

## Introduction

Is China part of the world? Based on much of the political, media, and popular discourse in the West the answer is seemingly no. Even after four decades of integration into the global socio-economic system, becoming the ‘world’s factory’ and second largest economy, most discussions of China continue to be underpinned and bounded by a core assumption – that the country represents a fundamentally different ‘Other’ that somehow exists apart from the ‘real’ world. Either implicitly or explicitly, China is often depicted as something that can be understood in isolation – an external force with the potential to impact the ‘normal’ functioning of things. This holds true for those who look at China from the outside and those who experience it from the inside, as ‘Othered’ representations of China are also common in Chinese official and unofficial discourses.

Both in China and the West – and across much of the Global South – this underlying assumption of China’s inherent separation and difference, and its status as an external agent of change, cuts across political and ideological spectrums. It frames positive, negative, and ambivalent discussions about the country, particularly in relation to the increasing presence and entanglement of Chinese entities in the global socio-economic and geopolitical systems. Leaving aside the monumental question of Chinese exceptionalism as seen from within China, this Element focusses on heated international debates around some of the key issues of our present moment – that is, labour rights, digital surveillance, mass internment in Xinjiang, investment overseas, and the erosion of academic freedom. Through an examination of these five topics, we seek to recast the implicit core assumption of China as an external ‘Other’ that underpins so much analysis of contemporary China and provide a methodological roadmap for understanding China not as a discrete unit but as part and parcel of the contemporary global capitalist system.

## Three Frames

So how is China ‘Othered’ and externalised in international political, media, and popular discourses and debates today? Three competing frames employed by ideologically distinct camps and with seemingly divergent analyses – but crucially rooted in the same core assumption of China as a separate ‘Other’ – currently hold sway. The first one is usually referred to as ‘exceptionalism’ but we would rather call it ‘essentialism’ to shift attention to how these discourses often put the emphasis on some innate ‘essential’ characteristics of ‘China’ and ‘the Chinese’. In relation to Western debates, we use this term to refer to those perspectives that dismiss any attempt to find similarities between dynamics in

China and elsewhere. This form of argumentation tends to emphasise the set of attributes specific to a certain context as its defining elements, a line of reasoning reminiscent of the debates over China's 'national character' (国民性) that raged in China and the West a century ago and which remain eerily in vogue today – one just has to think about how Arthur H. Smith's infamous 1890 'treatise' *Chinese Characteristics*, a scathing racist indictment of China and its people once admired by revolutionary Chinese intellectuals such as Lu Xun, continues to be read today (even in China, where the book earns a surprisingly high score on the social media platform Douban). While in the past similar discussions revolved around issues of race, today's essentialist arguments mostly centre around the idea that authoritarian China cannot be compared with liberal democratic countries because they represent fundamentally different political systems – and any suggestion that there may be commonalities or overlaps is immediately and vociferously denounced as whataboutism and moral relativism.

Essentialism produces a myopic outlook and often manifests as self-righteous outrage at any suggestion that there might be more to the picture than what immediately meets the eye. From this perspective, there can be no linkages, seepages, or parallels between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes. China must be analysed in isolation and any analysis must identify the authoritarianism of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the only constant underpinning all problems. If outside actors are involved, such as foreign governments, multinational companies, or universities, their participation is perceived as the result of their corruption at the hands of the CCP rather than a reflection of wider systemic issues – hence, for instance, the widespread surprise when it was revealed that former US President Donald Trump expressed support for re-education camps in Xinjiang (Thomas, 2020). At their most extreme, these essentialising views insinuate that those seeking to identify convergences between China and elsewhere are apologists, useful idiots who unwittingly reproduce authoritarian talking points, or active agents undermining democracy in the service of authoritarian regimes.

The second approach is based on the age-old idea of 'changing' China. Its core assumption is that the more 'we' engage with China, the more the country is included in international systems and institutions, the more it will assimilate, which will hasten its inevitable transition to a free-market liberal democracy. We call it a 'maieutic' approach, in that it resembles the Socratic idea of dialogue as a way to challenge established ideas to lead to the refinement of the views and practices of an interlocutor. As such, it is an inherently moralistic view of China as an externalised 'Other' that is in need of reformation and integration.

