

## **The rise of China under the lenses of Social and Political Sciences: four decades challenging widespread assumptions**

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### ABSTRACT

Since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policies by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China has undergone a series of rapid changes that have turned it into a great power with prospects for global leadership. Its rise has not only opened up the possibility that, for the first time in the last two centuries, a non-Western country could once again rise to the top of the international order. The changes in China over the past four decades have also refuted a considerable number of assumptions and arguments held from different angles of the social and political sciences. This paper will analyze how the rise of China has debunked some of the main paradigms and theories in the field of International Relations, democratization, and globalization. The present study concludes that the multidimensional implications of China's rise were not, to a large extent, anticipated by some of the mainstream theories of these disciplines.

**KEY WORDS:** rise of China, international relations, globalization, democratization, academic debates

The rise of China has received widespread attention from the academic world. Can China rise peacefully? Is the Chinese model of development sustainable over the long term? Can its political model be replicated in third countries? Is China satisfied with the international status quo or, on the contrary, will it attempt to transform it? These are just some of the most frequent questions that

are currently being debated in academic circles. In fact, the answer to those questions will have a remarkable impact not only on the academic literature in social and political sciences but also on the very historical development of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, it is not uncommon to make bold predictions on the unfolding of future trends that eventually fail to come about.

In 1953, the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin published the book *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, in which he classified previous universal thinkers into two types: the hedgehogs, who merely perceive the world through a single idea or notion, and foxes, who refuse to view the world through just one predefined idea, and prefer to adopt a much more eclectic worldview. This essay inspired the American professor of international politics Daniel W. Drezner (2005), who resorted to the idea of hedgehogs and foxes in order to answer one question that is recurrent in the field of International Relations: why do we usually fail to predict critical political events? Hedgehogs, he argues, are less prepared to make effective forecasts, given that they attach to one big idea that pretends to explain everything in a complex and changing world, whereas the flexibility of foxes makes them skeptical of big explanations and therefore less deterministic, increasing their likelihood of making better forecasts. And in this regard, as this paper will show, China is a paradigmatic example of how the extrapolation of big theories and existing paradigms to third countries does not always meet the theoretical expectations of the authors. In some cases, they might even lead to misguided policies based on wrong assumptions, which preclude the political outcomes originally expected from being met. The most obvious cases are provided by the liberal paradigm of International Relations and by democratization theories.

This paper aims to provide an exploratory examination of existing theories in the fields of social and political sciences that have been challenged by the multidimensional implications of the rise of China during the last four decades. The paper is structured as follows: First, it begins by explaining the evolution of the two main paradigms of International Relations (i.e., realism and liberalism), and how they were unable to cope with events that in the 1980s would end up in the end of the Cold War, paving the way to the emergence of new paradigms. This section also explores to what extent those paradigms can provide a satisfactory explanation of the current trend of China's relationship with the West. Then, the paper discusses the flaws of democratization theories when it comes to providing a persuasive proposal on the political evolution of China. This section also discusses Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History". The third section deals with the international implications of globalization, stressing how,

contrary to initial expectations, it managed to empower countries that did not historically belong to the First World, being China the most paradigmatic case. Finally, the Conclusion will wrap up the main ideas discussed in this paper.

#### THE END OF THE COLD WAR, THE RISE OF CHINA AND THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

September 1945. The Empire of Japan surrenders to the Allies, and World War II comes to an end. Hitler had already committed suicide in Berlin some days before Nazi Germany's surrender at the beginning of May of that same year. Dozens of millions of people had died in the deadliest conflict that humanity has witnessed. After the end of the war, the international system would not be precisely characterized by quietude and peaceful coexistence: a bipolar system in which the United States and the Soviet Union were ideological rivals emerged, and great power politics was back. The idealist approach to international politics was blamed for the outbreak of World War II: according to the realist school, it had glossed over human nature and had not paid enough attention to the threats posed by Nazi Germany, the Empire of Japan, and Fascist Italy. Therefore, given the political situation after World War II, marked by the beginning of the Cold War, it is not surprising that realism was the leading paradigms of International Relations during the following decades.

