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**China and Socialist Countries:
Role Change and Role Continuity**

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China and Socialist Countries: Role Change and Role Continuity

Abstract

This paper analyses changes in China's relations with socialist countries. It uses Chinese academic publications to add an inside-out perspective to the interpretation of Chinese foreign policy and outlines key socio-cognitive determinants of China's foreign behaviour. The paper starts with an overview of role theory, integrating Chinese scholars' writings on images of ego and alter to identify the main patterns and frames of China's self-proclaimed national role(s). It argues that China's actor identity comprises various, partly contradictory role conceptions. National roles derived from China's internal structures and its historical past lead to continuity in Chinese foreign policy, while the 'new' roles resultant from China's rise to global powerhood require it to adapt its foreign policy principles. The paper then examines four bilateral relationships – between China and Cuba, North Korea, the Soviet Union/Russia, and Vietnam – and discusses their development over time in light of China's reformulation of its 'socialist' role conception.

Keywords: China, Chinese foreign policy, national identity, role theory, socialism

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Nele Noesselt

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1 Introduction¹

Since the decisions on reform and opening in 1978, China's economic system has undergone a steady transformation from a centrally planned economy to a hybrid system that integrates elements of both plan and market. Furthermore, China has rejoined the international community and become an active player in multilateral fora and international institutions. Given China's domestic restructuring and its new position in world politics, one might be tempted to conclude that the country's new status has also caused the reformulation of its foreign policy and of the national role conceptions lying behind the decision-making processes therein. The international academic and policy debate already operates on the premise of an 'assertive' China, and has thus elaborated appropriate measures to cope with China's new role –

1 This paper was completed in March 2014.

based on the assumption that a role change has indeed already taken place. However, if the roles that external observers ascribe to China are not the ones that in reality determine Chinese foreign policy, the scenarios discussed might actually be leading to oversimplifications and even misinterpretations.

Chinese international relations (IR) scholars are currently engaged in rewriting and updating the country's international relations strategy. They also continue to debate the role that China should play in the future, and to critically evaluate the roles of other relevant actors. In order to come to a more nuanced understanding of the motivations and drivers of Chinese foreign policy, one thus also has to include in the analysis the debates within China's epistemic communities on ego and alter roles. Meanwhile, one also has to keep in mind that China's national ego roles consist of multiple subsets that can, at least in this particular case, combine elements dating from different time periods in the country's long history. As the symbolic continuation of the past ('using the past as a mirror') is a basic pillar of the party-state's legitimation strategy, there has so far not been any major role change at any point in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) history. However, given the side effects and spillovers of China's economic reforms – that is, the rise of the PRC from a passive bystander to one of the world's new gravitational centres – one might expect that the future will bring a further redefinition of certain subsets within China's role conceptions.

Among these subsets, China's self-imagination as a 'socialist' actor is the one that most obviously no longer fits given its new role as an international (capitalist) economic power. The key puzzle addressed in this paper is thus how China's socialist identity is, if at all, being reconfigured. Is the rise of a 'socialist' power to the level of a major player in the global capitalist system possible without the replacement of socialist role frames? Or is China managing to redefine its socialist role to make it compatible with the other role schemes it adheres to?

The following analysis is divided into three parts: The first develops a theoretical framework that outlines the key assumptions of role theory and combines these with theoretical reflections on China's national role from publications by Chinese political scientists. The second part sheds light on the official conceptualization of China's 'socialist' role by analysing the ego and alter roles of China and other socialist states (Soviet Union, North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam) outlined in Chinese academic publications. The conclusion summarizes the paper's findings and discusses what function a redefined socialism serves in Chinese (foreign) policy.

2 Analytical Framework

2.1 *National Role Conceptions, Legitimacy, and Identity*

The term 'national role conceptions' (Harnisch 2001; Harnisch 2011; Holsti 1970; Walker 1987; Wish 1980; Thies 2012) refers to the imaginations of ego and alter that underlie a state's cho-

sen behaviour in the international arena. With regard to foreign policy, reflections on ego and alter roles guide and determine political actions (Holsti 1970; Le Prestre 1997: 5) and justify political decisions ex post (Wang, Hongying 2005: 89–90). Role conceptions include certain obligations and patterns of behaviour that have to be adhered to in order to avoid a schism between a state's projected and enacted roles, which might damage its international reputation and also result in a loss of legitimacy in the eyes of domestic actors. National role conceptions are thus directly linked to the two key issues of legitimacy and identity.

The legitimacy dimension of national role conceptions implies that states – in order to secure people's support and commitment – can only enact roles that are compatible with the dominant value patterns and beliefs of the domestic populace (Beetham 1991: 11; Stillman 1974: 39).² To justify and consolidate its position, a government has two options: it can try to configure its policies and roles according to the official normative consensus, or it can start to actively prescribe new norms and values compatible with and favourable to its own role conceptions.

The governance strategy of the Chinese party-state mainly relies on the output dimension of legitimacy. The leadership seeks to guarantee social and political stability, to safeguard territorial integrity, and to maintain a stable economic growth rate. However, this one-dimensional construction of legitimacy is rather fragile, as any downturn in economic growth or sociopolitical destabilization could easily result in a full-blown systemic crisis. Consequently, China's political elites have recently turned back to the symbolic dimension of legitimacy, which includes ideational elements. In addition to 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm 1983) in the form of selected concepts excavated and reconfigured from ancient Chinese state philosophy, historical narratives are also used to construct a common frame of reference for a modern Chinese identity.

