of a joint statement on human rights in China in 2017, with those countries having received Chinese investments in recent years (Berkofsky 2019: 2). The 17+1 initiative of China for cooperation between China and CEECs also serves as a source of division among EU member and candidate states. Interestingly, China took advantage of the Eurozone crisis to increase its investments and the Covid-19 pandemic to increase its political profile among EU member states bilaterally and multilaterally (Huotari et al. 2015: 8). In the end, China created 27 "gateways to Europe" (Huotari et al. 2015: 9). Most importantly, "all EU member states are confronted with the dilemma of either prioritizing their economic interests with China or being critical of China's human rights record" (Huotari et al. 2015: 10). All in all, the EU's normative power towards China has been further shaken by the "collective action problem" with the lack of cohesiveness of the EU and the increasing bilateral engagement of China with individual EU member states (Geeraerts 2019: 284).

Therefore, the nature of EU-China relations became more pragmatic over time in terms of the EU's push for normative change in China in the 2000s. However, the normative stress in the EU's dealings with China was never entirely abandoned. For instance, the 2016 Joint Communication titled "Elements for a new EU strategy on China" (European Commission 2016: 2-4) demonstrates, albeit to a lesser extent than in previous years, the EU's insistence on reform processes in China, promotion of respect for the rule of law and human rights in China, and a rule-based international order in which China also operates. The EU also seems to understand the importance of a unified stance towards China: "The EU must project a strong, clear and unified voice in its approach to China" (European Commission 2016: 4). Additionally, the 2019 Joint Communication (European Commission 2019: 1) describes China as a "systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance" and calls for "a flexible and pragmatic whole-of-EU approach." The EU has begun focusing on more pragmatic interests in its dealings with China but does not abandon its normative stance.

The launch of the EU's 2018 connectivity project aiming for "connectivity with European characters" further promoted the EU's norms and values in its cooperation with China, as reciprocity and transparency are seen as missing in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Hackler 2020). Therefore, it could be said that the EU was aiming to maintain its value-based approach with a more proactive interest-based focus. In the end, however, the normative engagement of the EU with China did not produce any tangible results, as demonstrated by China's continued lack of response to the EU's normative calls (Berkofsky 2019: 3). The weakening of the EU's normative power towards China has been accompanied by rising Chinese power with proactive foreign policy embodied in Chinese norms and values. Therefore, the EU's normative power is not only resisted by China but also challenged by China's own normative understandings. As Mattlin (2012: 186) stresses, the EU's attraction would not be appealing to great powers: "Indeed, the Venutian nature of Europeans will promptly be dismissed, even ridiculed, by the Martians of international politics, of which there are plenty."

In summary, with China's rise, the EU has been challenged in economic terms and on normative grounds. In the competitive international environment, the EU's ability to promote its norms, values, and norms is highly challenged by the growth of illiberal centers in world politics that are unwilling to accept the EU's normative approach towards them and "instead [have] endeavored to push back against the EU's normative mission, thereby challenging the foundations of its contested identity" (Michalski and Nilsson 2018: 12).

Resisting and Challenging Europe: Normative Power China?

The EU and China are actors of different worlds. While the EU functions as a post-modern and supranational actor with rule-based institutions, China is a rising developing state and an illiberal global power based on the idea of strong sovereignty and a strong state tradition (Crookes 2013: 289). Such different identities are reflected in their relations and in the EU's projection of norms towards China. While China was more receptive to the EU's engagement initiatives and acted passively in the first stages of engagement, the EU's projection of its

norms, values, and rules has never been received positively by China in actual terms. At later stages, “once China learned the rules of engagement it has endeavored to diffuse its norms and world views upon the EU” (Michalski and Pan 2017: 614- 619). Over time, China has become more assertive, defending its own norms and values in its policies and revealing the gap between “China’s belief that cooperation should depart from normative diversity and joint interest and Europe’s assumption that differences in interests can be resolved by a consensus over universal political rules” (Holslag 2011: 309).