The most important author of the postwar generation of realist scholars (known as classical realists) is Hans Morgenthau. In his book *Politics Among Nations* (1948), he attempted to push the development of international relations theory forward, trying to make a realist theory of international politics. The historical moment was propitious for the development of realist theory, given that the Cold War seemed to signal the strong effect of anarchy on the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, whose relationship increasingly looked like a zero-sum game. In fact, classical realism emphasized the impact of human nature in the international system, with a pessimistic view of it, and also paid attention to the influence of domestic and regional politics in international relations. These two elements were downplayed later by neorealists, who focused on the structural constraints faced by states (anarchy) and considered that domestic politics were not a crucial factor when it comes to determining state behavior in the international system.

In the 1970s, a new group emerged within the realist school: neorealism, also known as structural realism. The main innovation of neorealism compared to classical realism is the emphasis on the necessity of a scientific approach to the

study of international relations. Or in other words, it was perceived that Hans Morgenthau had failed in his commitment to pull together all classical realism thought into a general theory of international relations. The publication of *Theory of International Politics* by Kenneth Waltz (1979) marked the beginning of neorealism and its attempt to provide a general theory of international relations from a more scientific perspective. Neorealists focused on a few key realist ideas such as anarchy, state, power, and material capabilities, aiming to explain basic continuities at the international level even at the cost of downplaying the possibility of change. This is not surprising, given that History was glossed over and was merely rescued to make claims about general rules of the international system that have supposedly existed for centuries.

Realism was not the only paradigm of International Relations that experienced an evolution in its theoretical claims. Neoliberal institutionalism was in a good position to explain the emergence of new non-state actors, and it combined their focus on regional integration and economic interdependence with an increasing attention on the role of international organizations. The most important publication in the neoliberal institutionalist school is Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's book *Power and Interdependence* (1977), who claimed that there is larger scope for international cooperation and that international institutions are capable of impacting state behavior. As a consequence, it was believed that a more peaceful world was possible. Once China adopted its reform and opening-up policy in 1978, it seemed that neoliberalism was right, and that international cooperation was possible and sustainable over the long term.

Neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists would eventually converge in what has been called the *neo-neo synthesis*. After all, both paradigms make use of a positivist methodology, stress the immutable nature of anarchy in the international system, and downplay the role of history in international politics. And above all, they are overly materialistic, suggesting that "material objects (military arsenals, mountains, people, oil, and so on) have a direct effect on outcomes that is unmediated by the ideas people bring to them" (Hurd, 2010: 300). These two paradigms seemed to be very well suited to explain the dynamics in international relations... until the world suddenly changed between 1985 and 1991.

December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1991. Mikhail Gorbachev announces his resignation as the President of the Soviet Union, a country that had ceased to exist. That same day, the red flag with the hammer and sickle was replaced in the Red Square of Moscow by the tricolor flag of the Russian Federation. Between 1985 and 1991,

the bipolar world came to an end, and the Soviet Union collapsed. A critical international event that, however, had not been forecasted by the two dominant paradigms in International Relations. Their focus on state, anarchy, sovereignty, authority, and territory was unsuitable for explaining the end of the bipolar world as well as the end of the Cold War, and it became increasingly evident that the discipline of International Relations was facing a challenge in both theoretical and assumptional terms. At the moment of falling apart, the military power of the Soviet Union, including its nuclear deterrence, remained intact. Therefore, as Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (2019: 233) have argued, “the implosion of the Soviet Union was as much or more about the collapse of a political idea as it was about a change in material circumstances”. A collapse in terms of ideas that could not be explained by realism and liberalism, two overly materialistic approaches to international relations, paving the way to the emergence of other paradigms in the field, such as constructivism, critical theory, and feminism.