As these historiographical underpinnings of China's identity as a modern nation state highlight continuity and present the PRC's history as path dependent, the official role set combines a plurality of frames dating from different developmental stages in the country's history. China's self-image as a modern nation state dates back to the Opium Wars, when the Chinese Empire was forced to transform itself from being 'all under heaven' (*tianxia*) to being one state (*guojia*) in the Western-centred Westphalian system (Levenson 1968). In response to China's humiliation during the Opium Wars, Chinese intellectuals engaged in a heated debate about China's national identity and its role in the international system during the last decades of the nineteenth century. China's current quest for a new position in the rapidly developing global system shows many parallels to these debates (Noesselt 2013). Over the last three decades China has transformed from an observer on the edge of international politics to a central player in world affairs. This, again, has required China to upgrade its 'old'

2 Beetham does not work with national role conceptions, but rather develops some abstract definitions of legitimacy that are grounded in shared norms and values. Nonetheless, these definitions fit quite well into the legitimacy puzzle vis-à-vis national role-making outlined above.

role conceptions. As Beylerian and Canivet have argued, changes in China's national role conceptions have not occurred as a radical distancing from the past but rather through the government's additions to already existing role frames (Beylerian and Canivet 1997: 221).

China defines itself not only as a nation state but also as a civilization (Zhang, Wei-Wei 2012); it thus sticks to images of ego and alter shaped by the ideas of the *tianxia* paradigm (Zhao, Tingyang 2003; 2005). Moreover, since 1949 socialism has become an essential part of China's national role conception and identity as a modern state. Other subframes within China's set of national role conceptions are related to its various past and future (anticipated) developmental stages. China defines itself as a 'developing country', a 'rising power' (or a re-rising one, as the official position is that China is simply ascending to the role and status that it held prior to the Opium Wars), and as a '[responsible] great power' (*daguo*). Last but not least, China additionally sees itself as an 'Asian power' (Men 2013).

This omnium-gatherum of role fragments raises the question of how the PRC can manage to pursue one unified path in its foreign policy given the obvious antagonisms between these different role elements. In 2005, Qin Yaqing, one of China's leading IR scholars, proclaimed that the construction of a Chinese IR theory should adopt the rise of a socialist power and its peaceful integration into the international system as its core theme (Qin 2005). From this perspective, the active engagement of a socialist country with the major (capitalist/democratic) powers does not pose a major problem. Nonetheless, the remaining, tantalizing questions are how to define the current version of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and how this concept is related to China's contemporary foreign policy.

China's variety of socialism is not like a static, dogmatic cage but is rather a highly flexible concept that can be adapted to changing domestic and international constellations. As a resilient (Nathan 2003) and learning (Heilmann 2008) system, the PRC reflects on the successes and failures of other systems so as to copy and borrow those aspects seen as being effective in stabilizing political rule. The redefinition of Chinese socialism thus relies on images of self and other as outlined in its analyses of the other versions of socialism found in the Soviet Union, North Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam. National role-making as part of a system's identity formation is based on processes of '*différence*'.

These considerations lead to the following three research questions, which guide the analysis of the case studies in Section 2:

- 1) How does China look at the other (i.e., other socialist systems) as a blueprint for its own socialist development?
- 2) Does China describe the other as a degenerated, dogmatic version of socialism, as a negative path that the PRC should not follow?
- 3) Is the other referred to as a copy of the 'Chinese' model of socialism?

2.2 *China Debates Its Foreign Policy*

The decryption of China's socialist role conceptions is not an end in itself, but rather a way to draw conclusions regarding China's current and (likely) future positioning within bilateral and multilateral constellations. China's domestic and international politics are now undergoing major transformations – as are, consequently, China's views on its ego and alter roles.

Although the changing of the guard in the period 2012–2013 did not represent a turning point in Chinese politics – since leadership transitions are carefully 'orchestrated' so as to allow the smooth passing of the baton to the next generation – it was nevertheless accompanied by a series of workshops, conferences, and think-tank meetings that dealt with the perceived need to reformulate China's official foreign policy. Even though it was not explicitly stated, the (perceived) changes in and around China also imply that a reassessment of China's socialist-actor identity was also deemed necessary.

The argument for why China needs to revise its foreign policy is first of all a structural one. There is a generally held perception – already documented in the *Chinese Blue Book on the International Situation*, edited and published by the Chinese Institute for International Studies (CIIS) in Beijing in 2012 – that global power is now shifting towards Asia and that, furthermore, the Global South will eventually become one of the major players in world politics (CIIS 2012: 3). This power shift, catalysed by the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008, has caused the United States and other core players to revise their foreign policies, and China thus needs to rethink its own international policies and strategies accordingly (Wang, Cungang 2012). Furthermore, this global power shift has been accompanied by the outbreak of regional conflicts and the emergence of new cleavages in the Asian region itself – for instance, the United States' 'pivot to Asia', the island disputes in the East and South China Seas, the North Korea issue (Zhao, Xiaochun 2013). China's new political leaders thus have to (re)position themselves in a changing regional security environment in which the success of preserving the status quo will depend not only on China itself but also on the (re)actions of the multitude of actors involved.

