

BOOK REVIEWS

The Cambridge Handbook of China and International Law by IGNACIO DE LA RASILLA AND CONGYAN CAI [Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2024, 610pp, ISBN: 978-1-316-51740-6, £150.00 (h/bk)]

The Cambridge Handbook of China and International Law offers a timely, comprehensive and insightful examination of China's evolving relationship with international law across a wide range of issues. Spanning 25 chapters and written by leading Chinese and Western scholars, this handbook provides an indispensable guide for understanding the nuances and complexities surrounding China's assimilation into, and increasingly proactive role in shaping, the contemporary international legal order.

At nearly 600 pages, the scope and depth of analysis is impressive. The work is structured into eight parts examining different dimensions of China's engagement with international law. It progresses logically from China's participation in international institutions and major foreign policy initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the concept of a 'community of shared future for mankind' (Parts I–III), to substantive areas like peace and security, human rights, the environment and economics (Parts IV–VII). The final part deals with international dispute settlement and territorial issues (Part VIII). While such a broad approach risks losing cohesion, the thematic structure provides helpful signposts for navigating the book's extensive contents. Read sequentially or selectively, one gains tremendous insights into the multifaceted ways in which China relates to international law across regimes, whether as a norm-taker, norm-upholder, norm-entrepreneur, or even norm-maker. Critically, the book moves beyond caricatures of China as either a status quo power or revisionist state, revealing a nuanced picture of how China strategically assimilates into, selectively adapts or attempts proactive reform of different aspects of international law in contextually contingent ways aligned with its national interests and shifting material capabilities.

Several cross-cutting themes stand out across the 25 chapters. One overarching theme is how China has substantially strengthened its international legal capacity, especially through selective adaptation and international institutional 'learning' (Zhao, Chapter 1, 15). Comparing China's initial revolutionary constitution under Mao to its contemporary one as a potential global power under Xi Jinping, Wang and Xiang discuss in detail how the latest 2018 amendments incorporate norms like the rule of law, human rights and sustainable development in progressive alignment with dominant international discourses (Chapter 4). As Xiao and Zhu argue (Chapter 9), such enhanced international legal engagement aligns with recent Party guidelines on utilizing international law to safeguard China's 'sovereignty, security and development interests' (86). These ideas are reinforced across

chapters examining China's evolving treaty practice (Shang and Shen, Chapter 7), human rights engagement (Dai, Chapter 13) and role in shaping international economic regimes including trade (Wang, Chapter 20), investment (Baetens and Zhang, Chapter 21) and intellectual property (Nie, Chapter 22). The overarching picture that emerges confirms Clark's view that 'in order to become a respected norm-maker, China must first be seen to be fully integrated as an appropriate norm-taker'.¹ Of course, being seen as fully assimilating into (Western-centric) international norms does not equate to wholehearted acceptance of such norms, as China's ongoing reservations towards human rights (Dai, Chapter 13) and absolute state immunity (Webster, Chapter 8) illustrate. Nonetheless, China's engagement across numerous substantive areas signifies a tremendous expansion of its international legal capacity, knowledge and networks, even if driven largely by national strategic interests.

A second prominent theme is China's growing confidence in projecting its own governance concepts and normative visions onto the international plane to enhance its international leadership legitimacy. Prime examples include constitutional incorporation and increasing diplomatic emphasis on the 'community of shared future for mankind' (de la Rasilla and Hao, Chapter 3) and the sprawling infrastructure and trade-focused BRI (Cai, Chapter 2). Although criticized respectively as attempts to legitimize authoritarian governance models and expand China's economic influence, both clearly aim to increase China's prestige and leadership credentials. As Kong and Guo argue, China's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and 'people-centric' mantra similarly sought to project global leadership in health governance (Chapter 14, 301). Across areas like climate change (Qin and Liu, Chapter 17), outer space governance (Vanhullebusch, Chapter 19) and international financial architecture (Gu, Chapter 23), Chinese experts and policymakers advocate alternative governance concepts and arrangements based on 'equality', 'inclusiveness' and meeting developing countries' interests. Whether such ideas gain traction depends on the battle of perception over China's benign or self-interested motives. Nonetheless, irrespective of credibility doubts, such initiatives exemplify China's growing ambition to shape international discourses and offer global public goods as a great power.

A third theme concerns the hovering paradox facing China between its self-identity as a leader of the developing world and its expanding interests as a rising superpower. This manifests, for instance, in principled objections to Western 'hegemonism' and selectivity on human rights (Dai, Chapter 13), whilst selectively targeting democratization protests in Hong Kong as 'foreign interference'. It features in continued appeals to 'common but differentiated responsibilities' on climate change (Qin and Liu, Chapter 17) whilst becoming the world's largest carbon emitter. And it underpins rhetoric about

¹ I Clark, 'International Society and China: The Power of Norms and the Norms of Power' (2014) 7 *ChineseJIntlPol* 315.

democratizing global economic governance (Gu, Chapter 23) while concentrating state control over banking, technology and private enterprises. As Zhu notes (Chapter 12), such dual developing/superpower identity bestows certain advantages internationally but also raises credibility problems over China's true motives and interests. Whether China can continue straddling this divide amidst deteriorating relations with the West represents an open question requiring nuanced analysis of China's regime-specific international legal practices.

However, the book also has its limitations. Although scope and depth are strengths, divisive organization into eight distinct parts constrains conveying deeper interlinkages between issue areas fundamental for appreciating the systemic complexity of China's relationship with international law. The discussion in certain parts of the book, like those on human rights, the environment and economics, could have engaged more deeply with obvious connections like environmental rights, climate justice, intellectual property and access to medicines. Greater efforts to link back to overarching themes like the BRI, 'community of shared future for mankind' or constitutional developments may have provided analytical glue reinforcing the coherence of China's international legal strategy. Moreover, more reflexive attention to implicit assumptions underpinning 'Western' and 'Chinese' perspectives could have further enriched the comparative analysis, although most chapters do successfully avoid overt partisanship. Similarly, while contributing author expertise provides diverse perspectives, the predominance of Chinese authors risks replicating assumptions about 'the China School' of international law. Broadening authorship to scholars from the Global South may have brought additional comparative insights and mitigated this danger.

In conclusion, through its comprehensive scope yet nuanced analysis, *The Cambridge Handbook of China and International Law* represents essential reading for anyone interested in unpacking different dimensions of China's complex modern relationship with international law. It moves far beyond simplified narratives about China as a unitary actor, revealing sophisticated regime-specific assessments of China acting as a norm-taker, norm-entrepreneur and norm-maker conditioned by relative power, strategic interests and evolving identities. While questions remain concerning interconnections across issue silos, the authoritativeness of 'the China perspective', and the implications of growing great power competition, the *Handbook* undeniably establishes itself as a vital reference on China's legal practices that will inform scholarship and policy discussions for years. Both editors and contributors should be congratulated for delivering a modern classic that will help shape future conversations about China's role under international law.

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