For its part, the rise of China and its implications have also challenged some theoretical assumptions embedded in both the realist and the liberal paradigms. In the first place, as mentioned above, neorealism tends to dismiss the role of ideas in the international behavior of states. Empirical challenges to this approach are not new: the influence of ideas in the international behavior of states was already clearly manifested during the presidency of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union. From the foundation of the country in 1922 to the arrival in power of the last Soviet leader, the worldview of Moscow consisted in the deterministic vision of history of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, according to whom class struggle was the driving force of history (Griffiths and Imre, 2013: xxvii). This perception had negatively affected the Soviet prospects of collaboration with the liberal West for decades. But Mikhail Gorbachev’s *New Thinking* rejected the Marxist-Leninist idea of the world divided into two antagonistic camps as well as the perception of international relations merely as a zero-sum game (Dallin, 1992: 72). Nowadays, this role of ideas colludes again to generate a “new thinking” policy inaugurated by former US President Donald Trump. But this time, the “new thinking” is focused on China and is overtly pessimistic. This new ideological atmosphere was noticeable during a speech of former US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo (2020), in which he argued that the United States should be tougher on China because the previous 50 years of engagement had failed, and that the ideology of Chinese policy-makers contained a “decades-long desire for global hegemony of Chinese communism”. And even though it is expected that Joe Biden’s policy

towards China will be more rational than Donald Trump's one, his early statements calling for the union of liberal democracies to face the rise of China show that the new impact of ideas in the bilateral relationship between the United States and China will continue for the foreseeable future.

Certainly, it might be argued that it is the structure of the international system, recently characterized by a possible situation of power transition in favor of China and to the detriment of the United States, *the* factor that might be behind the new trend in their bilateral relationship. However, as history shows, not all situations of power transitions trigger profound systemic rivalries between the rising and the declining power. The United Kingdom and the United States managed to maintain peace during their power transition in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, favored by their cultural homogeneity and shared identity (Feng, 2006). In addition, in the 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was widely accepted that Japan, a country with very different cultural values, would surpass the United States as the world's leading economic power. Harvard professor Ezra Vogel (1979) would even encourage US policy-makers and citizens to learn from Japan, as it was expected to become the "number one". But the ideological proximity between Washington and Tokyo made it impossible for their bilateral relationship to become as tense as the current relationship between Washington and Beijing. In fact, Ronald Reagan would even encourage Japan to take part in the US strategy against Moscow (Rodao, 2019: 106), which was perceived as the most pressing international challenge at the moment, even though it was already clear that the Soviet Union was no longer capable of surpassing the United States in material capabilities.

In addition, the implications of the rise of China have also challenged the neorealist assumption according to which domestic politics are unable to impact the international behavior of states, which is determined by the international system. In fact, John Mearsheimer (2001: 17), one of the most renowned scholars in the neorealist school, has argued that "the behavior of great powers is influenced mainly by their external environment, not by their internal characteristics. The structure of the international system, which all states must deal with, largely shapes their foreign policies". However, this statement is refuted by the evolution of the liberal West's perspective towards China (which might be more easily understood through constructivist lenses), and more importantly, the different approaches adopted by European countries that, even though they are located in the same region and are subjected the same international structural pressures, engage with China in a very different way. This aspect, in fact, has been a headache for the -so far unsuccessful- attempts

coming from the United States to create a common response towards Chinese initiatives: whereas some Western European allies of Washington such as Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Spain have rejected to take part in the Belt and Road Initiative, others such as Italy and Portugal have decided to join it, and their diverging responses are even more blurred in the case of the adoption of Huawei's 5G technology against the admonition of Washington (Pagán Sánchez, 2020).

Finally, the current negative trend of the relationship between the United States and China has dismissed the optimistic vision according to which economic interdependence will push diplomatic relations towards a more cooperative path. The hope of peaceful relations between two countries under the basis of economic interdependence is not new. More than two hundred years ago, Immanuel Kant outlined the possibility of a perpetual peace favored, among other things, by interdependence and trade. Taking dwellers in the Arctic as a case of analysis, he argued that "it was trade that first brought them into peaceful relations with one another and thereby into relationships based on mutual consent, community, and peaceful interactions even with remote peoples" (2006 [1795]: 88). Kant's optimism towards the possibility of achieving a more peaceful world has been echoed by the liberal paradigm of International Relations. Liberal scholars Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry (1999: 190) argued that "advanced capitalism creates high prospects for absolute gains that states attempt to mitigate anarchy between themselves so as to avoid the need to pursue relative gains".