China's official foreign policy is built on the assumption that the ongoing structural changes within the international system have opened up a strategic window of opportunity (Niu 2013; Wang, Zaibang 2013; Zhang, Chun 2012). At the same time as it redefines its foreign policy in this period of change, China also has to rethink and recast its identity as a global player. Any reconfiguration of China's development strategy and its national identity – despite the fact that it is conceptualized as a response to global power shifts – will, simultaneously, directly impact the remodelling of the international system.

Starting from the assumption that China has already reached a leading position in the world's concert of great powers, the current internal debates on China's foreign policy have led to a critical reassessment of the formulation '*taoguang yanghui*', commonly translated as

'nourish obscurity and bide your time'.³ Recent scholarly debates in China, seen as being responsible for guiding and justifying the new leaders' chosen foreign policy, have argued that *taoguang yanghui* does not stand for passivity in international politics and instead should be seen as a necessary counterpart to Deng's phrase '*you suo zuowei*' ('to play an active role') (Wu 2012). Interpreted in this way, *taoguang yanghui* means a circumspect and modest engagement in international affairs but does not ex ante exclude any direct interference or active participation. To make this point clear, the current Chinese strategy debates therefore complement *taoguang yanghui* with '*qianxu jinshen*' ('considerateness and prudence'). *Qianxu jinshen* can be traced back to Mao's speech at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee, where it was used to refer to the CCP cadres' working style. Transferred to the realm of international politics, it stands for China's self-imposed commitment to a non-aggressive foreign policy.

While neorealist hardliners postulate that China should play a more important role in global affairs (*geng da de you suo zuo wei*),⁴ liberals vote instead for modesty and cooperation (*qianxu jinshen*) (Wang, Yizhou 2012). China's new leaders will thus have to find a balance between these two seemingly mutually exclusive positions. Their revised approach to foreign policy will, furthermore, also have to be based on a new domestic consensus that guarantees the people's support for and trust in their government. Foreign policy has thus once more become a subdimension of domestic stability concerns, something that is also reflected in the 'novel' terminology now used to describe China's foreign policy: under the Xi-Li administration, the 'people first' principle (*yi ren wei ben*) has now been elaborated upon by way of the slogan 'to conduct a people-based foreign policy' (*waijiao wei min*).

As the analysis of China's internal debates shows, the country's foreign policy is now determined by several overlapping domestic-international linkages. The interconnectedness of subsystemic and international developments implies that China's core leaders have to carry out a foreign policy that reflects both their populace's demands and China's general developmental interests. At the same time, they have to consider how others perceive China's international engagement and, also, to generate support – or at least sympathy – for China's demands in global affairs. Public diplomacy and the export of national role conceptions that address not only the heads of states but also the people at large (in other countries and regions) will thus be one cornerstone of the new elites' foreign policy (Jin et al. 2013: 3).

3 According to Ye (2002), this term was used by Deng Xiaoping in the 1990s as part of a 28-character statement on foreign policy. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the democratic transitions of the former Communist states in Central and Eastern Europe, China would become the main target of the West's criticism and anti-Communist strategy. Deng's statement served mainly to prevent the emergence of a new Cold War, this time between the United States and China.

4 See Yan Xuetong's speech on the shifting principles of Chinese foreign policy: <www.fyjs.cn/bbs/simple/index.php?t558657.html>.

Zhao Kejin of Fudan University in Shanghai labels this new era in Chinese foreign policy one of 'leadership diplomacy'. According to Zhao (2012), China should not act as a revolutionary power intent on the overthrow of the international system but should rather use its new power to reform and restructure existing global institutions. The underlying assumption here is that the international order has been defined by the old Euro-Atlantic players, whose power has slowly started to wane in recent years. If emerging powers are now in the process of rising to global status, the old system is no longer justifiable in terms of these new actors' interests and beliefs (Xu, Xiujun 2012). Since 2008 China has thus continuously repeated its demands for a reform of international institutions through BRICS joint declarations, G20 meetings, and the Davos summits.

All these internal debates prove that the recent adjustments to China's foreign policy should not be read as part of a grand strategy to overthrow the existing international order. The new leaders' recent modifications of China's foreign strategy are instead primarily a response to perceived power shifts in the global system and in the regional context that impose new constraints on Chinese foreign policy. China's new government will thus have to somehow master a difficult balancing act between domestic groups trying to use this window of opportunity to increase their say in Chinese politics and the expectations now voiced by the international community.

However, what is striking with regard to the strategy debates summarized above is the paucity of references made to 'socialism'. Does this imply that this ethos has already been dropped from China's official national role set?

3 Case Studies

3.1 Case I: *Sino-Soviet Relations*

In China's ego/alter construction of socialism, the Soviet Union serves as a negative mirror – a warning and a failed version (Sun and Yang 2009: 71). In 2011, several seminars and conferences examined the dissolution of the USSR from a 'twenty-years-after' perspective (Zhang, Fei'an 2011; Zhao, Yao 2011; Zuo 2011). The official findings of these analyses now form the basis for ego/alter role constructions in China, and as such guide its future development path (e.g. Li, Yanlei 2013; Zhao, Youping 2013). An overemphasis on centralization and the deviation from the ideals and key principles of Marxism are seen as having been the core drivers of Soviet disintegration in the late 1980s (Pang and Sun 2013: 31).