China plays an “important role in defining norms and structures by what it does (or does not do)” (Wong 2013: 125). Most importantly, as Kavalski (2013: 250) claims, normative power China “acts as a ‘metaphor for difference’”; therefore, what China is not more important than what it is. In this respect, the role of history is critical in defining what China is not: the West. Furthermore, Chinese attitudes towards the outer world are shaped by historical experiences, Western economic gains, and the Western imposition of social and cultural superiority over Chinese traditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Crookes 2013: 650). These past “humiliations” created “a continuing legacy of victimhood at the hands of the foreigners” and engendered suspicions about and resistance against any projection of Western norms, rules, and values or a “Western rights model” in China (Crookes 2013: 650). Considering the EU’s attempts to project its model onto China, it is not a surprise to see resistance to such projections among both Chinese elites and the public. As Kavalski (2013: 257) notes, “China’s inferiority complex for the better part of the twentieth century dented its socializing propensities.”

In addition to such resistance, China aims for the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” based on sovereignty, social stability, and economic growth, pursuing the peaceful rise of the country in the global order (Crookes 2013: 651). The narrative in which Chinese identity is shaped is based on China being the “heir to an ancient and rich civilization, which perceived itself as the center of the world, not as a nation among many” (Holzer 2020: 186). The fundamental aim of China is to “remove this stain of national humiliation inflicted at the hands of foreign powers” (Holzer 2020: 186).

With Xi’s rule in China, the previous strategy of “keeping a low profile” was displaced with a goal of “striving for achievement,” and China’s increasingly assertive foreign policy emerged (Zeng 2017: 1164). With the launch of the BRI, China has become increasingly involved with the world, including Europe, in line with its own interests, and it has become more assertive in its foreign relations (Holzer 2020: 188). However, despite Europe’s economic importance as China’s largest trading partner, Europe has not yet been a primary focus for China (Zeng 2017: 1166).

In dealing with international affairs, China adopts a “Hobbesian view on power” based on “absolute sovereignty, stability, and control” in contrast to the EU’s preference for a rule-based international order (Yu 2018: 232). China’s normative priorities are mainly based on the “Westphalian reading of sovereignty” and, accordingly, the principle of non-interference, which in turn represents China’s external identity as an alternative normative power (Wunderlich 2020: 3). As Geeraerts (2019: 289) emphasizes, “China prioritizes the defense of state sovereignty and non-interference with domestic affairs, and prefers international cooperation

based on intergovernmental consensus.” Promoting the principle of non-interference, China aims to prevent outsiders from intervening in its domestic politics, which would constitute “a source of national resentment and humiliation,” and to protect itself from external criticism of its own policies, such as the treatment of Uyghurs (Maher 2016: 972). This is particularly true in the realm of human rights; China seeks to promote its own understanding of human rights, referring to “human rights with Chinese characteristics” (Berkofsky 2019: 4).

Chinese normative understandings do not rely on the imposition or even promotion of norms, values, and rules; rather, they rely only on “shared expectations of reciprocity” (Kavalski and Cho 2018: 57). An example of such reciprocity in EU-China relations can be seen in the Chinese insistence on cooperation based on “equality and mutual benefit” (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018; Michalski and Pan 2017: 619). China expects the EU to reaffirm “its adherence to the ‘one China principle’ and the settlement of the Taiwan question in accordance with the basic principle of ‘peaceful reunification’ and ‘one country two systems’ thereby affirming its respect for China’s sovereignty and internal affairs” (Michalski and Pan 2017: 619). China insists on the EU’s recognition of the “one China principle” regarding Hong Kong, as well, which has become a cornerstone of these relations (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018). The EU has also been repeatedly asked not to have any contact with the so-called Dalai clique (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018). In return, China reaffirms its respect for European integration.

Most importantly, the reciprocal relations and normative approach of China and its interactions with Europe are based on Chinese *guanxi* as “an ongoing commitment to act in accordance with social demands and expectations established and maintained through intricate relational networks engendered by the practice of unlimited exchange of favors and underpinned by reciprocal obligations, assurances, and mutuality” (Kavalski and Cho 2018: 50). While the EU’s normative power entails a rule-based framework, China’s normative understanding possesses a relational one, whereby “actors intentionally commit to the interaction by demonstrating their willingness to exercise self-restraint” (Kavalski and Cho 2018: 56).