This frame was perhaps dominant in the 1990s and 2000s, the golden age of neoliberalism and the ‘end of history’, but has been dealt a huge blow by the developments in Chinese domestic and foreign policy during the Xi Jinping administration (2013–). The crackdowns on Chinese human rights lawyers and activists linked to international civil society, the mass detention of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, the repression of the Hong Kong movement, the rise of so-called ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomacy, and the willingness of the Chinese authorities to arbitrarily detain foreign citizens on spurious charges in order to use them as pawns on the international stage have undermined the argument that engagement will lead towards a more liberal democratic future for China.

As it has become more and more apparent that the likelihood of China transitioning into this perceived ‘normal’ member of the global community is low, some of those who previously subscribed to the maieutic approach have become disillusioned, adopting more essentialist views. This shift is generally expressed through a growing concern over how China is ‘corroding’ international institutions and norms and placing part of the blame on those actors (companies, universities, institutions, individuals) that are seen as complicit. In these cases, the moralism inherent in maieuticism is reconfigured and redirected – with China transitioning from the role of willing student to corrupting influence. But the inherent othering of the country remains intact.

The third frame – which we can term ‘whataboutism’ – refers to the dismissal of any criticism of China (and not only China) as hypocritical. An instance of this perspective could be seen in 2020 when, as protests against police brutality and racism erupted in American cities, social media platforms were awash with voices pointing out the hypocrisy of the US government in condemning the actions of the Chinese authorities in Hong Kong. Unable to control social unrest at home, what right do US politicians have to comment on what is going on in the former British colony? Similarly, in stigmatising the mass incarcerations of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, how could they ignore their own moral bankruptcy, made evident by the grim situation of the US prison system, the mass detention on the country’s southern border, and the disasters unleashed by the global War on Terror? Conversely, how can anyone connected to the Chinese state (even loosely) dare to comment on the protests in the United States or the plight of immigrants in detention centres, considering the situations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang? These whataboutist arguments inherently frame what is happening in the United States (or any other Western country) and China as inherently separate and unconnected in any way – two sides of an equation that ultimately cancel each other out.

Whataboutism is such a common feature of the current debate that, in a recent op-ed, US-based Chinese human rights lawyer Teng Biao (2020) argued that constant comparisons between China and the United States have now become a ‘virus’ (病毒). Making a compelling case for how meaningless equivalencies have contributed to poisoning the debate, Teng highlights two types of questionable comparison: the first one is shallow congruences that do not extend beyond the surface level; the second is ‘whataboutism’ (比烂主义) proper. As Teng puts it: ‘You say that corruption in China is serious, they say that the United States is the same; you say that China is culturally annihilating Uyghurs and Tibetans, they say that the United States also massacred the Native Americans and enslaved black people; you say China carries out extraterritorial kidnappings, they say that the United States attacked Iraq.’

While nothing prevents these criticisms levelled at China and the United States from being concurrently accurate – indeed, both are true but one does not excuse the other – Teng is correct in his grim assessment that the current China debate is mired in superficial comparisons, false equivalencies, and whataboutist argumentation. This is highly problematic for at least two reasons. First, whataboutism fosters apathy: if any form of criticism is just seen as hypocrisy, then what is the point of critical analysis? When does one become qualified to criticise? Second, it blinds by obscuring basic similarities and interconnections, muddying the waters and making it difficult to identify actual commonalities that extend beyond national borders and are inherent to the organisation of the global economy in our current stage of late capitalism. Whether whataboutism finds fertile ground simply owing to helpless narrow-mindedness or is an act of purposeful misrepresentation, the result is the same: whataboutist argumentation breeds myopic passivity, with the focus being placed on the detail rather than the broader picture. This not only makes meaningful discussion difficult but also impairs our ability to undertake effective political action.

### Global China as Method

While the three frames outlined above are obviously ideal types, and in reality the boundaries between discourses are rarely that clear-cut, they generally coincide with starkly different political ideologies and thus come to divergent analyses of China. An essentialist framework is particularly common among those on the Right who perceive China as an existential (communist and authoritarian) threat to global capitalism and Western democracy that must be forcibly subordinated and integrated. Whataboutism is largely the domain of a growing segment of the Left, disillusioned with electoral defeats in liberal democracies (in particular, in the United States and United Kingdom), who are

embracing romantic ideas of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as representing a form of 'actually existing socialism' with the potential to challenge global capitalism and legacies of imperialist colonial extraction. The maieutic framework is more common among liberal voices who see China as an authoritarian force – fundamentally distinct from, and incomparable to, Western democracies – that needs to be further engaged with and coaxed more fully into the institutionalised international order (including both 'free-market' global capitalism and global governance institutions) for it to become a 'normal' liberal democratic country.