The critique of (Soviet) socialism is, however, not just a side effect of the recent changing of the guard in 2012/2013, but has in fact been a central feature of Chinese academic and political policy debates over the past few decades. The construction of the USSR as China's so-

cialist other dates back to the Sino–Soviet dispute⁵ that followed Khrushchev’s secret speech of 1956 and ended in an official schism between the two former socialist brothers in the early 1960s. Khrushchev’s negation of Stalin was, according to the current Chinese perspective, a negation of socialism per se – and thus the origin of the USSR’s decline from the late 1980s onwards (Chen, Xiaolu 2012).

Studies by international scholars often interpret the Sino–Soviet split as a competition between two socialist visions of the world order. In the late 1940s Mao Zedong had started to formulate his own interpretations of the world order and to define an alternative to the Soviet theory of the ‘two camps’. The notions of an ‘intermediate zone’ and the ‘Three Worlds’ theory both stand for a positioning of China outside of the Soviet hemisphere – and, at the same time, opposed to the capitalist world. The Three Worlds theory located the United States and the USSR in the first world; the second was composed of Australia, Canada, Europe, and Japan; the third world, lastly, comprised the developing states of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Yee 1983). By coining these alternative models of world order, the PRC positioned itself as a second socialist power with its own interpretation of socialism. While in the initial stage of its history the PRC largely copied the Soviet interpretation of socialism and practised a policy of ‘leaning to one side’ (*‘yi bian dao’*), during China’s ideological dispute with the USSR Mao classified it as an ‘imperial power’ and grouped it in the same category as the United States. After the Sino–US rapprochement of the early 1970s and the initiation of economic reforms, China resorted to using the so-called ‘strategic triangle’, which allowed the country to effectively pursue its own specific interests by playing the world’s two super-powers off against each other.⁶

Recent Chinese publications trace the Sino–Soviet conflict back to the fundamental incompatibility of the two countries’ respective *domestic* development models (Li, Minjie 2012). In addition to geo-strategic rivalry and competition for strategic allies from inside the socialist camp, the main drivers of the Sino–Soviet dispute were thus ideological differences. These included the end of the personality cult in the USSR, the meaning ascribed to imperialism, and disputes regarding the ‘correct’ economic development path.⁷

Shortly after taking office in November 2012, Xi Jinping reminded the Chinese people of the reasons for the dissolution of the USSR to defend and justify the approach to reform that the Xi-Li administration was propagating in 2012/2013. Against the background of the lessons drawn from Soviet socialism’s failures, China’s incremental reforms, its integration into the international community, and its rejection of the assumed incompatibility of plan and market are now presented as the only ways to secure the survival of China’s socialist one-

5 For a bibliographic overview, see Saran (1971); Gittings (1968) has analysed the ideological dispute.

6 For a historical overview of Sino–Soviet relations, see Dittmer (1992).

7 The recently published research monographs on the competing narratives on the Sino–Soviet split by Li Minjiang (2012) and Lüthi (2008) take ideology as being at the core of the debate, so as to stress the dissimilarities between the Chinese and Soviet interpretations of Marxism and between their socialist development options.

party system. These three characteristics of the Chinese model of socialism are formulated as being the direct opposite of the Soviet approach (see Zhao, Youping 2013: 8). The Xi-Li administration has also, strategically, reinvented ideology and reformulated Marxism. This step also stems from China's critical reassessment of Soviet socialism: the latter system's dogmatism and its turn away from Marxism in theory as well as in political practice are seen as the key determinants of its downfall (Liu, Youtian 2010).

The Sinification of Marxism-Leninism that started with the formulation of 'Mao Zedong Thought' is ongoing and is part of the PRC's identity – and its state-building process. In addition to Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the 'Three Represents' (attributed to Jiang Zemin), and Hu Jintao's concept of 'Scientific Development' have all been integrated into the Party's Constitution alongside Marxism-Leninism. All these concepts, theories, and thoughts serve as a treasure trove for the formulation of a 'new' theory of Marxism in the twenty-first century, one based on the PRC's current political practices and development strategies. The Chinese government now claims to be the only remaining socialist system capable of formulating a valid update to Marxist philosophy. In 2004 the Central Committee launched a 'Marx project' – with a budget of 200 million renminbi – that supported the restructuring and renaming of the CASS Institute of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought into the Institute of Marxism.^{8 9}

It is obvious that the Chinese leadership normally makes reference to Soviet socialism in times of reorientation and reform in Chinese (foreign) policy. Along these lines, negative experiences in China's reform process are generally explained as resulting from the persistence of outdated socialist system features, which, again, justifies further reform efforts; these, meanwhile, are presented as a *continuation* of Chinese-style socialism.

3.2 Case II: North Korea as the 'Socialist Other'

North Korea represents a major challenge in the PRC's neighbourhood strategy and in terms of its positioning in international affairs. The international community generally condemns North Korea's nuclear programme and its provocations of the United States and its allies. As a response to North Korea's nuclear tests and its missile launch, the United Nations imposed sanctions that were also supported by China. However, this should not be misread as an indicator that China has given up on North Korea. As long as the latter is not identified as a failed or derailed version of socialism, their shared identity – despite all the differences between the two systems – does not allow for an official split between these two socialist one-party systems (Noesselt 2014).

8 A short description of the Marx project can be found on the CASS Institute for Marxist Studies website: <<http://myy.cass.cn/news/422737.htm>>.

9 A short description of the Marx project can be found on the CASS Institute for Marxist Studies website: <<http://myy.cass.cn/news/422737.htm>>.