Nevertheless, over the last few years, the world has been paradoxically witnessing how economic interdependence is increasing the level of conflict between the United States and China. Their bilateral relationship is far from the possibility of escalating into a hot war, but it is not precisely characterized by harmony either. The situation deteriorated sharply in 2018, when Donald Trump decided to start a trade war with China due to the supposed imbalance in their economic relationship, and it soon escalated into a broader political conflict, including the pressures against Chinese technological companies (especially Huawei and ZTE) and the delivery of some ideological discourses that resemble the spirit of the Cold War. Liberal scholars also tend to argue that states care more about absolute gains than about relative gains, and that therefore relations between states are a positive-sum game and not a zero-sum one (Viotti and Kauppi, 2012: 131). However, the negative evolution of the relationship between Washington and Beijing during the last three years certifies that, contrary to liberal assumptions, under some circumstances, states

not only care about absolute gains but also about relative gains, so a mutually beneficial economic relationship might be damaged if one of the two parts perceives that it is more beneficial to the other side. In a possible moment of power transition, this concern becomes even more pressing, given that through the sustainment of an unequal relationship, the hegemonic power (the United States) might be undermining its own international position and reinforcing the one of the rising power (China).

#### DEMOCRATIZATION THEORIES: THE STRUCTURE VS. AGENCY DEBATE

The structure versus agency debate is at the core of big debates in International Relations: to what extent is the behavior of states determined by the structure of the international system? What is the room for maneuver of political actors in light of the anarchical structure of the international system? The answer to these questions brings formidable implications for the way we perceive the future prospects of conflict, cooperation, and peace. Besides, this debate is also at the core of one of the research areas that has aroused widespread attention in the field of political sciences: democratization studies.

The first studies on democratization had a strong structuralist approach to the issue. The classical work of this perspective is Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (1966). In the book, the author explains the role that both lords and peasants had in the historical processes that led to three very different outcomes: democracy, fascism, and socialism. The author makes clear that one key factor that will bring democracy and permit its continuity over the long term is the existence of a strong bourgeois class: in those countries in which the bourgeois class was weak and there was a strong peasant class, the former was defeated and socialism was adopted, whereas in those countries in which there was a weak bourgeois class and a strong landed aristocracy, they formed an alliance that would end up in the rise of fascism. In this regard, Barrington Moore offered a somewhat deterministic explanation of democratization, in which certain types of class structures and social coalitions are key prerequisites for democracy from a structuralist perspective.

The overemphasis on the role of structures would be present in the traditional literature on democratization until the 1970s. In defense of this approach, it might be argued that an explanation of democratization that merely relies on the actions of political actors will have the obvious disadvantage of being overly voluntaristic, ignoring the obstacles that they might face, and overestimating the



degree of freedom of choice they have. As Karl Marx (2006 [1852]: 8) once said, “man makes his own history, but he does not make it out of the whole cloth; he does not make it out of conditions chosen by himself, but out of such as he finds close at hand”. Or in other words, a study of democratization that only focuses on political actors and overlooks the structural constraints they face will offer an incomplete analysis of the situation. However, the problem also arises when the perspective adopted by a given study is the opposite: focusing on the structure while ignoring the interests, influence, and willingness of political actors to push in favor of -or against- democratization. Academic publications that predicted the adoption of liberal democracy by China in the short term are a good example of it.

The most famous work on the inevitability of the adoption of liberal democracy and the free-market economy is Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), in the wake of the global context after the end of the Cold War in which both elements of the liberal international order seemed to be the only feasible path of development to bring progress to humankind. Three years before the publication of the book, Francis Fukuyama argued that “the century that began full of self-confidence in the ultimate triumph of Western liberal democracy seems at its close to be returning full circle to where it started: no to an “end of ideology” or a convergence between capitalism and socialism, as earlier predicted, but to an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism.” Besides, in light of the reform and opening-up policy implemented in China since 1978, he stated that “anyone familiar with the outlook and behavior of the new technocratic elite now governing China knows that Marxism and ideological principles have become virtually irrelevant as guides to policy, and that bourgeois consumerism has a real meaning in that country for the first time since the revolution” (1989: 3-11). However, these two statements were based on two assumptions that were proven wrong during the following years. The first one, the confidence in the impact of the structure of the international system in a given period of time<sup>1</sup> to shape non-liberal democratic regimes regardless of the willingness of their political leaders to maintain the status quo. The second one, the perception of China’s economic reform as a path that would eventually lead to the abandonment of its domestic ideological principles.

