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The Chinese Peacebuilding Script:
A Pragmatic Contestation of the Liberal International Order

SCRIPTS Working Paper No. 19

SCRIPTS
CLUSTER OF EXCELLENCE
Contestations of the Liberal Script

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ABSTRACT

Chinese peacebuilding has become crucial considering China's dismissal of its low-key foreign policy in favour of a more assertive stance since President Xi's accession to power. This study critically builds on the scholarship of SCRIPTS and undertakes a within-case analysis of China's peacebuilding in Myanmar from 2012 to 2021, examining its policies and frames. Thus, the Chinese peacebuilding script is reconstructed to be compared with the liberal script and gauge typology and degree of contestation. By applying qualitative content and discourse analyses on archival data from the Chinese government and the Communist Party of China, the study finds that the Chinese peacebuilding script, contrary to expectations, qualifies as neither internal nor external contestation of the liberal script but rather as in-between pragmatic contestation – for China both enforces and contests the liberal international order in negotiating a more influential position amidst an increasingly multipolar world.

1 INTRODUCTION[1]

At the time of writing, war rages in Ukraine, and China's alignment or dealignment with the Russian invasion is hard to decodify. China's thrust for a more assertive role in foreign policy since President Xi's accession to power in 2012 poses the question of its future role as a peacebuilder, and if it will challenge or accept the Western, liberal international order (LIO). China's peacebuilding and its notion of developmental peace may indeed oppose that of liberal peace; however, the degree to which both models oppose or fit each other remains understudied.

This research, therefore, addresses the empirical puzzle and gap of China's peacebuilding, and how it challenges the liberal script. To that end, the study carries out a within-case analysis of China's peacebuilding in Myanmar from 2012 to 2021, comparing its policies and frames. Then, the Chinese peacebuilding script is reconstructed to be compared with the liberal script and gauge typology and degree of contestation. Consequently, I attempt to answer the following research question: To what extent does China's peacebuilding contest the liberal script?

The research sets off from the following expectations or hypotheses of what the research question will lead to:

1. Whereas the core value of the liberal script is individual self-determination, that of the Chinese peacebuilding script is collective self-determination – in other words, sovereignty.
2. As such, China is an external contester of the liberal script, as it pushes its own script for peacebuilding.
3. Such a script is both alternative and substitutive of the liberal and so bids for replacement and hegemony.

The research's explanandum is, then, China's peacebuilding policy and its degree of contestation to

the liberal script. It has been designed as a forward-looking, within-case study analysis of China's peacebuilding in Myanmar from 2012 to 2021, combining deductive and inductive reasoning. For that, I draw on the theoretical framework of the scholarship of the Cluster of Excellence "Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS)" from a critical perspective. The case selection responds to the case of China being hypothesis-tested in relation to the theory and, therefore, theory-building (Lijphart 1971).

As to the structure of the working paper, I begin by building theory and critically laying out the scholarship about the contestations of the liberal script (chapter 2). Later, I empirically probe the theory and expectations first by analysing the framing of China's foreign and security policy and its adherence to the responsibility to protect principle (R2P), as these inform the Chinese peacebuilding script (Section 3.1); second, by analysing and comparing the policies of China's peacebuilding in Myanmar from 2012 to 2021 and their framing (Section 3.2); and third, by reconstructing the Chinese peacebuilding script, drawing on the evidence presented in the former sections and the theory, and comparing it to the liberal script to explore the typology and degree of contestation (Section 3.3). Finally, I present my conclusions and sketch out potential follow-ups to the research.

2 THEORY BUILDING: A CRITICAL ACCOUNT OF SCHOLARSHIP AT THE CLUSTER

To answer and address both the research question and the hypotheses, I resort to the theory produced at the Cluster of Excellence "Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS)".[2] Thus, I engage SCRIPTS critically, with a view to applying its analytical framework in the reconstruction of the Chinese peacebuilding script and its comparison with the liberal script.

2 See https://www.scripts-berlin.eu (accessed 11 February 2022).

2.1 WHAT IS A "SCRIPT"?

A script is defined as "descriptive and prescriptive knowledge about the organisation of society" (Börzel/Zürn 2020a: 5). Thus, a script works as an analytical tool that allows for both descriptive and explanatory insights into the inner workings of a given society. More specifically, it contains prescriptive or normative statements and descriptive or empirical statements about society (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021: 4).

In short, a script carries an understanding of social, political, and economic reality; a normativity and morality about such reality; an epistemology that explains it; expectations for enactment; and discursive and institutional deployment (frames and policies). Overall, these set up a legitimacy framework for societal organisation through the "construction of dominant narratives" (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021: 7).

2.2 DIMENSIONS AND COMPONENTS OF A SCRIPT

This legitimacy framework subsumes the varied components of a script. In other words, it constrains features of a given script and how it must be enacted. These features or components fall into two dimensions: a categorical or a thematic dimension (Börzel/Zürn 2020a).

The categorical or analytical components of a script are classified into four (Börzel/Zürn 2020a: 10): (1) A plot consisting of the core idea(s) providing meaning to the script and constraining its theoretical realisation and material enactment; (2) actorhood, referring to the legitimate agents of such enactment of the script; (3) the scenery, pointing to the institutional background and structure in and against which the script develops, again, in both theory and practice; and (4) the level of decoupling, namely the room for deviation from ideational and institutional prescriptions.

Decoupling signals the "degree of discrepancy between the script and its implementation" (Drewski/Gerhards 2020: 4, fn. 2) and so demarks which ideas and practices qualify simply for deviation or rather for outright contestation. While decoupling disallows a "binary notion" of a script (Börzel/Zürn 2020a), there remains the component of a core value or master signifier that logically and systematically informs the rest of the plot, as it functions geometrically as an axiom from which theorems – namely, the full-text script – are further deduced. Provided that this plotted core value remains untouched, variation in the rest of the components signals decoupling rather than alternative scripting.

On the other hand, the thematic components or issues refer to themes a script is related to and governs over. Therefore, the thematic classification translates into subscripts, with their own subplot, actors, sceneries, and decoupling within the main script. The liberal border script will then be presented below as pertaining to the liberal script.

2.3 DEFINITION AND TYPOLOGIES OF CONTESTATIONS OF A SCRIPT

SCRIPTS understands contestations as "discursive and behavioural practices that invoke or challenge core components of a script and come with a certain level of social mobilisation" (Börzel/

Zürn 2020a: 5). As such, contestations can challenge some measure of the plot, or rather the core value(s). In the latter case, it would entail the advancement of "truly alternative scripts [...] that reject [the challenged script's] fundamental principles" (Börzel/Zürn 2020a: 10). Whereas this rejection of the core would qualify as *external or revisionist contestation*, the former case of targeting the whole script would correspond to *internal or reformist contestation* (Börzel/Zürn 2020a: 14).