Following the North Korean leadership succession in 2011, China's leading IR think tanks dedicated their research to the in-depth analysis of the current state of the North Korean economy (Wang, Zaibang 2012), the country's recent challenges and crises, and the security implications for the wider East Asian region stemming from the North Korean issue (Chu 2012; Feng 2012; Liu, Xinghua 2012). They did not, however, devote much space to assessing what North Korea's 'new' interpretation of socialism is.

If one applies a role-theory approach to Sino–(North) Korean relations, it becomes obvious that there is no clear-cut ego-versus-alter differentiation, but rather that the Korean peninsula is seen as belonging symbolically to the Chinese sphere of influence (Chung and Choi 2013). In imperial times, Korea was a tributary state of the Chinese Empire: it not only had close trade relations with its neighbour, but also copied Chinese institutions and based its governance system on Confucian thought. With the Unequal Treaties of the first Sino–Japanese War of 1894–1895, China was forced to cede its vassal state to Japan. This is remembered as a major trauma in the collective memory of the Chinese. Although China did not engage in the restoration of the old *tianxia* in Maoist times, on an abstract level Korea was still not outside the ego dimension of China's role conception. This changed slightly after the Korean War of 1950, which led to the division of the Korean peninsula into two competing systems. The PRC sided with the communist North and has since regarded PRC–Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) relations as those between two socialist comrades.

Both regimes – the PRC and the DPRK – were originally supported by the USSR, but then started to independently develop their own sets of ideas (Mao Zedong Thought; Juche Ideology). While the PRC embarked on a reform path in the late 1970s, the DPRK did not. Instead, it began to establish modest joint special economic development zones in its border regions with China and South Korea. Chinese articles published since the North Korean leadership transition in 2011 have condemned North Korea's isolationist course and argued that the country will have to initiate (Chinese-style) reforms if it is to survive (Tang, Yongcheng 2012; Wang, Zaibang 2012). North Korea is presented as the counter-image to Chinese reforms and is thus used to justify China's economic choices (and all the 'negative' side effects such as unemployment, the loss of the 'iron rice bowl', increasing economic disparities, and social tensions). Some Chinese political scientists argue that North Korea has already initiated reforms but will nevertheless have to continue to liberalize its economy (Jin, Canrong 2012).

The Chinese government has stated numerous times that it does not seek to export its own 'model' to other regions or states. With this in mind, the Chinese hope that North Korea might choose the 'Chinese' mode of reform and opening clearly demonstrates that China does not perceive the DPRK as an other but rather as a variant of its self, one that continues to have many flaws but might still be a successful experiment if it chooses the 'correct' path. This, again, is reminiscent of the Sino–Soviet controversies over what the 'correct' relationship between politics and the economy should be.

As long as North Korea remains reluctant to open up its economy, it will become increasingly difficult for the Chinese leadership to justify its support for what is more of a Maoist than a reformist model. The only way out of the dilemma is the current official narrative that North Korea has now begun to copy the Chinese model of a modern socialist state. Still, both inside the Chinese leadership and within Chinese society at large, more and more people are coming to doubt that North Korea will ever adopt a liberal reform path.¹⁰ While North Korea's hard-core socialism represents a dilemma for China's own positioning in regional politics and on security issues, in domestic politics, at least, North Korea's backwardness and developmental problems are an effective and convincing argument for the PRC's pursuit of new (neoliberal) reforms (launched by the Third Plenum of the Eighteenth Central Committee).

3.3 Case III: Cuba

Cuba under Fidel Castro was the first country in Latin America to grant China diplomatic recognition (September 1960). It is thus not surprising that Chinese scholars' views on Cuban socialism are highly positive and that they see it as a legitimate indigenization of Marxism. However, despite the relatively early establishment of diplomatic contact, bilateral relations have not always remained tension-free. In the mid-1960s, relations cooled when Fidel Castro accused the Chinese of participating in the US blockade against Cuba. They deteriorated further after China's 'punitive expedition' against Vietnam in the late 1970s – a country highly admired by Fidel Castro as an 'anti-American hero' (Cheng 2007: 26).

The rapprochement between the two socialist systems started in the context of the breakdown of the USSR, when Cuba was facing the loss of its most important economic supporter and strategic ally and when the PRC was confronted with international sanctions following its military crackdown on the demonstrations in Tian'anmen Square in June 1989. Bilateral relations were resumed with Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen's visit to Cuba in June 1989, a time when most other states were cancelling such visits and rigorously condemning Chinese socialism (Cheng 2007: 26–27). While it was China that profited most from Cuba's symbolic support in the aftermath of 4 June 1989, the power distribution between these two unequal socialist states changed after 1992, when most of the international sanctions imposed on China by the Western world – except the 1989 arms embargo – were lifted. When Chinese president Jiang Zemin travelled to Cuba in November 1993, he reportedly presented his country as a successful model of socialism and as a blueprint for Cuban socialist reforms (Xu, Yichong 1996, in Cheng 2007: 28). This claim demonstrates that the Chinese have always conceived of the coexistence of multiple versions of socialism beyond that defined by the USSR, and also beyond that practised in China. At the same time, China's presentation of its own development path as a model for others clearly reveals its recognition of diffusion processes between the centre and the periphery. After the dissolution of the USSR, the world

¹⁰ This argument is based mainly on expert interviews conducted in Beijing and Shanghai in June and July 2013.

had become unipolar; beyond the surface of visible power constellations, however, new power centres – such as the PRC – that could serve as orientation models for developing socialist states had started to emerge.

