

CHALLENGING THE PREDOMINANT MODES OF THOUGHT: SOCIAL STATES

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Iain Johnston, Alastair. *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. 273 pages. ISBN: 978-0691134536.

International Relations students have all taken at least one course on the core theories of IR, such as realism, liberalism and constructivism, which teach them how to make sense of a chaotic world. A basic course gives students an understanding of the original theories' origins and their implications for war and peace. Upon closer reading of these theories, diligent students may notice that there are theoretical drawbacks to the myriad books that expound upon the manifold theories and ask themselves: how is this book different and why should I read it?

At the Department of Government in Harvard, Alastair Iain Johnston has written extensively about China's foreign policy. In his new work, Johnston's book *Social States*, presents a refreshing alternative perspective to students interested in China and its involvement in international security institutions. The dominant literature has tended to focus on the US-China bilateral relationship through a realist or liberal lens. However, Johnston takes a novel approach that may yield some new insight on how China interacts within international security institutions through the lens of socialization, a constructivist theory.

First, very few books or journal articles go beyond conventional methods of explaining Chinese foreign policy behavior. Academics and political pundits tend to focus on China's growing military forces or dominance in economics. Most analysis tends to focus on macro-aggregate indicators that show which states have more power than the other. Johnston takes the issue of

China's international behavior and tests it to find the underlying causes of cooperation. Specifically, his research looks at socialization and the micro-processes that may operate to induce cooperative behavior in international institutions. He outlines these as mimicking, persuasion and social influence.

Second, Johnston outlines why he chose China. By all accounts, China is a relative novice in international institutions and has a realpolitik orientation inherited from the Mao era. His research focuses from the 1980s to 2000s. His main question revolves around the motivations behind China's willingness to cooperate on security issues that affect its relative security – a quintessential realist look at things. Also, from a contractual institutionalist perspective¹, Johnston looks for instances where side payments or sanctions were used to induce Chinese compliance. This is important because China is operating in an era of unipolarity and US military predominance. Through careful work, Johnston demonstrates the theoretical drawbacks to realism and contractual institutionalism.

In order to flesh out a new perspective on China's behavior, Johnston dives head first into a critique of the conventional realist or contractual intuitionist approach by highlighting by demonstrating the superior explanatory power of the social psychological and sociological institutionalist approach towards understanding micro-processes that operate on the agent level of analysis. Johnston demonstrates why these micro-processes are important. He underlines how agents operate in complex environments that shape their perceptions of a certain group and create pressures inside said environments to conform to group behavior. The research utilizes much background from social psychology and sociological institutionalism to demonstrate Johnston's claims.

The cases cited in which China decided to join an international institution are the UN Conference on Disarmament, Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), Convention on Conventional Weapons and the Association of South-east Asian Nations Regional Forum (ARF). Johnston does mention there are cases in which side payments (contractualist) were offered, but these are unimportant to socialization; instead why China joined is the bigger question and the subsequent micro-processes that occurred, will enable students to understand which conditions may lead to cooperation that do not required side-payments

¹ Contractual institutionalists assume that preferences, interests and ideology are fixed in international institutions. They are not concerned with social interaction specifically, but focus on pro-group behavior and issue-linkages. Moreover, they view social interaction as having little impact on actors.



or threats. Johnston also mentions cases that may disprove his theory that discusses China's refusal to sign the Ottawa Treaty and its refusal over human rights condemnation.

Johnston's evidence stems largely from interviews with government officials in China, the US and Canada. Interviews were conducted from 1996-2001, and were all anonymous. Thus, this may lead the reader to question how Chinese thinking has changed since the time of his interviews and what sort of impact that might have in international institutions. Johnston does admit that this type of research is difficult, especially due to the high levels of secrecy that surround Chinese security policy.

As *Social States* is written from an international security-institutions perspective, Johnston's theory can prove interesting when applied to North Korea, particularly regarding China's behavior within the Six Party Talks framework. The difficulty in this, though, is collecting the necessary evidence to support Johnston's claim that the three micro-processes caused a change in agent behavior which led to a change in China's international behavior. Much of the argument in Johnston's book focuses on the Chinese side being socialized, but no attention is paid to other participants. After interacting with other parties, how other actors are socialized and the sort of reaction or interpretation created is left unaddressed. In his defense, Johnston outlines why his research is important and why his approach may offer greater understanding of cooperation.

In sum, Johnston's *Social States* remains an important contribution to the field of international relations theory regarding Chinese foreign policy behavior and international security institutions from an alternative theoretical perspective. This book represents a good springboard from which students can begin to challenge predominant thinking. **PEAR**