There are three main typologies of contestations, dependent upon 1) the scope of the contestation in relation to the script, 2) the strategy of the contestant, and 3) the register of enactment (see Table 1).

1. The most important typology is the scope; however, the aforementioned distinction between internal and external contestation begs for a caveat. Any script allows for some measure of contradiction of key elements, whether in their internal logic or enactment of the plot or the scenery or level of decoupling. Nevertheless, "[there are] conditions under which decoupling turns into re-writing or the decline of [a] script" (Börzel/Zürn 2020a: 15). This means that, whereas external contestation is binary, internal contestation is spectral and begs the question of at which point decoupling begins to qualify as a challenge. Further, both types are said to potentially advance the contested script as it integrates contestations.

Table 1: Summary of typologies of contestation of a script

	Typology of Contestation	Types			
1	Scope of Contestation	Internal (Reformist)		External (Revisionist)	
2	Strategy	Reform	Dissidence	Pushback	Withdrawal
3	Register of Enactment*	Ideational / Discursive		Ideational / Discursive	
		Material / Practical-institutional		Material / Practical-institutional	

Source: Author's, based on Börzel/Zürn 2020a, 2020b.
*While reform and dissidence correspond to internal contestation and pushback and withdrawal to external contestation, ideational and material contestation can be either.

2. The second typology, while less relevant, plays a meaningful role nonetheless. It differentiates between ideational and material contestations (Börzel/Zürn 2020a: 17). Just as a script is enacted in both a body of theory and a group of institutional practices, contestation can target either the theoretical (frames) or the practical level (policies).

3. Finally, the strategy of the contester determines the third typology (Börzel/Zürn 2020b). Building on the first typology, it considers two variables: (a) attitude towards the script's plot (internal or external challenge); and (b) relative position of influence in the script's scenery. Figure 1 distinguishes between pushback, reform, dissidence, or withdrawal contestations depending on their measuring within the two-dimensional set of coordinates of (a) and (b).

2.4 THE LIBERAL SCRIPT

Defining the liberal script entails sketching out, first, its categorical components, and second, the themes about which it speaks:

2.4.1 THE LIBERAL PLOT

The liberal plot is logically and systematically structured into two ontological "layers" (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021: 14-16). However, I engage it analytically and deductively for a more critical presentation that better lends itself to comparison.

Thus, while we already have a good number of definitions at hand, a demarcation of *liberalism* is then needed. Liberal is defined as that which relates to or ensures liberty or freedom; to wit, there are two kinds of freedom: negative and positive (Berlin 1969). In the *ordo essendi*, negative freedom precedes positive freedom; indeed, the former refers to the lack of obstacles required by an agent in order for them to pursue positive

Figure 1: Typology of contestations according to contester's strategy
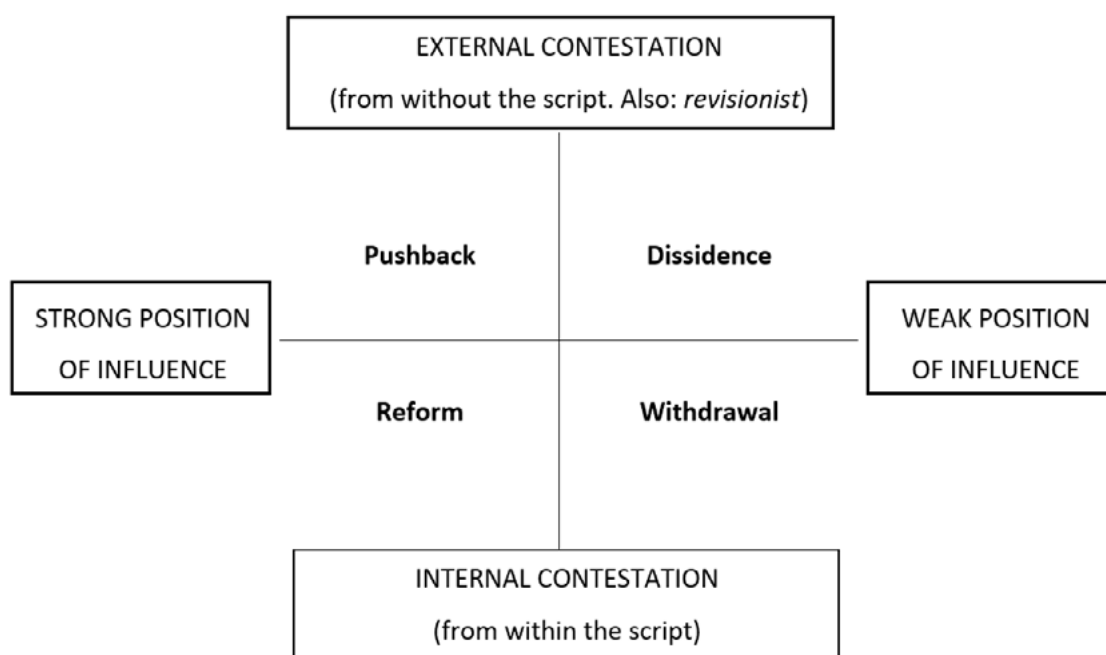
Source: adapted from Börzel/Zürn 2020b: 9, Figure 1.

freedom; it also constrains the agent, inasmuch as they must not act freely when such free action hinders the freedom of others – in what Mill calls the no-harm principle (Mill 2011 [1859]). On the other hand, positive freedom is defined as the capacity of the agent to (pro)actively determine themselves; this individual self-determination refers to the capacity to determine and choose their own normativity (autonomy) and so act unconstrained by forces alien to the agent's will (Kant 2010a [1785], 2010b [1788] [Ak IV, V]).

By virtue of these definitions – and those presented in the previous sections, I reason that (a) negative freedom has ontological priority to positive freedom in the *ordo essendi*, which means that (b) the aprioristic feature of liberalism is negative freedom. Therefore, (c) the core value of the liberal script is *negative freedom*. Thus, (d) negative freedom needs to be understood as the unfreedom to "do harm" to others – that is, to constrain the freedom of others. All these premises lead to two implications: First, the liberal script acts as a constraining framework that demarks legitimate and illegitimate agency, for its main feature is its structure of power on individual and collective agency. And second, unfreedom informs individual self-determination (first layer), and individual self-determination informs the rest of the plot (second layer) and the overall script.

Concerning this second layer of the plot, individual self-determination is transposed into political, economic, and societal goals (Börzel/Zürn 2020a: 11; Zürn/Gerschewski 2021: 16-20), such as human and minority rights promotion, democracy, and market-based economy to name a few.