In their analysis of it, Chinese scholars generally place Cuban socialism in the context of a triangular constellation made up of Cuba, the United States, and the USSR. While, from a historical perspective, the United States' sanctions against Cuba and its efforts to isolate it are seen as having limited the latter's strategic room for interaction in international politics (and thus opening a window of opportunity for China to deepen strategic bilateral relations), the 'socialist' relationship between Cuba and the USSR is generally depicted as having been one of unreliable socialist comradeship. This was evident in the USSR's 'betrayal' of Cuba in the crisis of 1962, when Soviet missiles were withdrawn from the island without prior consultation (Cai and Jiang 2012: 39). However, according to Cai and Jiang, the 'special relationship' between Cuba and the USSR continued until the end of the Cold War, when it was finally replaced by normal state-to-state relations between Cuba and Russia (Cai and Jiang 2012: 42–43). China, so the argument goes, became an attractive partner in those difficult times when Cuba faced increasing pressure from the United States and was left feeling deceived by the USSR. It was thus this international constellation that facilitated Cuba's diplomatic recognition of the PRC in 1960. Chinese studies argue that given the various disappointments and tensions in Cuban–Soviet relations, Cuba began to gradually turn away from Soviet dogmatism as early as the 1960s to establish a socialist system with its own idiosyncratic characteristics.

But how did Cuba, according to the Chinese narrative, refer to the 'Chinese model' of socialism? After the end of the Cold War, bilateral relations further intensified. During high-level diplomatic visits – Fidel Castro travelled to China in November 1995, and Hu Jintao visited Cuba in January 1997 – Castro, according to Chinese reports on these meetings, was especially interested in how China managed to feed its people without depending on imports. He was also reported to have shown a keen interest in the Chinese version of market socialism (Cheng 2007: 29, 31). The Chinese reports on these encounters as well as Chinese academic publications of the 1990s postulated that Cuba was willing to learn from China's experiences and would thus engage in reforms, leading to the formation of a Chinese-style hybrid economy with market elements (Xiao, Feng 1997). This narrative neither reflected Fidel Castro's open scepticism about China's 'socialist market economy' nor empirically investigated the state of politics and economics in Cuba. From a role theory perspective, this imagination of Cuba (intended for domestic consumption) as a carbon copy of the Chinese socialist ego role manufactured a certain ideological closeness between the two regimes and symbolically confirmed the attractiveness of the Chinese development path.

Chinese research papers published in the first decade of the twenty-first century use the terminology of Chinese socialism to describe the Cuban system as 'socialism with Cuban characteristics' (Jiang 2010). Cuba, as these studies stress, does not copy any other socialist

system but has effectively transferred the main ideas of Marxism-Leninism to its own specific politico-geographical environment. However, Chinese scholars also state that Fidel Castro's decision to define his revolution as one of the socialist revolutions of the twentieth century was due to pressure from the United States on the one hand and the USSR's offer of (unconditional) support on the other. The Cuban revolution, first proclaimed as a national liberation movement, thus only later became a socialist one – as Cuba positioned itself as a 'socialist' system diametrically opposed to the United States (Cui 2003: 79–80). Having emerged out of the national liberation movement, the Cuban Communist Party thus did not lead the revolution but rather came into existence in its aftermath. Cui Guitian therefore concludes that the Cuban understanding of 'socialism' generally consists of anti-Americanism and national independence, with some additional ingredients taken from Soviet socialism (Cui 2003: 80). For this reason it is not compatible with China's post-Mao version of socialism, which is based on peaceful coexistence and cooperative relations with the United States.

A third wave of Chinese research on Cuba – the first one having evolved in the context of Sino-Soviet competition, and the second having been part of China's re-mapping of the world after the end of the Cold War – emerged as a reaction to the handover of political power from Fidel to Raul Castro (Sun, Yanfeng 2011; Wang, Chengjiu 2011; Xu, Shicheng 2011). All these studies were dedicated to the Sixth Party Congress of the Cuban Communist Party in 2011, which formally confirmed Cuba's new development path and prescribed market economic reforms – labelled 'adaptations of the economic model' and granting a new key role to the non-state sector.¹¹ Other reforms addressed membership in the Cuban Politburo: Raul introduced an age limit and reduced the maximum number of terms that a party cadre could serve to two consecutive legislative periods. This measure shows many parallels to the PRC's efforts to formalize leadership transitions. The third debate is thus reminiscent of the 1990/1991 expectations regarding the anticipated adoption of Chinese-style reforms in Cuba, but it differs from those earlier wishful-thinking approaches in that it also reflects the particularities of the Cuban case.

Retrospective assessments of Cuba's reforms over the past 15 years generally stress three key 'characteristics' of this process: the reforms have not aimed for overall system change, but have been undertaken to restabilize the one-party state; stability has been given priority over revolution; and, even during the reforms and modifications, income equality and social justice have still been at the top of the political agenda (Guo, Weiwei 2009: 62). Cuba's reforms during the 1990s are presented, overall, as efforts to adjust and affirm the socialist sys-

11 These decisions have been inscribed into the official report of the Party Congress and have thus been cemented as new guidelines for future politico-economic development. They differ from Fidel Castro's interim adaptation strategies – such as the introduction of limited market structures and the temporary use of the US dollar – which were used to overcome Cuba's economic crisis but were not envisaged as steps towards further liberalization (Hoffmann 2011: 9).

tem's structures as part of the country's search for the 'correct' socialist development path (Jiang 2007; Tan 2003).