Regardless of the different political stances, these views share one core assumption: that of China as an externalised, separate, and self-contained 'Other'. As we mentioned above, this premise serves to obscure rather than enlighten, and ultimately produces a distorted image of both China and the world. Still, it is important to acknowledge that all these frames contain within them elements of truth – which is part of the reason why they are attractive for so many. It is undeniable that China, just like any other place, has its own historical, social, cultural, economic, and political 'characteristics'. As such, understanding Chinese dynamics requires a certain level of particularism and any analysis that is not historicised and contextualised will unavoidably be superficial and misleading. At the same time, however, China is obviously part of the world and therefore shapes and is shaped by broader dynamics. Owing to this very embeddedness, there are valid debates to be had about ways of engaging with China that might help to put an end to certain abuses within the country, as well as Chinese participation in deleterious global trends.

The problem is that, if taken to the extreme and in isolation (as they often are), these positions lead to the toxic state of the discussion on China we are facing today, characterised by endless shouting, utter lack of communication, and a sense of despair due to the perception that we cannot even agree on the basic terms of the debate. Indeed, when we first tried to propose this argument, one of the criticisms we received was that there is no such a thing as a 'China debate' today: you either choose to stand up to the Chinese Party-State, or you are complicit in its atrocities (an assertion that is reversed in whataboutist discourse). In other words, the debate today is increasingly dominated by people demanding to know if you are with us or against us – a situation that is obviously incompatible with critical inquiry and understanding.

In this Element, we attempt to overcome the limitations of these frames by arguing that China does not exist in a vacuum or outside of the world. We follow Mizoguchi Yūzō's ([1989]2016) call to 'take China as method' by moving beyond an analysis of China that renders the country a flat caricature merely serving to reflect the ambitions and insecurities of those analysing it – a

widespread phenomenon that he described as a ‘reading of China without China’. In his words: ‘A world that takes China as method would be a world in which China is a constitutive element’ (p. 516). However, we propose taking this idea a step further. Rather than merely recognising China’s existence as a component in the world in its own right, we highlight the importance of perceiving China as intimately entangled with global histories, processes, phenomena, and trends. In other words, China should not be seen as a discrete unit that can be understood in isolation. As such, we argue that understanding Chinese–global entanglements requires a fundamentally relational perspective, which moves away from a vision of the social world as comprised of static ‘things’ and conceptualises ‘social reality instead in dynamic, continuous, and processual terms’ (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 281).

In this way, this Element seeks to provide a framework for understanding the many manifestations of China in the world as resulting from material and discursive parallels and linkages, and embodying continuities and evolutions, as Chinese dynamics interact with and build on the historical legacies of the dynamic global capitalist system. Only by reconceptualising China as inextricably part of the world can we begin to understand what Chinese developments, both domestic and international, actually mean for people around the globe and present a more accurate depiction of the implications of China’s rise on the global stage. In this, we aspire to follow in the footsteps of the late Arif Dirlik (2017, p. 1), who in his final book put forward two premises in which to anchor discussions of China today: first, the integration of the PRC into global capitalism over the last two decades requires criticism directed at it also to attend to the structure of the system of which it is a part; second, given the economic, socio-political, and cultural entanglements of global capitalism, criticism must account for outsiders’ complicities – both materially and ideologically – in the PRC’s failures as well as successes. While recent years have seen considerable debate over whether or not the Chinese socio-economic system operates according to the rules of capitalism, the point of this Element is not to argue for or against the idea that China should be narrowly defined as a capitalist country but rather to show how China is not an alternative to but rather an integral part of a global system that today works according to capitalist dynamics. If we do not identify and map these critical linkages and connections, our analysis will fail to illuminate and our criticism of, and struggles against, the overlapping forms of brutality characterising contemporary China and global capitalism will lose strength.