Regarding *guanxi*, China does not impose any norms, rules, or obligations onto other parties in cooperation; rather, shared understandings emerge through interactions in the process (Kavalski and Cho 2018: 56). For instance, China does not employ conditionality in its trade agreements and financial assistance with other countries in contrast to the EU employing conditionality in its external relations, particularly regarding human rights and good governance. Referring to historical experiences, China’s normative understanding is explicitly not reliant upon imposition and proclaims that “others need not suffer humiliation either” (Kavalski and Cho 2018: 55). Therefore, China relies on the Confucian notion of “harmony with a difference,” and its power comes from the “practice of doing together” rather than imposing what China wants (Kavalski 2013: 254). Xi’s “Community of Shared Future for Mankind” gives a “strong signal that China is seeking to be a responsible global power and is open to pursue common objectives that benefit the international community” (Holzer 2020: 194). All these points make China an attractive partner for cooperation for many worldwide.

In summary, the rise of China has changed the global political scene and put severe stress on EU-China relations. While China was more of a passive receiver of the EU's transformative power in the first stages of these relations, with the growth of its power over time China has become more assertive in its external relations, defending its own normative understanding while resisting normative power Europe. If the EU continues to operate within its own framework of transformative power with conditionality, it will remain unfruitful in its relations with China. In contrast, as Chou (2015: 107) stresses, "exposing this Western hubris will, among many things, facilitate Chinese normative principles to attain the political legitimacy..." The Chinese approach is currently only an alternative compared to the European one, but in the future, it could enhance its legitimacy and become dominant in international politics.

Normative Power Europe Meets Normative Power China? The Case of Human Rights

The problems within EU-China relations arise from "deep disagreement over values" and human rights constitute the most challenging area of such disagreement between the EU and China (Taylor 2022: 368). In contrast to the EU's recognition and promotion of individual civil and political rights in its external relations, China focuses on collective socioeconomic rights prioritized over individual rights and resists the EU's norms, values, and rules in general and specifically in terms of human rights (Taylor 2022: 368). The case of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang constitutes an example of such disagreement over values within the realm of human rights that has yielded no concrete results for the better treatment of Uyghurs in China.

As discussed above in detail, being a normative power, the EU has positioned itself as a norm-promoter in other countries, especially regarding certain norms like human rights, which are considered as universal rights applicable in any country. Therefore, the EU has committed itself to promoting human rights within and beyond its territories and strengthening the human rights regime at the international level (Geeraerts 2016: 238). The EU perceives human rights as individualistic, universal, and indivisible norms comprising "civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights" (Men 2011: 538). Although the EU did not have a distinct approach to human rights in its external relations until the early 1990s, they have become a vital principle in the external relations of the EU since then, with the EU continuously declaring that human rights constitute the heart of its foreign policy (Christiansen, Kircher and Wissenbach 2019: 77; Geeraerts 2016: 238).

China's understanding of human rights arises from a collectivist and relativist perspective (Michalski and Pan 2017: 104). The country does not focus on individual rights but rather on collective human rights and believes in sacrificing the former for the latter (Michalski and Pan 2017: 105). Notably, rather than rejecting the whole concept of human rights, China has been defensive against the EU's specific promotion of human rights, emphasizing the inapplicability in China of the European notion of human rights focused on civil and political rights and instead stressing the importance of economic and social rights (Michalski and Pan 2017: 83). The most important human right for China is the right to subsistence, which can

give way to other human rights only once it is fulfilled. As China has still barely fulfilled the right to subsistence, it argues that the European insistence on human rights “is premature in China” (Michalski and Pan 2017: 83).

China also invokes national sovereignty and the principle of non-interference when it comes to human rights, arguing that “national states themselves are the best protectors of their people’s human rights” while rejecting the EU’s promotion of human rights to China as “encroachment on its sovereignty and detrimental to its national stability” (Michalski and Pan 2017: 83). In line with this argument, China perceives the implementation of human rights as being country-dependent, with individual countries responsible for deciding “which human rights they are able to accept at any given time” (Geeraerts 2016: 241). Therefore, China adopts a defensive approach to human rights internationally through “active efforts in the United Nations to block resolutions criticizing China and through dialogue with major Western countries” (Geeraerts 2016: 241). Christiansen, Kircher and Wissenbach (2019: 79) explain this emphasis on sovereignty as being “partly shaped by a domestic insecurity lingering from the ‘century of humiliation’ alongside a view that domestic decision-making is ‘culture specific.’”