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<sup>1</sup> This period immediately following the end of the Cold War would be later called the “unipolar moment”, characterized by the unchallenged hegemonic leadership of the United States.

In fact, this last misperception has been recurrent in academic analyses focused on the reform process in China. It was often argued that the main difference between the reform in China and in other post-communist countries was its gradualist approach, contrary to the *shock therapy* that was applied in Russia, but assuming that they would eventually end up in the same outcome: the abandonment of the socialist model of development (Lin 2006: 18). However, Chinese leaders have always made public their commitment to the maintenance of socialism with Chinese characteristics, which obviously entails the preservation of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party under a one-party regime.

Besides the structuralist perspective of the adoption of democracy from the point of view of the international context, the one that establishes a causal relationship between economic growth and democratization has also aroused widespread attention in the past decades. According to this structuralist approach, economic growth entails the expansion of the middle class, which will eventually demand more political rights and pave the way to the adoption of liberal democracy. This perspective is not new. More than half a century ago, Seymour Martin Lipset linked economic development with democracy, stating that “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy” (1959: 75).

Since then, other scholars have taken economic development as an independent variable with a causal relationship with democratization. Indeed, it is possible to find recent academic publications that share this decades-long assumption. For example, Julian Wucherpfennig and Franziska Deutsch (2009) have supported Lipset’s core argument according to which economic development is conducive to the adoption of liberal democracy. Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel (2009) go even further, arguing that “modernization brings democracy”, and that therefore the rise of China and Russia should not be a matter of concern for liberal democratic countries. According to the authors, the economic modernization of both countries has unleashed dynamics in both countries to the point that “it is unlikely that they will fail to function in the long run”. This perspective was, indeed, the guiding principle of the United States’ engagement with China since Beijing opened up to the rest of the world: cooperate economically with China in order to make its society richer and, therefore, make the country, in both political and ideological terms, increasingly similar to liberal democratic nations. But the problem of this perspective lies in two aspects. First, it takes for granted that social demands for a more open society will exist. And second, it overlooks the willingness and the obstinacy of political

leaders to maintain the existing political regime regardless of the economic costs their decision might entail. As a consequence, and based on a -for now- wrong assumption, the US economic engagement with China has not turned this country into an entity more receptive to liberal and democratic ideas. On the contrary, it has turned richer and more powerful a country with very different political values, which is already undermining the international position of the United States and that might, in the medium a long term, pose a challenge to the ideological principles of the US-led liberal international order.

Contrary to structuralist approaches to democratization, it is increasingly clear that the role of political agents must be included in the analysis. The existence of previous democratic experiences, the strength of opposition forces, the willingness of the ruling elite to remain in power and the nature of the non-liberal democratic political regime, to mention a few, are variables that also deserve to be considered in democratization studies and that go well beyond the role of an existing structure, be it the economic development or the polarity of the international system. In this regard, one of the best-known works that take the agency of political actors into consideration is Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan's *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (1995). The book not only takes into consideration the preexistence of factors such as the rule of law, opposition forces and social, political, and economic pluralism. It also focuses on the different choices that political actors have depending on the nature of the non-liberal democratic political regime, given that some regimes such as the authoritarian and even the post-totalitarian ones are more conducive to democracy than others, such as totalitarian and sultanistic regimes.

In this regard, it can be argued that democratization is a matter of historic opportunity, in which political actors have agency to impact political outcomes. Or in other words, as Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi have famously stated, "the protagonists in the struggles for democracy could not and did not believe that the fate of their countries would be determined either by current levels of development or by the distant past. [...] democratization was an outcome of actions, not just of conditions" (1997: 176). In fact, they argue that economic development might help democratic regimes to survive, but that there is no causal relationship that links economic development with democratization. The implications of this argument are clear: economic development does not necessarily undermine non-liberal democratic regimes.

However, this is not to deny the influence of existing structures on the likelihood of the adoption of democracy. Development and modernization

matter, and they can eventually put non-liberal democratic leaders under pressure, forcing them to face deep social changes caused by economic growth. But these leaders also have agency, and therefore their willingness to resist those changes and maintain the existing regime should also come into the equation (Thompson, 2019: 8). In the case of China, political leaders after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 have managed to create two new sources of legitimacy, given that the revolutionary one was no longer sustainable. The first one is nationalism, turning China into a more powerful country that can make up for the century of humiliation (1839-1949). The second one is economic growth, making the Chinese people richer and therefore less willing to speak up against the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. This combination, together with political control, shows the aspirations of Chinese policy-makers of maintaining the existing political regime, to the point that China is nowadays a case of study that defies previous structuralist approaches to democratization.