As such, we propose ‘Global China’ as an alternative analytical framework and methodological approach for discussing China today – that is, adopting a set of framings that interpret issues related to China’s society and domestic and

foreign policy in relation to broader trends and the underlying dynamics inherent to the stage of late capitalism we find ourselves in. While the idea of a ‘global China’ (lower case) is nothing new – one could easily argue that China has always been ‘global’, even at the height of the Mao era when the country was perceived as increasingly secluded from the rest of the world – here we refer to ‘Global China’ (upper case) as a broader theoretical approach to the country, its position in the world, and its international engagements. In doing this, we draw from Ching Kwan Lee’s ethnography of Chinese investment in Zambia, in which she argues for the need to ‘[push] the empirical boundary of China studies beyond China’s territorial borders’ (Lee, 2017, p. xiv). Lee has arguably done more than anyone else to give the concept of Global China a rigorous theoretical underpinning and popularise the term. In her words:

China casts an outsize shadow on many different arenas of world development, challenging the field of China studies to abandon its methodological nationalism so as to catch up with China’s transformation into a global force. Global China is taking myriad forms, ranging from foreign direct investment, labor export, and multilateral financial institutions for building cross-regional infrastructure to the globalization of Chinese civil society organizations, creation of global media networks, and global joint ventures in higher education, to name just a few examples. As many of these strands of outward development have originated from pressures and interests at home, the consequences of these external engagements are bound to have boomerang impacts on the home front, whether on regime stability, civil society growth, or national economic restructuring. Studying global China means reimagining China beyond China, connecting, contextualizing, and comparing ‘Chinese’ development with that in other parts of the world. (Lee, 2017, p. xiv)

In this way, Lee prompts us both to reorient our attention to China’s global nature and to examine the implications of Chinese globalisation for domestic developments, thus connecting two domains that have largely been treated as separate. Our modest proposal is to expand this perspective by consciously and deliberately situating China globally, highlighting how issues that are often read as specifically ‘Chinese’ are in fact the result of complex dynamics and interlinkages that not only go beyond the Chinese borders but also necessitate a perspective that illuminates both China in the world and the world in China. As such, we follow in the footsteps of other scholars who have previously discussed issues related to the co-construction of ‘China’ as an imagined entity (see, for instance, Lee, 2018), have traced possible paths forward to go beyond the emphasis on the local that is typical of Area Studies (see, for example, the essays included in Nyíri and Breidenbach, 2013), or have pointed out the intricate entanglements and complex interdependencies between China and



the global economy (Weber, 2020 and 2021), to argue that issues of Chinese domestic politics, economics, and social change should not be interpreted as separate from socio-economic and political developments globally. In our opinion, it is not enough to just say, as many have done, that Chinese domestic developments are now so consequential that they have important reverberations on the global stage – rather, domestic China should be read as an integral part of the broader global capitalist system and interpreted in this light. In other words, only by understanding China can one understand global capitalism and only by understanding global capitalism can one understand China – a fact which requires a significant conceptual and methodological reorientation.

### Structure of the Element

This Element seeks to provide a roadmap for this reorientation by illuminating the ways in which the country and its people are intimately enmeshed in the global capitalist system. As we mentioned before, this is accomplished by examining the entanglements that characterise five key issues which frequently arise in current discussions about China: labour rights, digital surveillance and the social credit system, the mass detention of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Chinese investment overseas, and academic freedom.

In the first section, we examine the issue of the Chinese labour regime since the country positioned itself as the new ‘world factory’ in the 1990s. The section challenges the competing narratives of those claiming that Chinese labour exploitation has prompted a global ‘race to the bottom’ and those who take the CCP’s pro-labour rhetoric at face value, instead arguing that the configuration of Chinese labour has both shaped and been shaped by intensive engagement with global capitalism. In the second section, we examine Chinese surveillance technologies through the lens of the emerging social credit system, arguing that rather than representing a uniquely Chinese form of digital dystopianism, social credit is rooted in, and contributing to, a global trajectory of rapidly expanding algorithmic governance and surveillance capitalism. In the third section, we examine the mass detentions in Xinjiang, outlining the discursive and material linkages with the US-led War on Terror and the role of multinational corporations and educational institutions in facilitating these disturbing developments. In the fourth section, we turn to the BRI and overseas investment, looking at how Chinese initiatives often build on projects, ideas, and modes of operation put forward previously by Western actors and how new Chinese institutions can be seen as attempts to first emulate and then adapt established models. Finally, in the fifth section, we zoom in on academia, which



has become a site of contention in debates over China's perceived influence abroad, outlining how the neoliberalisation of the university has opened up the possibility for outside actors (including Chinese ones) to threaten the fundamental principles of academic freedom.