The EU has been successfully divided on a common foreign policy for China for years, especially regarding human rights. For instance, in 2017, Greece blocked an unanimously adopted joint EU statement on human rights in China; in the same year, Hungary prevented the EU from putting its name on a joint letter of concern in response to a report on the illegal detainment and torture of lawyers in China (Berkofsky 2019: 2). Such divisions have prevented the EU from acting on human rights violations in China. Overall, human rights have always been a contentious issue between the EU and China, as exemplified by the Uyghur issue. Especially in the era of Xi Jinping, different understandings of human rights have clashed in the context of China’s human rights record regarding the “mass extra-judicial internment of Uighurs in Xinjiang” (Taylor 2022: 368). China has detained more than a million Muslim Uyghurs in detention camps in Xinjiang since 2017, and beyond that, Uyghurs have been facing “intense surveillance, forced labor, and involuntary sterilizations” (Maizland 2022). The Chinese government initially denied the existence of the camps, but later, in 2018, it acknowledged the camps as “vocational education and training centers” (Maizland 2022). China has continued to deny allegations of forced labor and other human rights violations in the region while insisting “that the camps are necessary for preventing religious extremism and terrorism” (Frater and Rahim 2020).

Nevertheless, in 2021, the EU succeeded in imposing sanctions against China that targeted “four Chinese officials and one entity believed to be involved in the alleged human rights violations of the Uyghur Muslim minority” (Euronews 2021). In response, the Chinese foreign ministry stated that the EU’s decision to impose those sanctions, “based on nothing but lies and disinformation, disregards and distort facts, grossly interferes in China’s internal affairs, flagrantly breaches international law and basic norms governing international relations, and severely undermines China-EU relations” (Euronews 2021). China further announced “retaliatory sanctions against EU persons and entities” (Succimarra 2021).

In 2022, after calls from the US, which had signed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in 2021, banning all imports produced by forced labor in Xinjiang, the European

Commission proposed a similar law banning products made using forced labor, primarily targeting Beijing's use of the forced labor of Uyghurs (Zimmermann 2024). In 2024, the EU approached the finalization of that law, which includes a total ban on goods made with forced labor in general. This shows that the EU has followed the US regarding Xinjiang, taking an approach shaped by human rights considerations and restrictions on trade in response to the treatment of Uyghurs by China. However, Beijing seems to be ignoring EU concerns about the human rights situation in the country as exemplified by the Xinjiang situation and perceives the issue within the framework of domestic boundaries that should remain within the jurisdiction of the state (Berkofsky 2019: 3).

As seen from this case, the EU insists on the prevention of human rights violations in Xinjiang as well as the implementation of human rights for Uyghurs in the region, while China acts defensively and denies allegations of human rights violations. Therefore, while the EU acts in line with its value system, China considers issues within its own framework of values based on sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention. In the end, normative power Europe meets normative power China with no compromises, each party relying on different understandings of human rights.

Conclusion: Normative Power Europe Meets Resistance from China

EU-China relations have shifted from the development of trust to increasing mistrust. The early years of these relations were based on the EU's engagement with China with the aim of transforming the country by triggering internal reforms and China's passive response. Over time, with the global rise of China, the country became more assertive and decisive in its rejection of the EU model. This has created a dilemma for the EU as it must decide between engaging with China normatively or pragmatically. While pragmatic considerations are increasingly voiced, the normative framework has not been wholly abandoned in the EU's engagement with China.

China has transitioned from a "developing country to a developed nation, from imitation to innovation, from rule-taker to rule-maker, from reactive to proactive" (Holzer 2020: 195). Such enormous change necessitated a new approach from the EU in dealing with China. However, the EU remains rhetorically entrapped within its normative approach, unable to abandon normative considerations in pursuit of its other interests. Instead, the EU is seeking to balance its interests with its norms, values, and rules in its relations with China.

Most importantly, the EU has come to face a challenging reality over time with the rise of China's power on a global scale. While the EU's normative power is widely recognized, China's increasingly firm normative considerations constitute a critical challenge for Europe. China has grown more confident and now presents itself as a rule-maker rather than a rule-taker. In the context of the changing world order, the EU is unprepared to meet China as a rising power, necessitating a total change in its relations with China. Despite the friendlier relations of past decades, China has made it clear that it will not accept the EU model; instead, it will proceed with its own Chinese model.

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