Another stream of Chinese research on Cuban socialism adopts a comparative approach. In this vein, Jiang Shixue (2010) argues that both systems ascribe a leadership role to the Communist Party and that both believe that reform is crucial to the survival of their political structures. However, he also outlines the differences that have gradually emerged between the two systems: while the Chinese Communist Party includes several democratic parties, in Cuba power is concentrated exclusively in the hands of the Cuban Communist Party – as the Fifth Cuban Party Congress in 1997 reiterated (Jiang 2010: 31). Moreover, the diachronic reform paths of China and Cuba do not, according to Jiang, follow the same rationale. The drivers of the Cuban reforms were not domestic developments but rather changes in Cuba's external environment – in other words, the dissolution of the USSR and the end of Soviet economic and financial support for the island state, together with increased US pressure (Jiang 2010: 32).

While bilateral connections between China and Cuba have been deepened and economic cooperation intensified throughout the post-1989 era, differences between the two socialist systems persist. Both are currently involved in processes of partial reform and structural re-adjustment on the basis of their leaders' critical analyses of past successes and failures, both in the national context and in other similar political systems. The learning processes in Sino–Cuban relations are not unidirectional. The fact that Cuba initiated reforms more than 30 years after the PRC did so could be seen to imply that Cuba viewed reform socialism as a way to adapt its own system to the new global constellations. However, Chinese scholars stress that in a few sectors Cuba's variety of socialism is more effective than the Chinese one. They cite Cuba's health system and the public education sector, as well as the country's measures to avoid economic disparities and socio-economic dichotomies. In China, Deng Xiaoping's 'let some get rich first' formula has resulted in extreme income disparities and fraught relations between the different strata of Chinese society (Jiang 2010: 37).¹²

In contrast to Sino–Russian relations, Sino–Cuban relations are still referred to as existing between 'socialist brothers'. Cuba, located miles away from the Chinese hemisphere, is – contrary to North Korea or Vietnam, for example – not a member of the imagined *tianxia* and is thus grouped into the alter-ego category of socialist regimes. Chinese social scientists' reflections on Cuba's social insurance and health systems reveal that China is currently looking for add-ons to increase the efficiency and legitimacy of its own 'socialist' system. Furthermore, they illuminate how China maps both successful and not-so-successful socialist experiments, with Cuba obviously being assigned to the former group.

12 In earlier studies, however, Jiang (2002) stressed the opposite view, and thus outlined why Cuba should study the Chinese model.

3.4 Case IV: Vietnam

Historically, relations between China and Vietnam were shaped by the Sino–Soviet dispute and the subsequent competition for influence within the socialist camp (Olsen 2006). Bilateral relations were quite amicable to begin with; in fact, China even supported North Vietnam in its war against South Vietnam and the United States. However, the relationship took a turn for the worse in 1970 when Vietnam symbolically sided with the USSR (Womack 2006: 26–27). Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia, one of the PRC’s allies, its leaning toward the USSR, and the discrimination against Chinese nationals living in Vietnam finally resulted in China’s ‘punitive mission’ against it in 1979, a decision that was heavily influenced by role reflections. Vietnam had once been part of the Chinese Empire, which might explain why China proclaimed a right to intervene and to restore order there. Punitive missions fall, according to Chinese state philosophy, under the category of ‘just wars’ and are thus not understood as interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign country.

China’s punitive mission took place in the post-Maoist era, a fact which illustrates that the PRC’s ego roles did not change after the initiation of reform and opening in 1978. Instead, China under Deng continued along the path followed in the preceding decades. The PRC continued to see itself as the legitimate ordering power in the region. In addition, the ‘socialist’ dimension of China’s national role conception might also have impacted its decision to send military forces over the Vietnamese border, with Vietnam’s siding with the USSR seen to prove that it had become a ‘degenerate’ socialist system (Chen 1987: 1).

The normalization of Sino–Vietnamese relations took place after the demise of the USSR and with the resulting reordering of strategic relations inside the socialist camp. Although Vietnam also initiated modest economic reforms, it chose not to rely exclusively on China’s development model as a blueprint for its own modernization efforts (Dosch and Vuving 2008: 2). Territorial cleavages and maritime disputes have overshadowed Sino–Vietnamese relations since the 1980s. In day-to-day politics, geo-strategic development interests have thus taken precedence over shared ideology.

Given all these apparent tensions, it is quite striking that most Chinese publications on the Vietnamese variety of socialism do not present it as being in opposition to Chinese socialism. The current reforms of Vietnamese socialism that Chen Mingfan, professor for Marxist studies at Tsinghua University in Beijing, outlines somewhat resemble those discussed among Chinese scholars with regard to the Chinese party-state itself: the rebalancing of state–society relations; the initiation of anti-corruption campaigns and efforts to set up a clean, efficient and accountable bureaucracy; and the integration of democratic (meaning deliberative, consultative) elements are all presented as necessary add-ons to conventional socialism (Chen, Mingfan 2013). Like China, the Communist Party of Vietnam is reported to be engaging in a reformulation of Marxist thought that might culminate in the emergence of a new theory of socialism with ‘Vietnamese characteristics’ (Ruan and Yang 2013; Ma 2004). Vietnam’s embracing of market elements (while it officially preserved its socialist planned

economy) as part of its reform (*doi moi*) in 1986 resulted in rapid economic growth during the 1990s. Vietnam is currently practising a 'socialist-oriented market economy' – in other words, its own kind of economy, which combines elements of capitalist and socialist thinking (Yu 2002). Vietnam's history of incremental transformation is portrayed as highly successful thus far (Li, Qinghua 2006), a portrayal which, indirectly, also reaffirms the validity of China's own reform path.