2.4.2 LIBERAL ACTORS

 The liberal actors considered are both individuals and public institutions such as nation-states and international organisations (Börzel/Zürn 2020a: 12). As it is, both individuals and public institutions have rights and obligations drawn from the plotted script. For instance, the State has the right to exert violence and the obligation that such exercise is legitimate; in turn, the individual has the obligation to accept and respect the State's legal coercion, be it bureaucratic or physical.[3]

2.4.3 LIBERAL SCENERY

The **liberal scenery** is peopled by "bounded communities and political orders" (Börzel/Zürn 2020a: 12). Such orders are organisational dispositions of coercive power, or how unfreedom is imposed society-wide for the sake of freedom. In the liberal order, States are legitimised as sovereign according to the scripted adhesion to the liberal plot and permutation of liberal standards of agency (Börzel/Zürn 2020b: 4). In a way, there is a co-constitution of nation-states' sovereignty and the liberal order. However, the latter has undergone a systemic shift from a thin liberal post-World War II international order of *liberal multilateralism* (LIO I) to a post-Cold-War international order of *postnational liberalism* (LIO II), which was not only rule-based but openly pursued a liberal social purpose with a significant authority beyond the nation-state (Börzel/Zürn 2020b: 4).

This increasing intrusiveness of the LIO goes in accordance with the unfreedom/freedom interplay as the core fundamental of the liberal script.

2.4.4 LIBERAL DECOUPLING

Certainly, some or many among the values of the plot contradict each other; but again, there is a measure of discrepancy allotted.

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3   Incidentally, although it would require a long detour that would lead me too off-topic, a fully argued distinction between agency and actorhood could deepen the framework.

2.5 THE LIBERAL BORDER SCRIPT

Turning to the thematic dimension of the liberal script, I only focus on the border subscript as it governs the subcategory of a peacebuilding script. SCRIPTS define the liberal border script as "normative ideas that arise from liberalism and regulate cross-border interactions" (Drewski/Gerhards 2020: 3).

Like the categorical components of the border subscript, the thematic dimensions are equally four. (1) The plot refers to the core tension between two values: individual and collective self-determination. However, the latter derives from the former, as the "legitimacy of collectives always rests on the consent of the individual" (Drewski/Gerhards 2020: 11). Hence, the thrust of the liberal border script is towards increasing permission for cross-border interactions in a bid for individual rights (Drewski/Gerhards 2020: 15). (2) Actorhood here emphasises nation-states. (3) The scenery corresponds to international law as a rule-based order. And (4) the decoupling here refers to the extent to which nation-states are legitimised to allow or prohibit control over cross-border interactions.

This sectorial or applied legitimacy framework governs several themes or issues. As State intervention relates to my research topic, let us skip over the rest and briefly describe the "liberal peacebuilding subscript". As it is, Drewski/Gerhards (2021) state that regime change and (liberal) democracy promotion are some of the main thrusts of liberal peace, agreeing with critical theory scholarship[4]. Comparing it to the justifications of the Chinese challenge and the aims of its peacebuilding practices will additionally give further insight into the typology and degree of contestation of the liberal script.

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4   Cox 1981; Duffield 2001; Pugh 2005a, 2005b, 2010; Jacoby 2007; Bellamy 2005, 2006; Chandler 2010; Richmond 2012; Jahn 2018, 2021.

3 EMPIRICAL DISCUSSION

In the following sections, I first empirically review China's foreign policy under President Xi. Second, I shift onto peacebuilding strategies and framings in Myanmar during the same period. And third, I reconstruct the Chinese peacebuilding script by applying the analytical framework of SCRIPTS. I then compare it with the liberal script and draw conclusions regarding contestation.

To this end, I have applied semi-grounded value coding in search of concepts that may serve as first-layer core value(s) of the plot for the reconstructed script. Thus, I rely not only on official documents but also on Chinese scholarship as it has been difficult to find official archives that are both available and open and not in Chinese.

3.1 ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY FROM 2012 TO 2021

In this section, I present the findings of the analysis of relevant translated official Communist Party of China (CPC) documents on foreign policy from 2012 to 2021 and of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) vetoes relating to China's adhesion to R2P.

3.1.1 CHINESE SCHOLARSHIP ON CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Chinese scholarship (e.g. Liqun 2010; Xiaotong 2015; Zhou 2015; Wang 2016; Hung 2017; Flint/Xiaotong 2019) coincides in stating that Chinese foreign policy can be generally characterised by what could be called strategic adaptability. Thus, China's foreign action does not bid for hegemony but rather for "improving the relative position of [China] within the world economy [...] to ensure domestic stability and economic growth" (Flint/Xiaotong 2019: 296). This entails two other features of Chinese foreign policy: a focus on domestic affairs and economic growth or development.

Thus, one of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)'s objectives is to offer a solution to overproduction and enable an international network for export (Flint/Xiaotong 2019). Indeed, Chinese foreign policy is clearly economy-based and purposely aimed at growth; hence the term "economic diplomacy", by which economic means are used for diplomatic goals (Xiaotong 2015; Zhou 2015; Flint/Xiaotong 2019).

The key concept is then "opportunity". Instead of challenging existing hegemonies and world orders, China has strived to follow successful models of economic practices (Zhou 2015). This inserts, rather than excludes China itself into the capitalist world economy and the LIO. As China carries out a "context-specific foreign policy" (Flint/Xiaotong 2019: 319), it understands and acts opportunistically to achieve domestic stability and economic growth. Perceiving the US hegemonic decline and the emergence of multipolarity (Flint/Xiaotong 2019), China has therefore embraced multilateralism (Zhou 2015).

3.1.2 ANALYSIS OF OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF CHINA

For the following analysis, I have carried out semi-grounded value coding, inductive frame, and discourse analyses of five documents published or released between 2012 and 2021 and translated into English.

The concepts that appear the most across the documents are "people" and "development", closely followed by "peace". Concerning "people", there are two uses of the term: one in a demographic sense and another as a hypostasis of the collective – as in the French "peuple" or German "Volk". The extensive usage of "people" in this second sense denotes the central importance of the Chinese people in all matters related to the governance of the country and even foreign and security policy. Thus, "The Central Committee

has stressed that the most fundamental and universal desire of our people is to live in a safe and peaceful nation" (Hu 2012: I), while "the Party leads the people in running the country" (Hu 2012: II) – which means that the Party both identifies and pursues the interests of the people. This paternalism takes Xi's policy practices up an epic notch (Xi 2013).

Relatedly, the documents significantly stress "unity", be that the "unity of the Chinese people of all ethnic groups" (Hu 2012: XII; Xi 2017), "national reunification" between the Mainland and Taiwan (Xi 2017; Central Committee 2021), or the "great unity of the Chinese people with the peoples of other countries" (Hu 2012: XII; Xi 2012). However, unity does not entail political homogenisation, for the "one country, two systems" policy is insistently emphasised concerning Taiwan, Macao and Hong Kong (Hu 2012: X; Xi 2017; Central Committee 2021); likewise, "We respect the right of the people of all countries to choose their own development path" (Xi 2017; also Hu 2012: XI). This is combined with a rejection of hegemonism and power politics, as "China will continue to keep in mind both the interests of the Chinese people and the common interests of the people of all countries" (Hu 2012: XI; see also CPC Committee 2021).