It is our belief that, when discussing China, it is now more important than ever to strive to identify meaningful commonalities and interconnections underpinning dynamics at both discursive and material levels. If nothing else, that is where we can still hope to find some power to act. While the situations discussed in this Element present us with instances of entanglements that are frequently obscured in current debates on Chinese globalisation, these examples are also part of an extremely grim broader picture. Around the world we are seeing some seriously disturbing trends – a general authoritarian shift, the development of repressive technologies, and the further normalisation of mass detention regimes. As easy as it is to lay the blame for all this on China – and as undeniable as it is that Chinese actors are playing an important role in all this – these trends are not emanating solely from one country. Rather, the case of China is just one dramatic manifestation of interlinked, global phenomena – phenomena that are, in turn, shaped by broader forces. For this reason, we need to go beyond essentialist, whataboutist, and maieutic approaches and carefully document (and denounce) China's role in facilitating this dark turn, while also highlighting the ways in which Chinese developments link up with events elsewhere.

## 1 Chinese Labour in a Global Perspective

Labour has played an important role in defining China's global image over the past century. As early as 1919, the first conference of the International Labor Organization (ILO) recommended that the Chinese authorities adopt a social legislation, a request motivated more by the desire to protect Western workers from the 'unfair' competition from China's massive low-cost workforce than by genuine humanitarian concerns (Van Der Sprenkel, 1983). Although the internal strife of the Republican era, the Japanese invasion, and the autarchic policies of the Maoist era somewhat allayed these apprehensions, similar concerns re-emerged in force in the 1980s and 1990s, as China embarked on its path of economic reforms. It was then that the figure of the 'Chinese worker' made its way back to the international scene, through narratives that depicted them either as a victim of horrific exploitation or as a fearsome competitor who, with their willingness to work for next to nothing and accept any sort of abuse, was challenging the job security of their Western counterparts. In particular, it is often noted how China's economic growth in the reform era has been made possible by the exploitation of a vast surplus of rural workers freed by the land

reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Siu, 2020). As these workers migrated to urban centres and fuelled the booming private sector, their plight – long work hours, low wages, lack of access to essential public services due to the systemic discrimination of the household registration system, and awful workplace safety and health conditions – came to represent the flip side of the country’s economic miracle, shaping China’s negative reputation as a ‘world factory’ founded on the extraction of surplus value from an exploited workforce (Chan, 2001).

The plight of Chinese labour assumed even more global relevance as China entered the World Trade Organization in 2001. In the developed world, this event led to uncountable recriminations by trade unionists and policymakers about how China’s ‘social dumping’ was undermining the well-being of workers in their countries; in the Global South, China was widely blamed for fuelling a ‘race to the bottom’ in labour standards, as governments chose to stay ahead of Chinese competition by promising prospective investors ever more favourable conditions (Chan, 2003). However, these perspectives do not always do justice to the complexity of the phenomena that were taking place at that time. On the one hand, they tend to overlook the fact that China inserted itself in an international context in which workers’ rights and labour conditions were already being undermined by the global turn to neoliberalism and the collapse of the communist experiments. On the other, they often neglect to mention how, while China’s entrance into the global capitalist system did indeed significantly change the dynamics of international competition with momentous implications for workers all over the world, China itself was forced to change and adapt in this process. It is this last aspect that this section examines, first by looking into the international pressures that the Chinese Party-State has had to face in its lawmaking efforts in the field of the labour law, then by highlighting the foreign connections of Chinese grass-roots labour organisations, and finally by discussing how some of the latest trends in labour activism in China should be read in a broader context of political desperation over the present and future of labour.

### China’s Labour Law

The narrative that portrays the Chinese authorities as wilfully suppressing the rights of its workers in order to gain competitive advantage in international markets has merit when it comes to the earliest stages of China’s reforms, but if we take a closer look at the Party-State’s policymaking efforts in the field of labour rights over the past two decades a more complex picture emerges. The most notable discovery is that – contrary to the popular discourse of the Chinese workplace as a ruthless arena where the law of the jungle prevails – the Chinese