#### GLOBALIZATION: THE TSUNAMI THAT ENDED UP AS A RIVER

Globalization can be aseptically described as a “planetary process involving increasing liquidity and growing multidirectional flows, as well as the structures they encounter and create” (Ritzer and Dean, 2019: 2). But in practice, it is a controversial element capable of arousing opposing reactions in political circles, and that is criticized by part of the Western social movements. Whereas some politicians highlight its capacity to foster economic growth and promote human interactions between individuals from different parts of the world, others argue that it might pose a threat to traditional ways of life and to the very existence of the nation-state, or from a different political approach, exacerbate global economic inequalities and become a tool for Western domination. These concerns have also been addressed by academic literature on globalization.

Perhaps the most well-known critical work on globalization is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s book *Empire* (2000). According to the authors, this process can be equated with a new global empire that reinforces the international domination of the West across all five continents. The transformations brought by globalization in economic and cultural aspects would spread Western exploitation in a different way from the capitalist and imperialist expansion of the previous centuries, given that it would pose a non-military and decentered challenge to crucial elements such as sovereignty and nation through the erosion of identities and the empowerment of transnational corporations. This vision, in fact, can be regarded as the evolution of Immanuel Wallerstein’s *World-System*

concept, which might be synthesized as “a multicultural territorial division of labor in which the production and exchange of basic goods and raw materials are necessary for the everyday life of its inhabitants” (Chase-Dunn and Grimes, 1995: 389). This system dominated the world economy between the 16th and the first half of the 20th century, consisting of some central regions that exchanged services and manufactured objects for cheap labor and raw materials produced in the colonies and peripheral regions. The wealth was accumulated in the center of the system, the Western metropolises, and was expropriated from the poor areas.

Besides, globalization has also been frequently depicted as a process intertwined with *Americanization*, which can be defined as “the import by non-Americans of products, images, technologies, practices, and behavior that are closely associated with America/Americans” (Ritzer and Dean, 2015: 457). This process is sometimes referred as *McDonaldization* too. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (1999) itself once argued that “globalization is really another name for the dominant role of the United States”. The sentence can be framed in the international context of that moment, in which the United States had emerged as the undisputed winner of the Cold War, becoming the sole hegemon of the new unipolar system. In such circumstances, the spread of its ideological and political values to the rest of the world seemed only a matter of time, which included the resort to military means to impose them in non-democratic Middle Eastern countries. An endeavor that eventually failed, because as John Mearsheimer (2018) has argued, universalistic ideologies such as liberalism and Marxism are generally defeated when confronted with the particularistic ideology of nationalism. However, this possibility had not yet been envisaged in the early 2000s, when there was a proliferation of analyses linking globalization to the expansion of the US way of life and the erosion of local cultural manifestations (Ritzer and Stillman 2003; Antonio and Bonanno 2000; Taylor 2000).

The depiction of globalization as a new empire, or as a tool to spread the ideological values of the United States to the rest of the world, could be equated to a tsunami that reinforces Western domination over the rest of the world and destroys the culture and idiosyncrasy of peripheral regions. However, with hindsight, at the time of writing this paper, we can clearly argue that those fears have not materialized. Quite the opposite has happened, in fact. Globalization has empowered emerging countries -especially in Asia- that were once considered as part of the periphery, and it has been far from being a tsunami that has wiped out their local culture.

June 25, 1950. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, commonly known as North Korea, invades its Southern counterpart, marking the beginning of a military conflict that would last for a period of three years and result in the death of five million people. The Korean War (1950-1953) represented the first conflict of the Cold War, and in that context, Japan went from being a defeated enemy with an uncertain future to a key actor in the maintenance of the international position of the United States in East Asia. The Asian country became a supplier to the US army during its military operations in Korea, beginning an economic recovery that would be later reinforced by its extensive cooperation with Washington and the *Yoshida doctrine*, which emphasized economic development and a low-profile foreign policy subordinated to the United States.