The concepts "peace" and "development" appear together multiple times. Thus, while there are different types of development, all of them are peaceful or entail peace; in turn, peace seems to be defined by the Gaultian negative sense – an absence of war – which overlaps with another code, i.e. "stability", plus development, understood as economic, social, cultural and political. As to foreign policy, the pursuit of a "foreign policy of peace" is claimed throughout the texts (Hu 2012: XI; Xi 2017; Central Committee 2021). This translates into "world peace and development" or global "peaceful development" and securing a "peaceful international environment" (Hu 2012: II; Xi 2017), ensured by "[China's] own development"

(Hu 2012: II). Likewise, the Mainland-Taiwan solution will come through "peaceful development of relations between the two sides" (Hu 2012: X; Xi 2017; Central Committee 2021). In short, China frames its foreign policy in terms of fostering its conception of peace, based on 1) incentivising development abroad while 2) respecting foreign systems of political and economic governance, and – last but not least – 3) foreseeing and preventing security threats to Chinese borders and neighbours.

Incidentally, the evidence suggests that the subject of development and peace is the Party-Nation – materiality, whereas the object is the Chinese people, or the whole of humankind – hypostatisation. At any rate, while actorhood clearly falls into the Party-Nation, it is unclear if agency resides in the people, as framed. What is clear is that the individual, not to mention individual self-determination, is nowhere to be seen in the script – unlike in the liberal script.

Foreign policy takes a holistic approach to domestic affairs. Therefore, to protect and ameliorate the "people's wellbeing", Xi (2017) established his "major country diplomacy" (also Central Committee 2021) – elsewhere translated as "great power diplomacy". It can be summarised with two related points: first, the promotion of international structures that fulfil bidirectional (home and abroad) developmental objectives, to wit: the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Second, it seeks to increase its "power to shape" international relations (Xi 2017; Central Committee 2021) to increase China's international influence and help refashion the international order. This nevertheless entails neither interference nor hegemonism: "We endeavour to uphold international fairness and justice, and oppose acts that impose one's will on others or interfere in the internal affairs of others as well as the practice of the strong bullying the weak" (Xi 2017).

The first layer of the plot clearly seems to observe the people and peace-development as its fundamental values. However, a concept that appears less prominently and nevertheless precedes them ontologically is "sovereignty". While the whole foreign policy script revolves around the people's peace development, this so-called peace cannot be pursued without the indivisible sovereignty of the nation. By the same token, there can be no promotion of development abroad without foreign sovereignty. This linkage is clear. However, the evidence is sparse: "Our endeavours to strengthen national defence aim to safeguard China's sovereignty, security and territorial integrity and ensure its peaceful development" (Hu 2012: IX). The phrase "China's sovereignty, security and development interests" is featured repeatedly (Hu 2012: X, XI; Xi 2017; Central Committee 2021). As sovereignty has logical priority, it is the condition underlying the possibility for security, stability, and development.

Sovereignty is also defended abroad. Consequently, China "opposes any foreign attempt to subvert the legitimate government of any other countries" (Hu 2012: XI) and seeks to engage in "people-to-people exchanges" (Hu 2012: X, XI; Xi 2017) and "state-to-state" relations (Xi 2017). However, the tension seems to remain between respect for the sovereignty of others and the paternalistic promotion of development abroad, sometimes militarily supported. Thus, sovereignty appears to be the true cornerstone of the Chinese border plot.

3.1.3 FRAME ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S ADHESION TO R2P

In line with the plot's core value of sovereignty, China first refused the initial wording of R2P for fear it justified regime-change intervention and liberal democracy-exportation – in short, Western expansion (Teitt 2011; Fung 2016). China then accepted the 2005 UN World Summit watered-down

phrasing, seeking the consent of the host State for intervention (Teitt 2011). What follows is an overview and frame analysis of the "Position Paper of the People's Republic of China on the United Nations Reforms" (2005), in which the principle was adopted.

R2P rests on three pillars: "the responsibility of each State to protect its population (pillar I); the responsibility of the international community to assist States in protecting their populations (pillar II); and the responsibility of the international community to protect when a State is manifestly failing to protect its populations (pillar III)" (UN World Summit 2005). Thus, China frames its adhesion to the principle as follows: "Each State shoulders the primary responsibility to protect its own population" (PRC 2005: III, §1). A need for "judging a government's ability and will to protect its citizens" on a case-by-case basis is foreseen, but China acknowledges that, "[w]hen a massive humanitarian crisis occurs, it is the legitimate concern of the international community to ease and defuse the crisis", without discarding "enforcement actions" (PRC 2005: III, §1). Despite this, there are two conditions: "the opinions of the country and the regional organisation concerned should be respected" and, "[i]t falls on the Security Council to make the decision in the frame of UN" (PRC 2005: III, §1). All things considered, China whole-heartedly supports pillars I and II since they completely abide by its scripted plot of State sovereignty and peaceful negotiation. However, the extent to which it supports pillar III is less clear.

To be sure, China's practical approach to R2P has been directed towards prevention, assistance, and State-centrism (Teitt 2011; Fung 2016; Adhikari 2021). The UNSC, of which China is a permanent member, has issued 83 R2P-framed resolutions from 2006 to 2021, warning and calling States to order (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect 2021). Conversely, as Table 2 shows, China has vetoed 13 UNSC resolutions since 2006; in the vast majority of

Table 2: List of Vetoes by China since R2P Adoption

Draft Resolution (Year)	Country Item	Reason for vetoing
14 (2007)	Myanmar	– Interference with the host State's internal affairs
447 (2008)	Zimbabwe	– Not constituting a threat to the world's peace and security – Non-interference
612 (2011)	Syria	– Lack of respect for State sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity – Non-interference
77 (2012)	Syria	– Lack of respect for State sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity – Non-interference
538 (2012)	Syria	– Lack of neutrality – State sovereignty – Non-interference
348 (2014)	Syria	– Lack of respect of State judicial sovereignty
1026 (2016)	Syria	– Lack of host State-owned, State-led humanitarian strategy
172 (2017)	Syria	– Disagreement on conclusions about the use of chemical weapons
186 (2019)	Venezuela	– State-centrism – State sovereignty – Non-interference – Non-intervention
756 (2019)	Syria	– Politicisation of humanitarian issues – Lack of State sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity guarantees
961 (2019)	Syria	– Lack of neutrality
654 (2020)	Syria	– Against unilateral coercive measures
667 (2020)	Syria	– Against unilateral coercive measures

Source: UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library 2022.

cases, it has invoked the principles of State sovereignty, host State-centrism, non-interference, and non-intervention. Along the lines of its border script, China repeatedly insists on strengthening host country State institutions for them to own the peace process and protect their people, which corresponds to pillars I and II; however, China frames its vetoes as protection of UN Charter principles of non-interference, non-intervention, and, above all, protection of State sovereignty.