Despite all the aforementioned tensions underlying bilateral trade and economic interactions between China and Vietnam, the two party systems – as Chinese scholars portray them in academic publications – display many similarities. The Vietnamese case is presented not as a copy of the Chinese model but rather as an indigenization and pragmatic reformulation of Marxism in the context of a socialist one-party system in the post-Cold War era. The Chinese narrative on Vietnamese socialism thus covertly mirrors and reflects on the Chinese construction of a new 'socialist' ego role.

4 Conclusion

In China's official terminology, the (still existing) socialist regimes presented above – Cuba, North Korea and Vietnam – are all classified as Communist one-party systems belonging to the group of 'socialist brothers' (*shehuizhuyi xiongdi*). This alliance is further subdivided into modern/liberal versus dogmatic/centralized socialist systems. The deficits and failures of other socialist systems that resulted in their ultimate disintegration and transformation – for example, in Eastern Europe and the USSR – are cited in the official political discourse and think-tank publications to justify China's economic reforms, in spite of their shortcomings and negative side effects. Cuba and North Korea are depicted as varieties of socialism with their own characteristics that will only survive if they adopt Chinese-style reforms. The decisions to open up market structures and to engage in international trade are not a turn to capitalism, but rather – in the Chinese narrative of ego and alter – a strategic move necessary to secure the survival of socialism in the twenty-first century.

The reform efforts of other liberal socialist systems are described as having been highly effective. This allows the PRC's government to present its own reform agenda not as a unique Chinese experiment, but rather as the only way to establish a modern socialist system – and something that has also been undertaken by those few socialist regimes that managed to survive the decline and transformation of the USSR. Chinese academics thus engage in the altercasting of other socialist systems to justify and stabilize their own regime's structures. By outlining the similarities and parallels between these systems' reforms and China's (which were implemented decades earlier than Cuba's and Vietnam's), the Chinese side is consequently able to create a narrative of a robust and successful 'Chinese model' that is reproduced by other systems (though adapted to the local context). Even studies that do not stress the 'model' nature of Chinese socialism indirectly use terminology that represents the

development in other socialist countries as a continuation of the Chinese path (e.g., by grouping Castro's approach under the category of 'socialism with Cuban characteristics') or as directly opposed to it (thus depicting the Chinese frames as an alternative to the main principles of Soviet socialism).

However, whereas learning processes during the 1990s were expected to spread in one direction only, from China to other regions, the direction of diffusion may have recently started to change. Chinese scholars of Latin America, for example, now also highlight issue areas where China could learn from Cuban experiences. This, again, is a mirror debate. While it is problematic for scholars to directly point out the shortcomings of Chinese socialism, referring to efficient policies in other socialist comrade regimes is accepted as a legitimate pursuit. Nonetheless, the imagination of Cuba as a successful alter remains part of a Chinese construction of the world and of modern socialism, one which does not necessarily depict the actual Cuban reality.

According to a comparative study by Xiao Feng, the reform strategies of China, Cuba, Vietnam (and Laos) converge on three points: All of them agree that they are still in a primary stage of socialism; it is only the labels used to denominate this period that vary slightly across these countries. Consequently, over the last thirty years all three countries have added market elements to their centrally planned economies. Furthermore, as a result of increasing market competition, all of them now face a new antagonism between equality (*gongping*) and efficiency (*xiaoli*). The Chinese side argues that socialism is meant to lead people out of poverty – something which requires a stable economic growth rate but does not have to end up in the stratification of society according to income levels and power positions. As long as the current existence of stark inequalities and stratification is seen simply as part and parcel of a transitional period, all these states still fall into the socialist category (Xiao 2007: 25–26).

Reference to China's 'socialist' role is made in statements addressed to the Chinese populace and in the course of bilateral relations with other socialist states. As the frictions between China and Vietnam exemplify, China's socialist role does not delimit the strategic moves – intended to secure its national development interests – that it makes in its interactions with other socialist states. However, as China's symbolic reliance on socialism is linked to issues of legitimacy, the PRC would probably not engage in an active destabilization of socialist regimes that, according to the official narrative, have started to adopt the Chinese mode of socialist reforms.

To summarize, China's 'socialist' role identity remains limited to selected bilateral relations and is first and foremost part of its national – and not international – role conception. Socialism thus no longer plays a leading role in the PRC's general foreign policy, as the ideas of a 'harmonious world' and 'peaceful coexistence' allow for interaction regardless of the participating states' own political constitutions. With regard to world politics, two new catchphrases have come to the fore in the Xi-Li administration's foreign policy: the 'Chinese dream' and the 'new type of great power relations'. These slogans illustrate China's revised

positioning in international affairs. The country's new leaders hope to play a major role in the collective reconstruction of a post-crisis world order, one that is no longer based on the principles of a unipolar system but that reflects the interests of the world's new rising powers as well. China might thus be expected to play 'new' roles on the international stage, such as that of a 'great power' (*daguo*), bringing with it its own ideas on world politics. As the case of China illustrates, however, role change in international politics does not require the transformation or substitution of those national role conceptions linked to attaining and sustaining legitimacy in the domestic context.

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