The Japanese economic miracle, marked by sustained economic growth from the end of World War II to the 1990s, had its own implications for the rest of East Asian and Southeast Asian countries. The region would experience a pattern of economic growth over the following decades brought by the so-called *flying geese paradigm*, coined by Japanese scholar Kaname Akamatsu (1962). This concept refers to the changing division of labor between neighboring economies that fosters their development through the delocalization of some parts of the production networks. An economy becomes less competitive in the production of low value-added products when wages increase, and then those economic processes "fly" like geese to other countries in the region. The first beneficiaries of this system would be the Four Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan), but once China opened up to the world in 1978, it managed to become the center of this paradigm, leading to a turning point in the global economy and in the field of international relations.

China's rise to the top of the international system would not have been possible without globalization and the offshoring of global production networks, which generated new economic opportunities in the country and improved the standard of living of the population, although at the price of increased social inequalities. Nowadays, China is a member of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, two institutions in which Western hegemony still persists, and its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), supported by the United States, earned it the position of world's exporting powerhouse. As a result of China's opening-up to the world and globalization, its GDP has grown from \$293 billion in 1978 to 11 trillion in 2019, a 40-fold increase (World Bank, 2019). Besides, China lifted 740 million rural dwellers out of poverty from 1978 to 2017, according to official statistics, a 94.4% drop (Xinhua, 2018).

Far from being a tool of Western domination, globalization has brought the rise of East Asia and the relative decline of the West: the center of the world's economy is no longer the Atlantic Ocean but the Pacific. This situation has materialized in the West in the form of industrial offshoring, company closures, and job losses. Not surprisingly, the protectionist candidate Donald Trump became the winner of the US 2016 Presidential Election after his victory in the Rust Belt, and political parties with similar ideological proposals have gained momentum in Europe over the last few years. This situation, along with the rise of antagonistic political forces, has led to an increase in social polarization and political instability throughout the West. Meanwhile, and even though the global North-South divide is still a source of inequality, China has managed to use globalization to its own advantage, and not only in economic terms. Far from having become a country dominated by the West because of its participation in the globalization process, China is already in the process of closing its military and technological gap with the United States and has begun to challenge the ideological principles of the US-led liberal international order that are incompatible with its domestic political regime, especially those related to the international promotion of democracy and the Western concept of human rights.

Globalization has not turned China into an entity dominated by the West. On the contrary, it has strengthened the Asian country. But has this been at the cost of yielding its own idiosyncrasies to Western cultural domination? This does not seem to be the case, either. In fact, this is a common feature shared by all countries that have been exposed to globalization: although they have incorporated new cultural elements, those elements have merged with local idiosyncrasies as part of a process of cultural blending.

Rather than a tsunami that destroys the traditions in its path, globalization is more like a stream that shapes the cultural orography around its course, giving rise to hybridization and mixing phenomena. The metaphor of globalization as a river was coined by Anna Tsing (2000: 327): "Imagine a creek cutting through a hillside. As the water rushes down, it carves rock and moves gravel; it deposits silt on slow turns; it switches courses and breaks earth dams after a sudden storm. As the creek flows, it makes and remakes its channels". In this regard, globalization combines with local environments and gives shape to global assemblages that are not the result of homogenization or clash between different cultures, but of hybridization. In the words of Stephen J. Collier and Aihwa Ong (2005: 4), these global assemblages "define new material, collective, and discursive relationships". Nowadays, China has the second most McDonald's

restaurants in the world with 3790 stores (Statista, 2021), but its products had to adapt to local preferences (for example, when it comes to spicy flavors) and ingratiate themselves with the mindset of the Chinese population, presenting the franchise as a Western restaurant chain for customers with an intermediate purchasing power. Meanwhile, the introduction of this foreign company in the country took place under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party with the aim to provide a culinary service to a society that perceives its products as exotic and that has not abandoned its cultural idiosyncrasies.