In conclusion, while the adherence to R2P may call into question the rigidity of its core value of sovereignty, China certainly has managed to invoke the latter when justifying contestation to the R2P framing by liberal countries. Moreover, it reaffirms what the evidence consistently showcases: the Chinese border plot revolves around the people's sovereignty, which must prevail above all to pursue the rest of the plot: peace, development and stability. Concurrently, it points to a great deal of flexibility – that is, decoupling – in the actual enactment of the script.

3.2 ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S PEACEBUILDING IN MYANMAR FROM 2012 TO 2021

In this section, I will analyse and compare the peacebuilding policies, and their framing carried out by China between 2012 and 2021. For that, I will build on the previous analyses of the Chinese border script and China's adherence to the R2P principle and continue applying inductive frame and discourse analyses on Chinese scholarship and official documents of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

3.2.1 POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF CHINA'S PEACEBUILDING IN MYANMAR

Navigating between domestic and international security and development, Myanmar plays an important role as a border-sharer. One reason is that the Myanmar conflict spilled over to

the Chinese side between 2011 and 2013 – bombs wrongly fell into Chinese territory, killing Chinese citizens – and Myanmarese refugees recurrently fled into China. Another is that China has historically trusted Myanmar with non-traditional security issues, such as trafficking, disease, and drug control (Su 2013). Additionally, the country caters to China's needs for cheap consumer goods markets (Myint 2020) and holds a critical place in Xi's plans for the BRI, which is set to build infrastructure through railways, pipelines, roads, and ports that better connect Myanmar and China (Wong/Li 2021). Consequently, China intensified its peacebuilding initiatives after 2011 – when reforms in Myanmar eased Western sanctions – for fear of loss of economic and political dominance, coinciding with the launch of the BRI (Adhikari 2021).

These peacebuilding initiatives follow three pathways: trade and investments; monetary aid, frequently in the form of loans; and mediation and facilitation between the Tatmadaw and the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). The BRI has branched out into the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) with plans to build road and rail transportation from the Yunnan Province in China through to Kyaukpyu in Rakhine State, following gas and oil pipelines built in 2013 and 2017 (Htwe 2019). This expanded access will facilitate agro-enterprises investing in opium substitution schemes that, in turn, bolstering China's war on drugs (Su 2013).

Regarding financial assistance, it is stated that, between 2017 and 2020, China pledged USD 3 million to the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre and the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (Htwe 2019). In addition, China invested $690 million in infrastructural, agricultural, and educational development (Thiha 2020). In all cases, China's preference for concessional loans – which may be forgiven if necessary (Wong/Li 2021) – must be taken into account. A key aspect of Chinese finance and development aid is that it comes

"with no strings attached" (Wong 2021; Wong/Li 2021), as it is given irrespective of the political system or ideology of the host country – the only requirement being the acknowledgement of the "One China" policy (Wong/Li 2021). This open policy contrasts with regime-change thrusts tied to grants provided by Western peacebuilders, who seek to engage Myanmar regarding human rights and overall political agreements and treaties (Wong/Li 2021; Adhikari 2021).

Finally, China's role in the peace process has been of utmost importance, as it has played its leverage on both the Tatmadaw and the EAOs well. Its main thrust has been bringing both parties to the negotiation table. Indeed, since 2013, China has facilitated rounds of talks and served as an observer of this bilateral dialogue – together with the UN, and as a formal witness to the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) (Adhikari 2021; Wong 2021; Wong/Li 2021). Furthermore, in 2017, China arranged for Sino-Burmese border-based EAOs to fly to the Union Peace Conference – 21st Century Panglong (The Irrawaddy 2017; Adhikari 2021). At the same time, China has bilaterally engaged with both parties. For example, it has sought to strengthen the State capacity of Myanmar and the defence scope of the Tatmadaw in particular through the provision of arms, training, and exchange visits (Slodkowski/Lee 2016; Adhikari 2021; Wong/Li 2021). However, it has covertly engaged with EAOs as well, strengthening and arming some (Adhikari 2021; Wong/Li 2021). The reason behind this multilevel engagement, both top-down and mid-space, is explained first by the need for China to win over gatekeepers to the BRI-CMEC project; indeed, its investments contribute to areas controlled by either the Tatmadaw or the EAOs (Wong/Li 2021); second, strengthening both sides reduces the possibility of one party taking the upper hand, fostering an environment propitious for negotiation and peaceful settlement (Adhikari 2021); and third, this very situation is incentivised by development

investment, designed to benefit both parties (Sun 2019).

China's role in the 2017 Rohingya genocide crisis is also significant. Indeed, China vetoed all resolutions from the UNSC to tackle the crisis, shielding the Tatmadaw's action against the Rohingya (Adhikari 2021). Concurrently, China refused to accept the involvement of any but the concerned parties, Myanmar and Bangladesh, in the resolution of the crisis. Accordingly, it acted solely as a mediator (Wong/Li 2021). Similarly, after the coup d'état in 2021, China blocked the UNSC from issuing a statement condemning the military junta (Barrett 2021), continued to supply food to Myanmar (Reuters 2021), and sent over 500'000 Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines to fight the Covid-19 pandemic (The Irrawaddy 2021).

Overall, China's peacebuilding in Myanmar since 2012 can be characterised by a lack of a consistent strategy. Thus, China has "no simple model for peacebuilding" (PRC 2013). Instead, Chinese peacebuilding in Myanmar has been adaptive to the changing context of the country and, most importantly, to its impact on Chinese interests in the intersection between the domestic and the international. Thus, in 2015 it dissuaded some EAOs from signing the NCA in a bid to not surrender dominance in the peace process to American and Japanese efforts (Slodkowski 2015). In fact, China's role in mediation and facilitation has mainly focused on EAOs established near the Sino-Burmese border, as it most threatens China's domestic security (Adhikari 2021). This pragmatic, non-ideological approach with a view to contain the conflict and limit cross-border impact has featured an outright refusal to address political or structural transformation and to engage domestic NGOs, civil society, and grassroots networks in general, as all these are deemed to bring instability – unlike Chinese development-seeking policies (Adhikari 2021; Wong/Li 2021).

3.2.2 FRAMING OF CHINA'S PEACEBUILDING IN MYANMAR

Chinese scholarship (Kuo 2015; He 2017, 2019; Yuan 2019; Hinoro et al. 2019; Wong 2021) subsumes China's peacebuilding approach in Myanmar under the "developmental peace" or "Chinese peace" framework. This assumes a causal link between underdevelopment and insecurity, and thus problem-solving targets socio-economic development to attain peace (He 2017; Yuan 2019) – namely, stability and absence of conflict. Sustainable growth, and not sustainable peace, is, therefore, the target.

Consequently, to attain infrastructure networks that bring about socio-economic development and connectivity, a competent and strong State is required (Kuo 2015; He 2017, 2019). In other words, it is necessary to boost State capacity through economic and infrastructure projects like the BRI-CMEC and business-oriented partnerships (Yuan 2019). For that, the principles of non-interference and non-intervention, in tandem with a Westphalian conception of sovereignty, must be resolutely observed. In short, stability, sovereignty, and development (Kuo 2015; Yuan 2019; Adhikari 2021) comprise the three pillars of Chinese peacebuilding.

Additionally, China seeks participation in international relations that promote cooperation, equality, and multilateralism (He 2017). Sovereignty is, logically, the necessary condition for this equal footing. However, He (2017, 2019) claims that the developmental peace approach does not oppose the liberal peace framework, which does involve political and ideological content. Chinese peacebuilding, as shown in the case of Myanmar, is value-free and contents in building a capable government and a sustainable economy, and thus can accommodate different takes if they *coexist peacefully*.

When it comes to official documents from China, all the scripted values analysed above appear prominently. Already in 2007, China vetoed the UNSC resolution S/2007/14 about Myanmar on the grounds that "the Myanmar issue is mainly the internal affair of a sovereign State. The current domestic situation in Myanmar does not constitute a threat to international or regional peace and security" (UNSC S/PV.5619: 3). Furthermore, it focused on "economic development, social harmony, the rule of law and inclusive democracy" to attain "national reconciliation" (UNSC S/PV.5619: 2-3). These same phrasing and framing appear in the Chinese framing of Sino-Burmese relations after 2013, with emphasis on the China-Myanmar "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership on the basis of mutual respect, equality, and [… m]utually beneficial cooperation in economy and trade" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014).

Additionally, it is stated that "[i]n line with Myanmar's wish, China actively supported and assisted in peace talks between the Myanmar government and ethnic armed groups in northern Myanmar" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014). Consent of the host country aligns with the Chinese border script as to "constructive intervention" (Lin 2019: 38) and the R2P Chinese framing.

On this, China assumed the framing used by Myanmar in both the 2017 Rohingya genocide/crisis and the 2021 coup d'état. To protect its investments and economic interests, and in line with its script, China framed the crisis in terms of poverty and non-interference (Adhikari 2021). On the other hand, China initially framed the 2021 coup as "a major cabinet reshuffle" (Xinhua 2021). It changed its take, however, as the military junta showed signs of favouring US relations (Lewis 2021) and supported a UNSC presidential statement condemning the coup and calling for a peaceful resolution (UNSC S/PRST/2021/5).

At any rate, in joint communiqués with other South Asian countries, China and Myanmar keep partaking in the developmental peace language. Thus, there abound vindications of "bilateral comprehensive strategic partnerships, and multilateral coordination in regional and international frameworks in boosting peace, stability and development of the region and the world at large" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a). Likewise, in another statement, the signing countries vow to "improve regional trade and investment cooperation [… to] achieve sustainable development and common prosperity" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b). In summary, equal footing, State-centrism, and market-based sustainable development – and State sovereignty as a necessary condition for these – are ubiquitous in the framing of China-Myanmar relations.

3.3 CULMINATION OF FINDINGS TOWARDS A CHINESE PEACEBUILDING SCRIPT

In this final section, I examine cumulative findings and reconstruct a Chinese peacebuilding script first and then draw conclusions as to the extent of its contestation of the liberal script. Thus, I will address both the research question and the hypotheses with a view to building theory regarding SCRIPTS.

### 3.3.1 RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CHINESE PEACEBUILDING SCRIPT

My first hypothesis posited that the core value of the Chinese peacebuilding script is collective self-determination, in contrast with the plot of the liberal script, which favours individual self-determination. Indeed, the evidence showed that State sovereignty is the condition that makes unfolding layers of the plot possible and that the Chinese people are the central object of the discourse and enactment of the script. "People's sovereignty" as a concept may capture the multilayered and multicausal normative plot of the Chinese script,

as it implies the central importance of domestic stability and its overlap with international peace.

However, people's sovereignty does by no means correspond to collective self-determination as a core value of the liberal border script. The latter, as shown in Section 2, derives from the consent of (a majority of) the individuals of a society to have their interests represented by public institutions such as the State (Drewski/Gerhards 2020). In this key point lies the justification for the legitimacy framework in which liberal discourses and practices are embedded, such as liberal peacebuilding. Chinese legitimacy, on the other hand, works differently, as the government earns approval for its performance according to the effectiveness of its policies in ensuring development, stability, and peace; Chinese scholars call this "performative legitimacy" (Yuan 2019). Moreover, the paternalistic stance of the CPC has been shown in the textual evidence to interpret and pursue the interests of the Chinese people as a whole, which, as discussed, is but a hypostatisation – not unlike, perhaps, the "individual" in liberal societies. And incidentally, this paternalism is universalised and thus extended to "all the peoples of the world". All things considered, I conclude that my first hypothesis has been only partially met, and the *plot* of the Chinese peacebuilding script can be layered, as shown in Figure 2.

Concerning actorhood and scenery, the Chinese peacebuilding script, as a subscript of the border script, takes into consideration peoples, States, *and* international organisations as actors. There is, however, a difference between the subject and object of the script as per its paternalistic stance and performative legitimacy framework; thus, while all three might be actors, only States and international organisations are, in fact, agents. As to the scenery, international law *and* the regional environment comprise the background of China's foreign and security policy; in other words, China inhabits both the LIO and the regional level.