China's opening-up to the outside world and globalization has enabled the Chinese people to become more knowledgeable about foreign countries, as well as to travel to distant destinations and to have access to an increasing variety of Western cultural products. But paradoxically, sustained economic growth and the improvement of their quality of life have also increased their pride in belonging to an ever-stronger nation, leading even to the revival of old traditions that were long gone. For example, while the central government promotes as alternative non-Western values those Confucian ideas that were heavily criticized during the Maoist era, at the popular level, the so-called *Hanfu movement* has emerged, advocating for the revival of the pre-Qing clothing representative of the Han Chinese (Wu, 2019). Besides, globalization has proven to be a two-way process, increasing the dissemination of Chinese culture abroad. As a result, the number of foreign learners of the Chinese language exceeded 100 million in 2017, according to the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Chai and Wang, 2017). In short, everything seems to indicate that China has successfully navigated the waters of globalization.

## CONCLUSION

What does the Western response to Covid19 have in common with the US policy towards China over the past four decades, which placed a formidable competitor and rival at the top of the international system? The adoption of policies that have backfired because they were based on wrong assumptions. During the two months following the outbreak of Covid19 in Wuhan, Western governments were unable to adopt preventive measures to avoid the possible spread of the virus on their territory, despite the shocking images coming from that city. An unfounded sense of invulnerability combined with a lack of knowledge about the Chinese reality wreaked havoc in a static West. Whether political leaders in Europe and in the United States would have adopted different policies if they knew that economic legitimacy, which was so endangered by the



strict confinements applied in Hubei province, was an inseparable part of the Chinese political regime, is a counterfactual that unfortunately will be impossible to corroborate. But it does seem to indicate the extent to which the lack of awareness about a key country in the international political arena of an increasingly globalized world can have dire consequences on the very decision-making process. And as this paper has argued, wrong assumptions on China have gone well beyond political circles: the rise of China has also challenged some of the mainstream theories in the field of social and political sciences.

In the field of International Relations, Western engagement with China over the last decade has certified the relevance of ideas in the international behavior of states, an aspect that was overlooked by neorealism and liberalism, the two main paradigms of the discipline for decades. A “new thinking” on China seems to have emerged in the West, in which the Asian country is increasingly seen as a security concern. Besides, the heterogeneous relationship between European countries and China certifies the importance of domestic politics in international relations, which is often downplayed by neorealist scholars, whereas the negative turn in China’s relationship with the United States and some European countries indicates that states not only care about absolute gains, and that greater economic interdependence does not necessarily lead to more positive bilateral relations, as it is often assumed by the liberal paradigm.

The rise of China has also posed a formidable challenge to democratization theories, certifying the limited explanatory power of those studies based on structuralist and deterministic approaches that tend to overlook the agency of political actors. The adoption of liberal democracy has not been, for the time being, a historical inevitability, no matter how much it may be based on explanations that appeal to economic growth or the *zeitgeist*, a German expression that might be translated as “the spirit of the times” and that refers to the prevailing climate of opinion at a given time. Democratization occurs as a consequence not only of the structural conditions faced by political actors but also of the actions of those actors. Therefore, factors such as the strength of the opposition political forces and the willingness of the political elite to maintain the existing political regime should also be brought into the equation. This reality was overlooked by US policy-makers over the past four decades of engagement with China. While they believed that economic cooperation with China would make the growing middle class in the Asian country push in favor of liberal democracy, what they ended up achieving was to place at the top of the international system a country whose political regime has totally different

ideological values, and which is already undermining the international position of the United States and the liberal international order itself.

Finally, the impact of globalization on China has been far from being a tsunami that has wiped out its cultural idiosyncrasies or a tool of Western domination that has forced China to pass under the Caudine gallows of a new era of humiliation. On the contrary, its growing interconnection with the rest of the world has allowed China to increasingly close the gap with the United States in terms of economic, technological, and military power. And its culture has not faded in the process. In fact, China's opening-up to the rest of the world has been accompanied by the revival of Confucianism, presented by the local authorities as an alternative to Western values, and more recently, the revitalization of the Hanfu by younger generations.

In sum, the generic extrapolation of some theories in the field of social and political sciences does not always work, as the case of China has shown. The indispensable knowledge of these theories must necessarily be accompanied by an understanding of the local conditions of the country to be analyzed. In this regard, in an increasingly interconnected world, greater mutual understanding between the West and China is essential. Whether that will be possible, under the context of the deteriorating relationship between the two sides, remains to be seen.

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