Figure 2: Layered plot of the Chinese peacebuilding script
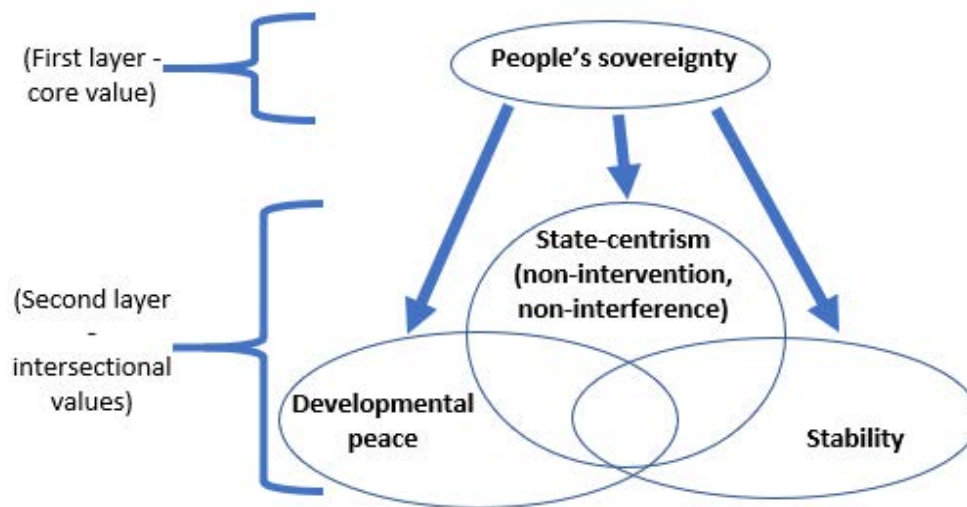
Source: Author's own work.

As to the level of decoupling, First, while the CPC/ PRC's paternalism seems to extend to "all the peoples of the world", this is contradicted in the policy enactment. The analysis of China's peacebuilding in Myanmar has underpinned the discrepancy between what is claimed to have been done, namely respect the sovereignty of the host country and promote its development, and what has actually been done, which is developmental and economic intervention in order to favour Chinese interests even at the expense of the peace process. For instance, and in addition to the evidence presented in Section 3.2, amidst the expansion of the BRI-CMEC megaproject, China has exercised land-grabbing in areas controlled by ethnic groups whose territory was protected by the NCA (Adhikari 2021). Second, this adaptability of its peacebuilding policy is reflected in its enactment of R2P prescriptions, even under the very same Chinese framing. Thus, while claiming to be a responsible country and pledging to ensure the prevention of mass atrocities, China remained neutral during the 2017 crisis and at the beginning of the 2021 coup, all while attempting to protect and promote its economic investments in the region, especially the BRI in the Rakhine State. Third, China's very framing of its anti-hegemonism arouses

suspicions about the compatibility of being an equal player in a multilateral international arena *and* a power-shaper. And finally, and most importantly, there seems to be a considerable measure of liberality concerning the respect for the core value of the plot. Indeed, the way China states its respect for State sovereignty and host country consent (in agenda-setting foreign policy papers, UNSC resolutions/vetoes – especially those related to R2P and humanitarian intervention, and China-Myanmar relations-related archives), and its multilevel engagement with non-State actors, such as the EAOs, constitutes a blatant performative contradiction. Similarly, its gargantuan economic and infrastructural projects in Myanmar, as well as its State capacity-strengthening, call into question the extent to which China's peacebuilding disagrees with liberal peacebuilding regarding its "no strings attached" interference.

In short, the Chinese peacebuilding script is mostly characterised by its strategic adaptability, that "turns crises into opportunities" (Hu 2012: I; Central Committee 2021). It is a pragmatic script if ever there was one; even a sacrosanct principle, such as non-intervention, has mutated into constructive intervention, inhabiting a no man's land

between Westphalian and post-Westphalian conceptions of sovereignty. How can the contestation of such a script be described, then, in relation to the liberal script?

3.3.2 TYPOLOGY AND DEGREE OF CONTESTATION OF THE CHINESE PEACEBUILDING SCRIPT

My second and third expectations at the beginning of the research stated that, first, China poses an external contestation to the liberal script, and second, such contestation pushes an alternative script that seeks to replace the liberal script and become hegemonic. Table 3 shows the variance between both scripts, the degree of discrepancy in some key components such as the plot, and which types of contestations would qualify for China.

In essence, it is difficult to consider China as a fully-fledged external contestant considering the framing of its practices and policies. If anything, it acts as a reformist inside the LIO – the extent to which it accepts or contests current postnational liberalism (LIO II) is unclear as well. Granted, China justifies its contestations under the very framework of multilateralism and international cooperation provided by the United Nations; additionally, it employs R2P frames and engages in constructive intervention through the developmental peace framework. These actions signal a move towards a more post-Westphalian and a liberal conception of sovereignty. However, China has consistently vetoed R2P-framed interventions that do not have host country consent, which aligns with Westphalian sovereignty. Concurrently, framing the BRI and pushing a Beijing Consensus may present an external contestation at the discursive and practical level. This new model that antagonises the Washington Consensus is seen to support economic innovation and State sovereignty driving policymakers (Zhou 2015; Xiaotong 2015; Hung 2017), which presents an

Table 3: Comparison of components of the liberal and the Chinese peacebuilding script, and range of contestations

script	components							typology of contestation						
	plot			actorhood/agency		scenery	decoupling	1) scope						2) enactment
								external	internal					
	core value	first layer	second layer	agents	actors			3) strategy						
								pushback	dissidence	reform	withdrawal		discourse	practice
liberal (border) script	individual unfreedom vs individual freedom	individual vs collective self-determination	human rights, democracy, market economy, liberal peace R2P	individuals	individuals, public institutions	international law (LIO II)	political and economic spectrum, while respecting the plot							
Chinese peacebuilding script	people's sovereignty	State Sovereignty	stability, developmental peace, constructive intervention, R2P (pillars I&II)	party, State	party, State, international institutions	international law (LIO I and II) and regional environment	pragmatism, strategic adaptability	no*	no	yes	no		yes	yes

*According to SCRIPTS, this would be a yes (Börzel/Zürn 2020b).
Source: Author's own work.

Figure 2: Negotiating situation of China's peacebuilding regarding sovereignty and target outcome
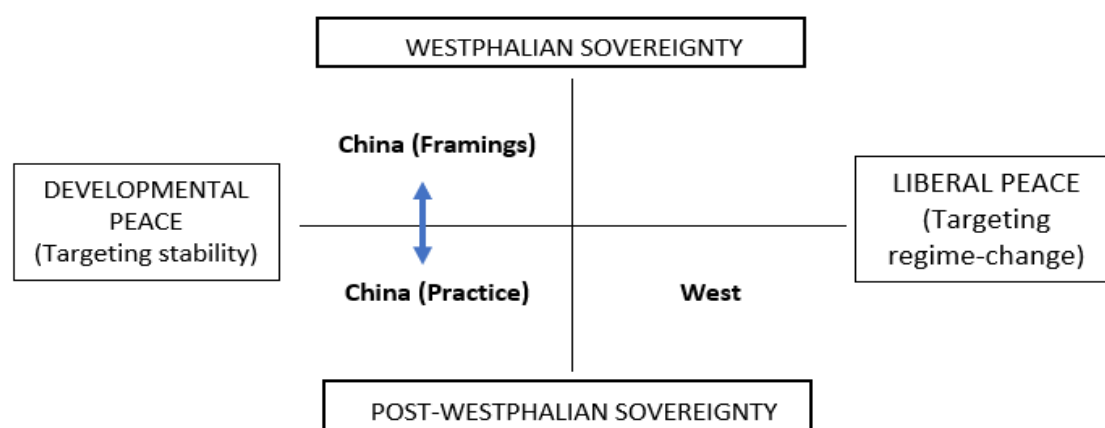
Source: Author's own work.

alternative foreign policy script. Nevertheless, the concepts used to stress China's differentiated position are, in essence, liberal, namely sovereignty, free trade, development, peace, and so forth. All things considered, I conclude, unlike SCRIPTS, that *China qualifies neither as an external contester nor as having an external pushback strategy*. China bids for an equal, multipolar global order with limited concessions – but concessions nonetheless – to State sovereignty and international intrusiveness, all the while employing language and fostering values of the LIO.

Concluding that China is *not* an external contester, however, is far from determining that China is a plenipotentiary liberal actor. In terms of the core value of the plot, it is undeniable that China and the liberal West cannot be farther from each other. However, this research has shown repeatedly that every principle, discourse, and strategy in the Chinese script is susceptible to loose interpretation when needed. China is more than open to accepting and respecting other plots and scripts; its pledge to anti-hegemonism may hold some logical tensions and performative contradictions, yet China has not sought to replace any other script for peacebuilding but rather favours coexistence and even complementarity. Consequently, enactment and strategy seem to play a more

relevant role in describing Chinese contestation than scope (partly or wholly contested). Hence, the Chinese core value of sovereignty, insofar as it swings between a Westphalian and a post-Westphalian understanding, only matters as to the different discourse or frame and institutional approach to peacebuilding, namely developmental peace and stability instead of regime-change and democracy-promotion (see Figure 2).

In comparing both scripts, we find acute similarities in the outcome of their peacebuilding practices. On the one hand, liberal *ideology* normalises coercive structures of power that constrain actorhood and agency and integrates them into socialisation and institutionalisation processes alike. Building on Žižek (2007, 2008, 2009) and critical theory scholarship, its main feature is, therefore, tacit unfreedom – internalised in a manner that disallows its expression – and self-determination. Correspondingly, critical security studies problematise exporting the liberal script into societies that have experienced intervention or peacebuilding – actions often entailed in establishing liberal peace. On the other hand, China *builds* developmental peace. However, the research has shown that China's peacebuilding builds developmental peace *at home* at least as much as abroad – meaning that China cares as

much, if not more, for domestic stability as for the host country. As Chinese scholarship puts forward, its coercive structures are implicit when it comes to foreign and security policies. Along the lines of critical accounts of liberal peacebuilding, Chinese peace reproduces structural hierarchies, although on the economic and infrastructural level; allows capitalist interests to reshape conflicted societies to the point of neglecting local interests; and, overall, seeks not political regime-change but economic – and all the while using R2P discourse. In all these policies, the differences between liberal peace and developmental peace are only nuanced. Both, to a large degree, reproduce oppressive relationships with the people *in a demographic sense*, as both scripts are, ultimately, structures of power that essentially constrain actorhood and agency in their discursive (framing) and institutional deployment.

I propose another type of contestation for the Chinese peacebuilding script. China is neither an internal nor an external contester, for it acts internally and externally as it sees fit. China is rather in-between, negotiating the space and navigating the distance. One learns to navigate a space, like a new city; initially hostile, peace policies make it less so, or not at all. China does propose alternatives but does not seek to spread or impose them; rather, like liberalism, it takes whatever serves its agenda and material interests and acts freely, untethered by liberal norms. Therefore, *China's challenge qualifies as an in-between pragmatic contestation of the liberal script*. It contests when necessary and does not when not. Liberalism's core values are non-negotiable; China's, in practice, are less so. In sum, China is a negotiator between scripts, as it understands – perhaps better than the West – the commonality in so many components, even the plot, of the two scripts.

4   CONCLUSION

This research explored Chinese peacebuilding policies in Myanmar, the language used to frame them in official foreign and security policy papers, documents, and resolutions, and the Chinese scholarship reviewing them. From these, I have reconstructed a Chinese peacebuilding script, compared it with the liberal script and analysed the typology and extent of its contestation to the latter. The study has led me to conclude, in answering the research question and addressing the hypotheses, that the Chinese peacebuilding script performs an in-between pragmatic contestation of the liberal script – negotiating its tenets, principles, framings, and institutional deployment and navigating the space between the two scripts without intending to replace it.

These findings, and the critical engagement with SCRIPTS, have allowed me to humbly contribute to building theory about the contestations of the liberal script. This contribution can be generalised along two lines, (1) regarding the analytical framework of the theory, and (2) the liberal script and China as a peacebuilder. While the analytical framework provided by SCRIPTS allows for insightful research on liberalism, the LIO, and their contestations, it lends itself less to application in an illiberal-centric context. When reconstructing the Chinese peacebuilding script, I found that it does not consistently fit within the SCRIPTS framework for contestations.

Moreover, SCRIPTS' shunning of the concept of ideology may allow for a more analytical and explanatory take on liberal societies and their contestations, but it can effectively disallow critical approaches. A post-ideological description of liberalism as an organisational scheme and not as an ideology lends itself to universalisation from a scientific point of view. Thus, while SCRIPTS explicitly distances itself from the Stanford School, which considers there to be only one script and

not many scripts, their conceptual scaffolding appears Western-centric nonetheless.

Yet, there are lessons to be learned from the Chinese peacebuilding contestation. For example, China's strong peacebuilding policy based on free trade and economic reform, development, and State-building begs for reflection – one might even venture to speak of "liberalism with Chinese characteristics" or even "socialism with (many) liberal characteristics". It is imperative that the West understand not only the contradictions within its own script but also the benefits of the Chinese approach and its focus on development and non-interference. China's mediating stance allows it to be considered both a contester and an enforcer.

Exploring Chinese peacebuilding for potential contributions to the liberal script can be addressed in further research along with other interesting and necessary follow-ups; namely, explanatory research that explores the causal mechanisms behind China's foreign and security policy regarding peace and development, its advantages and disadvantages in the field, and in the long run, and its compatibility with the liberal approach. In addition, operationalising the conceptualisations employed here would nicely complement this research's more critical approach. As it stands, constraints in length for this research have impeded a more in-depth engagement with both the theory and the evidence, and further analysis with critical theory scholarship would still be in order.

Most essential is further research on the foreign and security policy of China. Of particular urgency is to develop policy-oriented explanatory frameworks that allow predictions of China's behaviour as a peacebuilder. Ultimately, the objective should be, as it has been in the present study, to better understand an international actor as relevant as China and its future movements in repositioning itself amidst the new global order that 2022 appears to have inaugurated.

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